

*IN MEMORIAM JOSEPH GIOSCIO

Joseph Gioscio, born in July 1953 in Calvello (Italy), deceased in September 1988 in Melbourne, was inaugural lecturer-in-charge of the Italian section at Monash University, instituted in 1987. Notwithstanding the brevity of his tenure, Joe Gioscio (he preferred the informal appellation of this common Christian name, and his preference mirrored the distinctive unpretentiousness of his nature), succeeded - despite, too, the handicap of illness - in forging undergraduate courses in Italian of panoramic ambition (views of history, politics, society, seen from such disparate belvederes as *Il Gattopardo* and "Roma città aperta"), devoted to prising open the student mind, prodding and stirring it, politely shocking it with demands of attention to the demands of newness, cajoling that mind too, assisting it, compelling it to rise out of its endemic, but not - he rightly perceived - congenital atrophy.

Joe Gioscio's commitment to intellectual evolution, then, was simply a pragmatic labour, the daily perseverance of an act of faith as moderated as his manner was reserved, but unremitting. In this way, although he epitomised the intellectual, he never sacrificed the teacher or counsellor in himself. Perhaps only towards the end did his tone, in lecturing students, strain towards the categorical and the imperative, did he plead with a bargaining frustration in his voice - touches of admonishment too - in trying to impel them towards care, respect and effort. It was the measure of personal suffering but also of fiercely determined, altruistic concerns.

Joe's purpose in life seemed, then, to transcend mere survival, to enhance the human, making success the virtue of self-sacrifice. In part, this must have derived from the struggle for self-assertion which is "migranhood", a struggle that was his own. He came to Australia in 1962 as a 9 year old to pursue with doggedness the same meritorious scholastic results for which the "Calvellesi" parents of his school friends had already determined in him an exemplar for their own children (he confessed once how ridiculous it was to have other children encouraged to follow him about like reluctant disciples in an effort to learn how to be like him). Joe was to exalt the significance of his early life in the hilly isolation of a typically obdurate Southern town, two decades later, with the lauded publication of his linguistic-philological study of Calvello's dialect, a study as enlightening as its author was enlightened and scrupulous in giving back this town, like an archeological gift, to the outside world. As Manlio Cortelazzo noted in the "Presentazione", the study is "... un'immagine completa della

parlata di una piccola comunità, che il Gioscio ha saputo generosamente trarre d'oblio e consegnare alla meditazione (scientifica, ma anche umana) dei ricercatori futuri."

Indeed, Joe's humanism was as broad as the term itself: a boy fond of painting with confident, spirited, naturalness in suburban Preston (a picture of a gargantuan, blazing red guitar hangs outstandingly, almost exotically, in the corridor of his parents' home); an undergraduate magazine editor at the University of Melbourne; a rumbustious companion at parties with close friends but a student, by day, cloistered in libraries even at weekends; an affiliate, in his youth, of socialistic politics (though shunning the dogmatism of ideology) but not without having tested religion to, asked questions of the Catholic Church as reformer, radical and social worker; a busy, meticulously rational administrator; opera lover; academic, but a populist too, believing in a local community's involvement in education, and so, President of the Dante Alighieri Society in Townsville; still a scholar as a man but a family man too, married, and always his younger brother's helper when needed, even when gruff and cantankerous, tired in his last year from exasperating cancer therapy.

Ultimately, a lateral thinker, thinking always of the possibilities in life glimpsed from different angles - life turned this way and that like a Rubik's cube for the right pattern or solution (of twelve possibilities, notoriously, he would choose the thirteenth) - staid Joe defied stasis. But his creativity was never facile or readily public. (It worked long hours in offices.) Faithful first to its own principles, it was ceaseless momentum but governed by rigorously balanced, exhaustive (and exhausting for him, one might have thought) laws of purposefulness and usefulness. So it was that his intelligence proved itself to be at once practical and theoretical. It was inevitable (although he could have undertaken scientific or medical studies at university, had he wished) that in the Humanities such an organised intellect should have found its fulfilment in the quasi-mathematical discipline of linguistics; while in literature, confessional works, works of solipsism or aggrieved, cerebral insularity, held his attention less than those that analytically took issue with history, argued with or criticised their societies like Sciascia's novels, or the societies that hosted them, like Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, a book Joe cherished for its didactic utility but also, one suspected, in speaking to him, for the anthropological magnanimity of its vision of his heartland.

However, if Levi's attitude of benign patriarchy was a quality of his bemused foreignness, of his pure curiosity - both congenial and cultural, as a Northerner exiled to the South - Joe's involvement with his heritage and upbringing was clearly visceral, as in the following

example of culture shock in an impressionistic piece of verse written by him as a young man in a new country, but less shocked than dignified, and less languorous than gently reasoning:

“Dull, indeed, it is to
Walk through streets of
This foreign city full
Of voice, but those who
Speak, dare not stir.
...My eyes long for something...
Something which is not there ...
This longing to see the
Expressive, frank gestures
Of the hands, as
Conveyed by a native heart,
Makes exile ever more
painful.” (“Nostalgia”)

It would not be unfair to dwell on this: Joe seemed, classically, the ethnic oddity, a young man composed of contradictory clays, raised out of a pastoral remoteness in the Basilicata region of Italy to be propped up in the strange soil of an even stranger landscape in Australia. But if emotion typifies a circumstance - a young migrant's unhappiness, his sense of alienation - Joe's life, comprising all along its length humbling achievements (for those of us who knew him but could not emulate him - he graduated first from high school, first from university), his life was archetypal. In success, his wealth was unmaterialistic, his purposes deceptively idealistic. More than to be comfortable, he sought to be educated and to educate others properly. Thus, his belief in the power of words - for example, in communicating - involved no palliatives or platitudes. And neither was there anything rhetorical about him at all (he dressed, too, with unconcerned simplicity). Those times he would agonise in speech, fumbling at times to express what he meant precisely, or “saw” - for a moment or two fluidly inarticulate - it was his striving for intellectual honesty we were witnessing.

In this sense, Joe Gioscio was profoundly a man of civility and civilisation, one of those true “galantuomini” Levi found great difficulty in meeting, or, more exactly, was ironic about having met. In a 1985 review of the translation of Rosa Cappiello's *Paese Fortunato* appearing in *Linq* (the journal of the English Language and Literature Association of Queensland), Joe, with characteristic clarity, patience and equipoise, but also subtlety, explained to an English reading audience that:

Generally, Southern Italian dialects do not have a verb "to emigrate (overseas)" but express the concept by saying "to go to America" even if the real place of destination is Australia. The identification of Australia with this America, mythical promised land of good fortune or "lucky country", is first and foremost autobiographical since the author migrated to Australia about fourteen years ago. The identification is all the more poignant due to the existence of a parallel myth in the Australian community of Australia as being the lucky country.

Let us play then on the ambiguity of that adjective in remembering Joe Gioscio, one of those thinking men of uncommon humility whose stubborn dedication to the intellectual and pedagogical task is the continual rescue of a culture from the obscurity of its own backwardness, and whose good fortune, in its turn, is having them; or having them to recall.

WALTER MUSOLINO

La Trobe University

* I am indebted to Dr. Stan Scott, Melbourne (Senior Associate in the Department of French, University of Melbourne, who reviewed Joe Gioscio's *Il dialetto lucano di Calvello* for *Spunti e Ricerche*, vol 2, 1986) and Mrs. Anna Maria Sabbione, lecturer in the Department of Italian at the University of Melbourne (both of them ex-teacher's and close friends of Joe's), for conversations which were of help in the compilation of this obituary article. My heartfelt thanks also to Joe's wife, Adeline, for providing me with personal material of his to which I have made reference.

* * *