

## **Social Class, Language and Power**



# Social Class, Language and Power

'Letter to a Teacher': Lorenzo Milani  
and the School of Barbiana

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## PREFACE

This volume is the result of the collaboration between the authors and a number of colleagues, researchers and scholars who have been touched by Don Lorenzo Milani's contributions to education and society. The first result of this endeavour was published in 2009, in the form of a volume entitled 'Letter to a Teacher. Lorenzo Milani's contribution to critical citizenship' (Malta: Agenda). The interest created by this volume encouraged us to further our research and to extend our collaboration with other colleagues, who commented our work and with whom we engaged critically in order to produce this new volume. In it we retain the translated version of Don Milani's *Lettera ad una Professoressa*, including footnotes and notes, which appeared originally in our 2009 publication. These, however, have been revised and corrections have also been affected. The other original contributions highlight the importance of Don Milani's work, the relevance of its powerful message in today's society and his use of language as a means to transmit his enlightening philosophy.

We would like to thank all the colleagues and students whose comments, reactions and criticism inspired us to carry further research on Don Lorenzo Milani's works. We also thank all those who provided feedback on different drafts of this book, Antoinette Pace for proofreading the final draft, Raphael Vella for his contribution to the cover design and Joe Cassar for his editorial support.

Carmel Borg, Mario Cardona, Sandro Caruana





## FOREWORD

### DON MILANI, THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

This book foregrounds the ideas of an important European pedagogue whose writings provide insights for a critical social justice oriented approach to education. He has all the credentials to be regarded as potentially a key source of inspiration for critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that movement which is very much inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and others but which has had its origins in North America. One need only visit the site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University to verify this as we come across such names as those of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Apple, Deborah Britzman, bell hooks, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder and Shirley Steinberg, among the leading figures<sup>1</sup> (I would include Maxine Greene and Roger I. Simon among the major North American exponents). Among the historical figures that include John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Lev Vygotsky, W.E.B. Du Bois and more recently Jesus ‘Pato’ Gomez<sup>2</sup> and Joe Kincheloe, one should also add Don Lorenzo Milani. In this regard, Milani joins other important figures from Italy who provide insights for a critical pedagogical approach to knowledge, learning and action. These include Danilo Dolci, who wedded community learning and social action, through community mobilization, ‘reverse strikes’ and ‘hunger strikes’ (Castiglione, 2004), and Aldo Capitini, the anti-fascist peace educator and activist who organized various educational and mobilizing activities within the context of a peace education movement and his post-war centres for social orientation (COS) (Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini, undated). Capitini was a visitor at Milani’s school at Barbiana.

Milani’s approach to education for social justice gives importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race issues especially with his critique of North-South relations and cultural/technological transfer, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring) reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one’s learning (from the occasional to the profound motive) and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. The list is by no means exhaustive.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Paulo and Nita Freire International project for Critical pedagogy website: <http://freire.education.mcgill.ca/content/important-figures-emergence-critical-pedagogy> Accessed 2nd July 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to 'conscientious objection' with its process of reading/teaching history against the grain. The last feature of Milani's pedagogical approach would be very apt for critical pedagogues engaged in exploring signposts for a pedagogical politics after Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (Giroux, 2005) and for a pedagogy against empire (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007).

Being quite eclectic like Freire and sharing with the Brazilian educator the influence of the Holy Gospels, Lorenzo Milani differs with respect to Marxism. And yet Gramsci's writings, an important influence on critical pedagogy, were of interest to Milani. The Italian Marxist's *Letters from Prison* were important reading material at the School of Barbiana. However one does not come across traces of Marxism or references to Marx in the writings of the Tuscan priest. The Gospels were the most important source of inspiration for Milani. This notwithstanding, his classes at San Donato, the place where he served prior to Barbiana, were devoid of religious symbols – a secular, non-denominational school (Simeone, 1996, p. 99).

Despite the absence of Marxist influences in Milani's works, it is interesting to note that what he wrote in *Esperienze Pastorali* and that which the eight boys wrote in the *Lettera*<sup>3</sup> anticipate or echo the arguments of French sociologists and philosophers and English and American sociologists, a number of whom of neo-Marxist orientation, with regard to the themes of the bourgeois school and its role in social reproduction. Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Raymond Boudon, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron come to mind. In this regard, one should underline the convergence of the ideas expressed in the *Lettera* and the ideas concerning the school and bourgeois cultural capital expressed by the leading French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (certainly not a Marxist). It seems that Milani, a keen reader of French literature, had been exposed to the critique of bourgeois culture and power that occurred in France and that certainly influenced Bourdieu.

Like all human beings, Milani has his contradictions, as one can observe from the interviews reproduced by his helpers, students and colleagues in this book. One must also keep in mind the time when his writings emerged. However, there is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which gives pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables, vouchers. When the *Lettera* was published in 1967, it provided an important source of inspiration for the movement for change known as the 68 Movement and was heralded by the leading Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini, as one of the few books that had aroused his enthusiasm at the time. The text underlines, as this translation will show, the social class basis of school failure and does so with much clarity as it contrasts the fortunes

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<sup>3</sup> *Letter to a Teacher* is a collective piece of work authored by the eight students of Barbiana under his direction.

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and everyday worlds of Pierino and Gianni. Its vignettes from peasant/working class and middle class lives, centering around Pierino and Gianni, serve to render the arguments made most compelling.

It goes beyond this. For, in projecting an alternative vision for schooling, it draws on the experiences that took place at Barbiana, experiences which, as Freire would argue, almost echoing Milani on this, cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. In Don Milani's view, the experience at Barbiana started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. This is not to say that critical pedagogues cannot glean ideas from the Barbiana experience, as presented in this book, to contribute to a more humane, more social justice oriented education predicated on rigour, love, collective work and vivid imagination, and which eschews a process of programming for failure.

Peter Mayo

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## INTRODUCTION



Taking as its point of departure the moral conviction that education is inherently political (Mayo, 1999; Mayo, 2004; Borg & Mayo, 2006; Borg & Cardona, 2008; Borg, Cardona & Caruana, 2009; Borg, 2010; Borg, 2013) this book highlights the educational legacy of Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) and the students who attended his school in Barbiana, an isolated community in the Mugello region of Tuscany. *Lettera a una professoressa* ('Letter to a Teacher') is the key text that defines the Barbiana phase in Milani's life. Written under his close editorial supervision, the book is recognised as the work of eight boys from the school. Forty-seven years from its publication, the *Lettera*, translated into several languages, continues to inspire academics, educationalists, students and social activists who have embraced social justice as their vision for education (Gesualdi, 2007; Hoffman, 2007; Martinelli, 2007).

Born in May 1923, Lorenzo Milani Comparetti was meant to reproduce the prestigious history of his extended family – the Comparetti-Milani-Weiss families. Domenico Comparetti, a well known 19th century philosopher, was proficient in 19 languages. He was studying another language – Arabic – when he died at age 88. Domenico's wife, Elena Raffalovich was a life-time collaborator of Friedrich Froebel (Martinelli, 2007). Luigi, Lorenzo's grandfather, was an accomplished archaeologist. Born in Trieste, a cosmopolitan city under Austrian rule, Lorenzo's mother, Alice Weiss, was not a university graduate. However, her sophistication and cultural capital were admired by a wide circle of friends. Alice's cousin, Edoardo Weiss was a student of Freud; he established the psychoanalytic school in Italy and was a personal friend of James Joyce, the Irish writer who for some time taught at the Berlitz School in Trieste where Alice had taken some courses (Borghini, 2004). Proficient in six languages, Albano, Milani's father, was a chemistry professor with vast interests in literature.

As a child, Milani's upbringing was cushioned by privilege, comfort, intellectual stimulation and bourgeois 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984). His immediate social context was serviced by maids, a cook, a driver, a private tutor and a wet nurse. The presence of learned relatives, friends and collections of artistic and archaeological artifacts defined the cosmopolitan milieu of his home (Fallaci, 2005). At home, Lorenzo, like his brother and sister, was not simply a child to be seen but not heard. On the contrary, he was central to what was happening within the family. Roberto Dessales, a school friend of Adriano, Lorenzo's brother, recalls how the father would recite poems in Latin and listen to classical music with his children and their friends (Fallaci, 2005). No wonder Lorenzo possessed a *weltanschauung* that was transnational in nature and a linguistic repertoire that included German, Italian, English, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew and Ancient Greek (Becchi, 2004).

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The Milani family belonged to the rentier class (Borg and Mayo, 2006, 2008), a socio-economic location that was only partially challenged at a time when Italy, like the rest of the world, was facing an economic depression. In fact, early in the 1930s, Albano moved his family from Firenze to Milan with the aim of supplementing his family's income. In Milan, Lorenzo's father took up a managerial position while maintaining an estate of twenty-five farms at Gigliola in Montespertoli and a summer residence at Castiglioncello. The family's addresses in Milan – 15, Via Conservatorio, followed by 26, Via Fiamma – and the class register of the *Emilio Castiglione* elementary school, which classified Lorenzo's family as rich, attest to the fact that while the family's economic status was partially dented, it continued to enjoy a high standard of living even when economic depression had raised its ugly head.

In Milan, Lorenzo experienced a schooling process that, to his mind, served to socialise students into assimilating a diet of fascist ideology. Lorenzo revisited his schooling years in *Lettera ai giudici*, a document written towards the end of his life, in response to the accusation of incitement to the crime of desertion and military disobedience. In *Lettera ai giudici* he accused his former teachers of acting as organic intellectuals to the fascist bloc by legitimising 'common sense' (read fascist) knowledge within schools.

Lorenzo's antipathy towards the school's socialisation process, the fact that his social class position brought him in direct contact with social, cultural and economic privilege and dominance, his close contact with poverty on the streets of Firenze and Milan, coupled with an early understanding of the social injustice that characterised the society in which he lived, constituted the beginning of a journey that led to his preferential option for the poor and to his pacifist stance.

Early in his life, Milani developed a reputation for being an anti-conformist, a quasi-bohemian who lived on the edge of what was perceived as socially acceptable (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). His genuine conversion to Catholicism represents one of his major acts of 'rebellion'. Born into an agnostic family with a mother of Jewish descent, Lorenzo was baptised, following his parents' remarrying within the Catholic Church. All happened on the same day - 29th June, 1933 – in the shadow of Hitler's rise to power. It was a Catholic marriage of convenience, choreographed by Don Vincenzo Viviani, a friend of the Milani family from the parish of *San Pietro in Mercato*. This marriage was meant to shield the family from the anti-semitic hysteria that characterised the years leading to World War II. According to one of Milani's biographers (Fallaci, 2005), the decision by Alicia and Albano to baptise their three children was also taken in response to Adriano's, Lorenzo's brother, traumatic experience in a Catholic private school. Adriano was constantly being bullied by the teacher of Religion and by his peers for being a "heretic" (sic).

It seems that Lorenzo's baptism at age 10 constituted his awakening to the fact that his mother had Jewish roots. In a review of *Lettere alla mamma*, originally published in *Il Tempo*, in 1973, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian film director, suggested that Lorenzo was psychologically and culturally Jewish (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). Don Bensi, Milani's spiritual director, argued that Lorenzo "was a

Christian, but also a Jew: he always kept a foot, albeit in his own way, in the Old Testament. This explains his rigour, his outbursts, and his frightening intransigence” (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 11). As with Catholicism, there is nothing in Milani’s biography to suggest that Alicia was interested in transmitting her Jewish cultural heritage to her children (Borg and Cardona, 2008). Elena Milani Comparetti (1999), Lorenzo’s sister, confirms that, as children, they were never exposed to a Jewish education process or value system. This fact was confirmed by Alicia herself, in an interview with Nazzareno Fabbretti (in Martinelli, 2007). The rigour that defined Milani’s pedagogical and pastoral stance was intellectual (Braccini and Taddei, 1999) and deeply spiritual, while his intransigence and arrogance could be attributed to his bourgeois upbringing. Milani’s subjectivity stemmed from his sociological analysis of the immediate, national and international, socio-economic realities, and from his unconditional Christian love.

The root causes of Milani’s transformation from a potential bourgeois and secular intellectual to a Catholic priest committed to the oppressed, remain largely a mystery. Milani’s biographers (Fallaci, 2005, Pecorini, 1998) point at two possible indicators, including Lorenzo’s decision, contrary to his parents’ expectations, to study Art, following his completion of the compulsory years of schooling in 1941. On the advice of Giorgio Pasquali from Florence, his father engaged the services of Hans Joachim Staude, an established German artist known for his profound spirituality. Lorenzo’s dialogues with Staude over Sacred Art seems to have initiated Milani into a deeply spiritual experience. Moreover, Lorenzo’s chance discovery, in the summer of 1942, of an old missal, in a desecrated chapel on the family’s estate of Gigliola, is often mentioned as another possible catalyst to his real conversion to Catholicism.

In 1943, Lorenzo received the sacrament of confirmation from Cardinal Elia Della Costa. Lorenzo’s parents were not informed and were shocked when, within months of his confirmation, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, at the age of twenty, he entered the seminary at Castello in Oltrarno. Lorenzo was ordained priest four years later, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1947, at the age of 24.

The radical attitude that defined his years at the seminary constituted the prelude to a pastoral life that was characterised by an obsession with coherence and by a total commitment to a liberatory vision and project. Close to his ordination, Lorenzo renounced his family’s inheritance, a deeply symbolic gesture of how he wanted to live his pastoral years.

Milani’s twenty years of pastoral leadership unfolded against a socio-political backdrop marked by Pious XII’s crusade against communism; a crusade that was partially responsible for the polarisation of Italian society. Milani refused to foreground anti-communism in his pastoral work. He considered communists as children of an equal God. As a priest, Milani felt morally obliged to reach out to all, irrespective of one’s ideological background.

The Diocese of Florence, Milani’s immediate pastoral patch, was first led by Cardinal Elia della Costa, an anti-fascist, and then by Cardinal Ermenegildo Florit,

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who played an important role, together with other religious leaders, in isolating Don Milani. At the time of Lorenzo's most radical decisions, Florence was rich in projects that addressed peace and social justice. Some of these projects were led by radical Catholics such as Don Primo Mazzolari, Giorgio La Pira, Don Bruno Borghi, Ernesto Balducci, and others from the circle of *Testimonianze*, a well established Catholic periodical. Aldo Capitini, whose reflections and action were inspired by the philosophy of passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi, was also highly influential within Catholic circles in Tuscany (Schettini, 2008).

Milani's pastoral journey started at the parish of San Donato di Calenzano, a small community near Prato, fifteen kilometres away from Florence. It was populated by farmers and textile workers and led spiritually by an old provost, don Pugi. As witnessed in his book *Esperienze Pastorali*, published in 1958, the parishoners' spirituality was essentially folkloristic in nature. Their way of experiencing religion contrasted heavily with Don Milani's radical reading of the Word.

Milani's pastoral life at San Donato mirrored the principles that informed his entire pastoral journey – i) coherence between action, reflection and spirituality (Schettini, 2008); ii) dominance of moral law over predominance of power; and iii) a life dedicated to others, particularly those who were living in poverty (Fiorani, 1999). In the spirit of what today one would refer to as radical or emancipatory community development, Milani immersed himself totally within the community. He did not wait for the community to approach him. In the morning, after Mass, he would walk through the village to phone, collect the post or buy the newspaper. On the road, he would encounter the 'generative themes' (Freire, 1970, 1971) that defined San Donato. Unemployment, exploitation of child labour and the crisis in accommodation constituted some of the chronic ethical, moral and political problems of Milani's first pastoral community.

San Donato's cultural landscape was mainly defined by high levels of illiteracy and by what Milani considered as low levels of analysis, weak organisation of ideas and poor communication skills. Shyness was also understood by Milani as a major impediment to the community's emancipation. Against such a backdrop, Milani's educational project at San Donato, which consisted of a *scuola serale* (evening school), the *Conferenza del venerdì* (Friday conference) and drama sessions at the headquarters of the Compagnia del S.S. Sacramento, an old confraternity of San Donato, was meant to reclaim the community members' humanity by engaging in a process of 'locating and dislocating oppression' (Freire, 1973, Ledwith, 2005).

Milani's educational vision was not secular. He wanted to set up the school at San Donato primarily to overcome the linguistic barrier that limited his conversation with the parishoners on matters inspired by the Gospels (Bruni, 1974). The *scuola popolare* formed part of his strategy to evangelise and to reach out to the lost sheep (Schettini, 2008). The main motivation for his action was profoundly religious (Simeone, 1996).

True to Milani's inclusiveness, the educational context of San Donato was non-denominational in nature. Milani rejected the confessional school. For Milani, school



constituted a space for genuine dialogue and for active engagement with issues that were profound, relevant, immediate and potentially transformative in nature. Milani argued that the search for truth and genuine dialogue were not possible within a school climate that was partisan and exclusive.

Language was central to Milani's pedagogy of freedom. He understood that one cannot read the 'world' without mastering the 'word' (Freire, 1995). Milani referred to language as the 'ghostly key' that opens every door, including the door of sovereignty. For Milani, proficiency in the language of power is intimately tied to the struggle for democracy, equity and social justice.

According to three of his students from San Donato – Mario Rosi, Ferruccio Francioni and Benito Ferrini – Don Milani would explain a word in detail: its provenance; how it can be used in different circumstances; its shades of meaning; how it translates in different languages; and other words that derive from it (Fallaci, 2005).

In a letter to Enrico Barnebei, Director of the Italian newspaper *Giornale del Mattino*, Milani explains that:

In the first years the young men were not interested in this work because they did not appreciate its functionality. However, with time, they started to enjoy it (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 38)

Apart from speaking well, Milani expected students to write equally well. In current terms, Milani's students at San Donato and, later, at Barbiana, engaged in emancipatory action research. The students were the subjects and protagonists in the process of research and writing. Blending archival research with direct, experiential knowledge, the writing phase served to collectively bond them with the contents of their analysis. In the true spirit of social theology, the ultimate goal of the writing was to help the community transform the conditions that facilitate material as well as cultural domination. As a result, the writing had to be kept simple and sieved of any flowery language that tends to colonise rather than emancipate the reader.

Given Milani's radical stance on many issues, the absence of females from two of the three official educational spaces created or led by Milani at San Donato – the *scuola serale* and the *conferenza del venerdì* – could not be overlooked or dismissed as an inevitable detail accruing from a particular historical moment. The all-male situation obtained in the aforementioned sites may be traced to Don Pugi's conservativeness and to the prevailing mentality, accentuated in rural areas, that late evenings are too dangerous for women to stay out, and that women, unlike men, could do with little education. The suggestion that Milani targeted men because, unlike women, they were increasingly distancing themselves from the Church and because Milani's personality, characterised by frequent outbursts, was more compatible with an all-men context (Braccini and Taddei, 1999), seems too speculative to explain his lack of action in this regard. At San Donato, Milani partially redeemed himself in this area by allowing females to interact with males during the drama sessions.

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Milani's radical pastoral approach at San Donato disturbed the comfort zone of a number of parishioners, ecclesiastics in the vicinity and the ecclesiastical authorities in Florence. While the practice of priests manning the coffee bar or selling pigs and wine seems to have been tolerated (Milani in Martinelli, 2007), Milani's radical option for the poor, his readiness to problematise, question and challenge established practices, his aggressiveness towards speakers who he considered as ill prepared and, therefore, disrespectful of the community, his willingness to venture into hazardous territories, his openness to all, irrespective of political allegiances, his controversial sermons, some of which included references to upcoming elections and twice, in 1951 and 1953, provided clear indications of his voting preferences, his open antipathy towards *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action), his critique of parish priests in the area and of communists for their alienating practices, rendered his transfer to another community a foregone conclusion.

On 6 December 1954, soon after Don Pugi's death, and seven years into his priesthood, Don Milani arrived at his new parish – *Sant'Andrea a Barbiana*. Situated in the hills of the Mugello region, Barbiana was a hamlet of about twenty farmhouses. The hamlet lacked most of the basic services, including an access road, water, and electricity which was introduced in 1965, two years before Milani's death.

Typical of settlements located in mountainous regions, Barbiana was populated by families with very young children. Families moved down to the plains as soon as their children reached fourteen years, the work-permit age. The educational life of children born at Barbiana followed a definite script – they would come out of the *quinta elementare* semi-literate, timid and with poor self-esteem. In fact, most of the children who would later attend his school would “have either failed their exams and left school or were bitterly discouraged with the way they were taught” (Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 10).

While subsistence farming, conditioned by a thin layer of very poor soil, characterised the economy of the Barbiana peasants, life for the industrial workers was equally hard. The day for the latter category of workers started at five in the morning. They would walk seven kilometres to the train station and would spend an hour-and-a-half on the train to Florence. They would normally return home at half-past-eight in the evening.

While ‘exile’ was meant to silence and isolate Milani, the Barbiana phase proved to be the most productive, radical, public and controversial of the two pastoral experiences. This phase was characterised by his total dedication to an educational project – the school of Barbiana - that served students, ranging in age from eleven to eighteen, twelve hours a day, seven days a week, public holidays included.

The school was established a few days after Milani's arrival (Bozzolini, 2011). It did not belong to the state school system. In fact, it was described as private, meaning that it did not receive financial support from the state. Milani did not charge fees.

The physical space of the school consisted of four rooms - two rooms within the priory and two workshops dedicated to wood and metal work respectively. The immediate grounds of the priory were conceived of as an extension to the school

premises. In fact, they were used extensively during Spring and Summer, from April to October.

School resources were limited. Some of them were manufactured by Milani and the students themselves. Such was the case with the in-house production and projection of a microfilm based on Beethoven's seventh symphony, the manufacturing of an instrument that photographed, in black and white, the different phases of the eclipse of the sun, and the construction of a theodolite that measured the distance between the belfry of San Martino and the station of Vicchio (Martinelli, 2007). Milani also drew from his family resources.

Only a few of the students belonged to the parish of Barbiana. Some of the non-parishioners lived with families at Barbiana. Others came from nearby parishes and returned home every day. According to Martinelli (2007), save for five students, most of them attended Milani's school enthusiastically. Some opted for school when faced with choosing between school and work.

Milani's school at Barbiana started as a *scuola serale*, a multi-age class taught by one teacher. This initiative was meant to support the elementary school of Padulivo, a cluster of houses, one kilometre from the Church. Later, Milani established a full-time 'professional' school for students wanting to continue beyond the *quinta elementare*. Milani's school saved the children from going to Borgo San Lorenzo for secondary education, and, as indicated earlier, postponed the movement to the plains of some of the families (\*).

Kleindeinst (1994) provides us with video footage of life at the school of Barbiana. Hoffmann (2007) describes some of the scenes from the documentary as follows:

The boys trudging up the steep, forbidding hill, bundled against the region's rain and cold. We see them gathered around long tables in the presbytery during the winter months, the older boys instructing the younger children. In spring and summer they move the tables outside under those cypresses, where they write, tinker with an astrolabe that they will use to study the night time sky, or sit listening attentively to one of the many fascinating visitors whom Father Milani has invited to make the outside world a reality to children living in what was then a remote corner of Tuscany (p. 5).

Students who wrote the *Lettera* confirm that there was no break. Save for swimming and skiing, tolerated for their functionality, there was little space for leisure pursuits within the school curriculum. Leisure, according to Milani, ruined the life chances of working-class youth (Milani in Gesualdi, 2007).

Given the fact that the formal education system had shortchanged most of his students, Milani acted with a sense of urgency. The school at Barbiana had to quickly equip students with relevant skills while preparing them for the formal exams imposed by the official system. It was a parallel curriculum that addressed official and parental expectations as well as what Milani perceived as real needs. From the eyes of one of his former students, real needs were skills in critical and active citizenship "...that would later enable us to defend ourselves against the bosses, against the doctor's son, against the ruling classes" (Kleindeinst, in Hoffman, 1994).

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The school's ethos is best captured in the motto inscribed on one of the walls. Written in English - "I Care" – it provided an antidote to dominant educational practices where individualism, achievement and selection were symptomatic of a system that reproduced dominant cultures and asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific class, gender and linguistic lines. Not only did pupils care but their caring also took the form of a pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners, a political and pedagogical principle that Freire would develop, almost simultaneously, in Brazil (Mayo, 2007). Martinelli (2007) describes the Barbiana experience as a school with 23 teachers.

Milani himself tutored the first group of students. As students increased in number – in one particular summer there were around forty students - he adopted peer tutoring as a main pedagogical tool. Peer tutoring was possible because Milani fostered a spirit and mentality of cooperation among the students. Physically, the school adopted a flexible and circular arrangement which was conducive to cooperative learning. Such a pedagogy was also possible because Milani promoted the art of mutual listening, a skill that transformed students into student-teachers.

The Barbiana experience revolved around a very important principle – schools should not fail students. The authors of the *Lettera* considered failure as the weapon used by schools to perpetuate a 'caste system' (Darder, 1991) This was regarded by Milani as the root cause of most of the intra-class hatred, and by the authors of the *Lettera* as politically unsustainable and unconstitutional in that everyone was entitled, according to the Italian Constitution, to several, unrepeated years of education. Repetition and exclusion were discriminatory since they acted as sorting devices that ultimately pushed students from disadvantaged backgrounds out of the education system.

Visually and symbolically, the logic of inclusion was expressed in a different way at Barbiana. While at San Donato the holy cross was removed to create an open, non-denominational space for all, at Barbiana the holy cross reappeared on the wall, next to other symbols – Gandhi, Confucius, and the Cuban poem.

At Barbiana, time was perceived as a function of inclusion. The school community was prepared to slow down the pace not to leave anyone behind. Coverage, an obsession of modern curricula, was sacrificed for quality and collective well being. Furthermore, the Barbiana curriculum was essentially interdisciplinary and integrated in nature. It was perfectly possible for students to learn Mathematics during a lesson of Anatomy (Martinelli, 2007). While not using the term intercultural dialogue, Milani's curriculum centered around the affirmation and valorisation of difference. Difference was perceived by Milani as an essential ingredient in the formation of human beings as well as in the development of democratic societies.

Photographs of Milani in class with his children and video footage (Kleindeinst, 1994) indicate that, unlike San Donato, girls, albeit outnumbered by boys, did attend his school at Barbiana. There are also indications in the *Lettera* that the school did confront the issue of gender inequity. In a section dedicated to 'The girls', the authors problematise the absence of girls from town, referring to such absence at the school

of Barbiana as symptomatic of the prevailing mentality that ‘woman can live her life with the brains of a hen.’ The boys referred to such a mentality as a form of racism.

Milani’s biographers, former students and collaborators confirm that Milani’s pedagogical regime at Barbiana was more austere and disciplined than that of San Donato (Borg and Mayo, 2006). Borg and Mayo (2006) argue that Milani’s austerity, like that of Gramsci’s (Borg and Mayo, 2006), is based on the notion that success at school, perceived by many as value free and as a mirror-image of one’s intelligence (sic), is largely dependent on material and cultural resources. Milani was aware that only long hours of hard work, critical analysis and linguistic competence could interrupt the boys’ cycle of scholastic failure and, as a result, puncture the perpetuation of an education system that rewards the privileged.

The affective domain was central to the Barbiana curricular experience. While emotionally unpredictable and, at times, unbearably tough, Milani generated an emotional milieu characterised by warmth and genuine love. Often harsh with the outside world, Milani acted as a surrogate father who was always present and ready to endure a lot of pain for his pupils (Fallaci, 2005).

Milani’s obsession with language became more apparent at Barbiana. Milani conducted one- to three-hour-a-day, reading sessions. These sessions were consciously meant to sharpen the students’ use of the Italian language and to provide them with a backdrop to understand the world from the point of view of the oppressed. During these sessions, students were exposed to narratives of revolutions, wars, resistance, liberation movements, trade unionism and social movements, among others. These narratives were analysed against a historical backdrop that ranged from the war experience of their grandparents and parents to the Russian revolution or the wars of liberation in Africa and Asia. These reading sessions centered around Milani’s idea that those who could not read and understand the first page of the newspaper were easily pushed to sports pages and doomed to a life of subordination.

Reading was not limited to newspapers. Books were also read loudly. Among the several books read, one of his students recalls Gandhi’s autobiography, ‘Apartheid’ by Angelo Boca and the letters of Claude Eatherly (Martinelli, 2007). Socrates was also a favourite read at Barbiana. As with the newspapers, the reading of books was meant to stimulate critical thinking as well as exposing students to standard Italian. Some of the books took several weeks to cover as one sentence could stimulate a long-drawn discussion

Milani’s approach to reading contrasted heavily with the fascist practice of using newspapers and periodicals for propaganda. Such was the case in 1936 and 1941, during the occupation of Ethiopia and the first defeats in Africa respectively. Fascist propaganda was also disseminated in schools by Balilla and GILE.

Barbiana’s curriculum was also characterised by an ongoing struggle against insularity. Such a struggle is symbolically represented by the completion of the road to Vicchio by the community itself and driving lessons as one of the first adult education activities at Barbiana. The Barbiana curriculum also provided a context for the struggle against ethnocentricity and mono-culturalism (Toriello, 2008). Apart

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from the exposure to several types of texts, starting from 1959, Don Milani hosted a number of young foreigners with whom his students could interact in English, French or German. Those who demonstrated sufficient knowledge of any of the foreign languages would normally be encouraged to spend some time abroad. Such trips were preceded by lengthy preparations, especially if the student was considered by Milani to be very timid. The trips served a triple purpose: to consolidate students' knowledge of foreign languages; to help them overcome their shyness; and to help them in character formation. Ultimately, the experience of travelling abroad, what Milani considered as the end-of-compulsory-schooling-age exam (*l'esame di maturità*), added credibility to the intercultural dimension of Barbiana's curriculum as it was through such an experience that language genuinely served as an instrument of social relations, real exchange, culture and negotiation (Toriello, 2008).

The experience of living in foreign, mostly urban, centres and the direct encounter with foreign guests at Barbiana, complemented a teaching regime of foreign languages based on hours of listening to music records of, for example, Bob Dylan and Brassens, and to radio broadcasts. Those who arrived early in the morning would find Milani preparing the materials for the day, which often included the recording of radio programmes in English, French, German or Spanish (Martinelli, 2007).

As indicated above, writing constituted a star skill in Barbiana's curricular repertoire. Milani taught students how to compile notes, place them on individual cards, organise the cards into categories, put categories into a sequence and name each section. Milani insisted that each section should be named. For Milani, a difficult-to-name paragraph meant that it either lacked substance or was overloaded. Named sections were meant to help Milani and his students to arrive at a logical sequence of statements which would eventually form a coherent whole. Once the paragraphs are put into a sequence, the language is filtered of difficult words, long sentences, repetitions, and overloaded and ambiguous sentences. This was all done collectively and with a commitment for quality.

Milani started experimenting with collective writing in 1950 when he used a rather crude version of the foregoing pedagogy to build a collage of student writings around the life of Jesus. Milani, clearly influenced by Mario Lodi, perfected the writing process in question and was followed rigorously in the writing of the *Lettera*.

Milani's writing principles are described in the *Lettera*:

Have something important to say, something useful to everyone or at least to many. Know for whom you are writing. Gather all useful materials. Find a logical pattern with which to develop the theme. Eliminate every useless word. Eliminate every word not used in the spoken language. Never set time limits (in Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 25).

Written by eight of his students, all boys and in their teens, the 'I' of the *Lettera* is a composite of the eight authors while the 'you' they address throughout the book represents the kind of teachers they had encountered in schools – teachers who were

more likely to harbour negative attitudes towards low-socioeconomic-status children and whose lower expectations were fuelled by testing and tracking procedures which were themselves stacked against lower-class children. Well aware that there are teachers who care – Milani was one of them – the boys distinguished between a teacher whose attitude and action contributed to their exile to a life of labour in the fields and a teacher, like Milani, who loves unconditionally to the point of going on a hunger strike to reclaim a child who was taken away from school by his parents (Abbate, 2008).

The catalyst for writing the *Lettera* came from a series of failures experienced by three of his students on their way to becoming teachers: Enrico, Luciano and Michele. Most of the themes were developed in an earlier letter, written in December, 1965, and addressed to a teacher of the *Istituto magistrale*.

*Lettera a una professoressa* was written at a time when Milani knew he was terminally ill, having been diagnosed in 1957 with Hodgkin's disease and, later, with leukemia. In addition to the chronic pain and discomfort, Milani was very bitter over the official condemnation and subsequent removal from the commercial book shelves of the book published in 1958 – *Esperienze Pastorali* – that exposed the puerile spirituality of the parishioners of San Donato and its environs. He also received further denunciation from Archbishop Florit who criticised his attitude and positions and accused him of *classismo* (classism). Such denunciation angered Milani to the extent that he asked bourgeois intellectuals and collaborators to stay away from Barbiana. This was a time when Milani's rapport with the world turned sour.

The *Lettera* was also written in the shadow of a major controversy that started in 1965 when Milani's health had deteriorated to such an extent that he was no longer able to travel to Rome. A group of retired military chaplains published a letter in *La Nazione* denouncing those who refused service in the Italian army on the grounds that they were conscientious objectors. The chaplains considered conscientious objection as an insult to the fatherland and to its fallen. They also referred to conscientious objection as something alien to the Christian commandment of love, and as an expression of cowardice.

Considering the chaplains' letter as diametrically opposed to his educational philosophy, one based on critical reading of the world rather than passive acceptance of cultural invasion, Milani, in conversation with his students, crafted a letter that linked obedience with support for a string of unjust and repressive wars waged by Fascist Italy that served only the privileged. His historical analysis led him to conclude that the liberal-bourgeois monarchy, from 1862 to its downfall, waged wars but did very little for the poor. He also questioned the chaplains' faith by asking: "Is it God or men that we ought to obey?"

Milani's letter was immediately condemned by the veterans of war. The public confrontation that developed as a result of the two letters, including the *autodifesa* (self-defence) that followed, attracted a lot of Barbiana-centered attention, both locally and internationally, including that of Eric Fromm who sent his secretary,

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Clara Urquhart, to the parish (Martinelli, 2007). In this particular period, Barbiana became a laboratory where research, critical and historical analysis, an ongoing process of writing and rewriting, dialogue and external critical input informed the daily life of the foregoing community of learning.

The fact that the only periodical that published the letter in its entirety was *La Rinascita*, the communist publication edited by a childhood friend – Luca Pavolini – reinforced his image as the red priest. Milani was uncomfortable with this label, an image that communists and marxists challenged by claiming that Milani was not even a *Cattolico di sinistra*. Milani was simply a Catholic; he was always for and within the Church (Schettini, 2008).

The anger that characterises *Lettera a una professoressa* is partially attributed to Milani's personal experiences as well as to the boys' recognition of the fact that the school system served to reproduce vertical inequalities rather than liberate students. What appears to be an innocent and apolitical system, intended to offer equal opportunities for all, is, in effect, a school system that sorts, classifies and labels students, often assigning a highly disproportionate number of low socio economic status students to low-ability groupings (sic).

Don Milani and his schoolboys were well aware that parents could play a decisive role in the struggle for quality education. The *Lettera* directly addressed parents, encouraging them to stand up to a system that was engineered to perpetuate the hierarchical structure of society; a system that was ironically funded by the labour of the poor.

Milani insisted that all parents should understand the contents and spirit of the *Lettera*, including those parents who just made it to the *quinta elementare*. Before presenting the manuscript to the press he read several extracts from the *Lettera* to different people to ensure that the language used throughout the work was comprehensible to peasants, industrial workers and home makers. On a similar note, the introduction written by Michelucci, a dear friend and collaborator of Milani, was rejected on the grounds that the language used by him was incompatible with the language and style of the *Lettera* (Martinelli, 2007).

The *Lettera* revolves around the different fortunes of two boys – Pierino and Gianni. Pierino, a generic name, represents the privileged students who are rewarded and promoted by the education system, and eventually by an 'occupational hierarchy' (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) that is essentially credentialist in nature. Scholastic life is easy for Pierino as he comes to school already equipped with the psycho-physical discipline, the cultural capital and the mental attitude expected from school. Gianni, another generic name, mirrors the authors' background and fortunes. He represents the low-socio-economic status students who have been pushed out by the education system and forced into internalising a complex of inferiority and low self-worth, an education system that did not respect their culture, an education system that was at war with the poor.

The boys wanted the *Lettera* to be more than an emotional protest (Rossi and Cole, 1970). They illustrated how the education system safeguards the interests of



the Pierinos by presenting empirical evidence. The data they compiled and the level of analysis were impressive. In Rossi and Cole's words (1970):

Under the leadership of Milani, they insisted that their conclusions also be accurate, and were willing to go through a painstaking discipline. Although some readers may only glance at the statistical work, its presence makes their moving appeal for change still more forceful (p. 13).

The authors of the *Lettera* argued that the old intermediate school reinforced class distinctions through instruments of power that included: short hours of schooling; long holidays; teachers' authoritarianism; irrelevant curricula; a banal assessment regime; inert knowledge; and culturally biased curricula that excluded Gianni's knowledge.

In response to the analysis of their own failure, the Barbiana boys favoured a broad-based curriculum, a curriculum which they themselves experienced at Barbiana. The tried-and-tested formula proposed in the *Lettera* is simple as much as it is radical: do not fail pupils. On the contrary, privilege the weak and give priority to those students who fall behind; no one is useless. Schools are spaces where the rights of citizenship – the right to be listened to, included and respected – are affirmed; provide students who are completely demotivated with relevant educational experiences which can excite and stimulate them; and provide students who have a history of failure with a full-time (read a whole-day) educational experience.

Milani had spent most of the last phase of his life in bed, battling a cancer which would eventually kill him (Corradi, 2012). From bed, he oversaw the teaching-learning process that was unfolding at Barbiana while editing the letter of the eight boys. *Lettera a una professoressa* appeared on the book shelves in May, 1967, a month before the death of Milani on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1967.

The year 1968 is remembered as the year of student contestation, a year where the school and the capitalist systems were challenged and confronted by millions of students around the world. Against such a backdrop, the book produced by the school of Barbiana was, for many, a reference point in the struggle for the abolition of the selection process within schools and, by implication, from universities.

*Lettera a una professoressa* is a political text written by a group of politically liberated students under the supervision of an engaged teacher. It bears witness to a school that prepared students to confront the world and its unethical social relations.

As hope seems to be escaping the radar of many educators, Barbiana confirms that even in the most difficult circumstances and with very limited resources, collective learning, critical literacy, genuine inclusion and transformative action are all possible. In their attempt to demystify and challenge a world that is becoming more oppressive, cynical and dangerous, Milani should provide engaged educators with signs of hope and possibility.

This book is dedicated to those teachers who have transformed students' nightmares into dreams of hope and possibility.

## INTRODUCTION

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## LANGUAGE USE AND STYLE IN 'LETTERA A UNA PROFESSORESSA'

*"Because only language can render equal. Equal is he who can express himself and he who understands the idiom of others."* (Page 110)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The link between language and power and the indispensable and urgent need for the oppressed to master the dominant language for emancipatory purposes are among the recurrent themes of *Lettera a una professoressa*. Developing communicative abilities and learning the 'art' of writing are seen by the authors of the *Lettera* as instruments of empowerment and means to resist the dominant location of hegemonic groups who reproduce their power through an education process that self-serves the interests of the most powerful. One of the main notions expressed constantly throughout the *Lettera* is that each and every child can learn how to reflect on his/her use of different languages, including the mother tongue, and that all learning experiences in life are valuable, regardless of one's socio-economic status. However, when children with different backgrounds start attending school they go through different experiences, even because of the form of language used by teachers: in some cases this may be a natural transition from what they are exposed to at home, even in their pre-school years; in other cases the language of schooling is totally different, the language register may be more formal and the variety used may approach standard forms which contrast with local or regional varieties used at home. The language of schooling may therefore represent one of the first obstacles towards the socialisation and integration of some pupils.

From the beginning of the *Lettera*, the authors stress the importance of learning the 'art' of writing. Failure to do so leads to social disadvantages as the negative repercussions which result from linguistic and communicative deficiencies affect one's life:

In June of the third year at Barbiana I sat for the *licenza media* exam as a private candidate. The essay title was: "The train wagons speak". At Barbiana I had learnt that the rules of writing are: to have something important to say and that it may be useful to everybody or to many. To know who you are writing to. To gather all that is necessary. To find a logical way of putting it in order. To eliminate any unnecessary words. To eliminate any word which we do not use while speaking. Not to set any limits of time. (...)

But faced with such an essay title, what could I do with the humble and sound

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rules of the art of all times? If I were to be honest I would have to leave the page blank. Or criticise the essay title and whoever had assigned it to me. (p. 44)

From the above extract it is clear that there is a distinction between writing for communicative purposes and the writing tasks which were given at school, especially those set for examination purposes: students at Barbiana were taught to develop specific skills which were related to self-expression and to convey one's thoughts in a manner which is relevant to the reader. On the other hand the author of the above extract found himself involved in a writing task which was distant from the ones with which he was familiar.

Departing from such considerations, in this chapter an overview of language-related aspects in the *Lettera* is provided in order to illustrate both the authors' reflections on languages as well their use of syntactic and discursive features of Italian. This will also lead to observations which are deemed fundamental for the translation of the *Lettera* from Italian into English, presented in the next section of this book. The main objective of this translation is to present the *Lettera* in a manner that reflects as closely as possible the philosophy of Don Lorenzo Milani and his students.

### 2. THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLING IN THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE *LETTERA*

Since language is a reflection of the society in which it is spoken and written, any linguistic considerations regarding the *Lettera* must take into account the historical background of Italy in the Sixties. During these years the country was going through the final phase of an economic boom which changed it radically and put the suffering and humiliation of the Second World War firmly behind its back. Although this led to immense wealth for some individuals, many others were left in dire poverty. This was also a very significant era for standard Italian<sup>1</sup>: the widespread diffusion of mass media (especially television<sup>2</sup>) as well as internal migratory movements (mostly from the South of the country to the North) enhanced and strengthened the use of standard Italian while local and regional dialects and language varieties became less widespread, thereby leading to a decline in their status.

As a result of this, those who had an elite family background, sufficient economic means and the necessary cultural milieu in order to be exposed regularly to and comprehend standard Italian were in an advantageous position at school: in fact, lessons were held in standard Italian, which was obviously also used in writing. Local and regional dialects were not only absent within the schooling context, but their use was frowned upon and discouraged by teachers. The *Lettera* addresses this very precisely:

After all one ought to agree as to what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor who then continue to renew them infinitely. The rich crystallise them in order to taunt those who do not speak as they do. Or to fail them.

You say that Pierino, son of the doctor, writes correctly. Of course you say so, he speaks just like you do. He is part of the firm. (p. 43)

Standard language forms are normally determined through the status and prestige gained by specific language varieties that, in the course of time, become a reference point in order to establish grammatical rules. Such norms, however, can also be used as an instrument of discrimination as indicated in the above extract from the *Lettera*.

The spoken varieties used for everyday communicative purposes do not necessarily correspond to the standard forms used at school. Whereas spoken language is normally spontaneous and fulfils immediate communicative and social functions, the formal written word often requires more reflection and its correctness and appropriateness are measured against grammatical and orthographic rules<sup>3</sup>. As far as schooling is concerned, language is used to examine, select and classify students thereby favouring those who possess the cultural capital which allows them to develop and master such forms:

... your little rich boys used to ask you things they already knew, putting on an angelic face. And you used to encourage them: "It's an intelligent question!" A useless comedy for all of us. Damaging for the soul of those suckers. Cruel for me as I did not know how to play the game. (p. 134)

You used to make me keep a copybook with notes to force me to learn that language by heart. And to whom would I speak this other language that I had to learn? (p. 135)

Moreover, besides the role of standard Italian as a medium of instruction in schools, within the educational and social context in which the *Lettera* was written, great importance also used to be attributed to Latin. In fact, in the Italian educational system, students would study Latin language and literature at the *liceo classico* which was considered to be a highly prestigious institution attended by the most academically inclined students. In the *Lettera*, this is considered discriminatory against students who do not possess the cultural background in order to learn those languages, including Latin itself, which are devoid of everyday social communicative functions and which are therefore very distant from the reality of those who, at the time, were part of the lower social classes of society:

In your school the most important subject is the one that we should never teach. You even expect to translate from Italian to Latin. But who placed a sign where Latin ends and Italian begins? Somebody, who knows who it may have been,

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even wrote a grammar book for you. But it's a vulgar swindle. For every rule it would be necessary to have the date and the region where it was spoken in that way. The career-oriented children accept the imposition, they learn it by heart. They are only concerned with passing exams and with repeating the game when they will be teachers. (pp. 123-4)

Latin was distant from the daily life of most children in Italy, including those who attended Milani's classes in Barbiana. The teachers of this language are described as being 'as solemn as priests. Custodians of the extinguished wick' (p. 52) and the *Lettera* is also openly critical about the fact that in order to become a Primary school teacher at the time one had to pass examinations of Latin. One of the authors, who used to attend the *istituto magistrale*, was given the following 'advice':

You told me, I repeat your words: "You see, you do not know Latin. Why don't you go to a *scuola tecnica*?" Are you sure that to form a good teacher Latin is indispensable? Maybe you have not thought about it. (p. 118)

The authors of the *Lettera* therefore view Latin in schools as a selective tool, often used to exclude those who do not possess the means to learn this language and to translate its literary texts into Italian. This is an example of how language in a school curriculum could potentially turn into an instrument used to exclude rather than to include, a means to discriminate between students with different backgrounds, rather than to learn about and appreciate the linguistic identity and the culture of oneself and of others.

### 3. THE LINGUISTIC CAPITAL OF THE STUDENTS OF BARBIANA

Since in the Italian schooling system of the Sixties great importance was given mainly to high and prestigious culture, only sporadic reference used to be made to whatever was part of the daily life of individuals from different social strata of society. The very fact that the language of school, be it implicitly through the standard forms of Italian or explicitly through the importance attached to Latin, was distant to that used at home by those pertaining to lower social strata of society was enough to make it impossible for them to engage even in the simplest form of discourse.

In the case of Barbiana, many students had a rural background and therefore found themselves immersed in a situation which was totally detached from the one they experienced in their home environment. Anything which was related to rural culture was either totally excluded from school or looked down upon. In some cases, examples related to this field, used in textbooks or by teachers, were totally incoherent:

If one leafs through a primary school textbook it's full of plants, animals, seasons. It seems that only a peasant could have written it. However, the authors come out of your school. It's enough to look at the illustrations: left-handed peasants, round shovels, hooked-shaped hoes, blacksmiths with tools used in Roman times, cherry trees with plum-tree leaves.

...

I even know the plant-shoots. I pruned them, I gathered them, I used them to bake bread. You marked the word *sormenti*<sup>4</sup> as an error in my work. You say that one should say *sarmenti* because that's how it is said in Latin. Then, making sure nobody sees you, you go to check what it means in the dictionary. (pp. 121-2)

Although, as in the case exemplified above, students with rural background were certainly aware of the misconceptions being presented in class, they would not normally find the courage and motivation to speak up.

Similar considerations are also included towards the end of the *Lettera*, when one of the authors recounts his experience in England<sup>5</sup>. In this context, although it is not possible to compare English regional varieties to Italian dialects because of their different historical evolution and social use, the author notices that a friend of his who speaks cockney 'is branded'. Children like him find it hard to master Received Pronunciation<sup>6</sup> just like students with a rural background in Italy encountered problems with the use of standard Italian and Latin:

In London they're worse off than in the rural areas. We were in the basements of the City unloading lorries. My workmates were English and they did not know how to write a letter in English. Often they told Dick to do it for them. Dick sometimes asked advice from me who had studied it from records. Even he only speaks in cockney.

Five metres above our head there were those who spoke "Queen's English". Cockney is not very different, but whoever speaks it is branded. In their schools they do not fail. They turn students to schools of lower prestige. The poor, in their schools, perfect their incorrect speech. The rich their correct speech. From the pronunciation one may understand how rich one is and what job one's father does. (pp. 108-9)

Moreover, in the *Lettera* the methods used to teach and assess languages are harshly criticised, mainly on the grounds that prominence is given to prescriptive and grammatical rules, leaving little space for communicative linguistic functions, which reflect the fundamental use of language:

The French paper was a concentrated series of exceptions. Exams should be abolished. But if you set them, at least be honest. Difficulties must represent a percentage of the ones we face during life. If you include a larger number of

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them it means that you have got trap-mania. It's as if you were at war with your children. Who makes you do this? Is it for their good? It's not for their good. A boy, who in France wouldn't even know how to ask where the toilet is, passed with a nine. He only knew how to ask for owls, for pebbles and for fans both in the plural and in the singular<sup>7</sup>. He probably knew two hundred words which were chosen as exceptions and not because they are used frequently. The result was that he hated French just as much as one could hate Maths. (p. 45)

Similar considerations are also made with regards to English as taught in Italy during the time the *Lettera* was written:

In the class next door there were some students of English. As misguided as ever. Even I know that English is useful. But if one really knows it. Not just by touching upon it as you do. Other than owls and pebbles. They did not even know how to say good evening. And they were discouraged forever. The first foreign language is an important event in a child's life. It must be a success, otherwise there will be trouble. (p. 47)

Although this situation has evolved over the course of time and nowadays schools accept non-standard varieties more readily, especially in the spoken form, the powerful status of standard varieties is still very influential<sup>8</sup>. This is especially evident in language textbooks and gains prominence in examination-oriented schooling systems where languages are taught mainly in order to obtain certification, rather than to allow students to express themselves and to use them as means to explore local and foreign cultures. The authors of the *Lettera* had a remarkable foresight as far as learning the communicative features of language is concerned:

I studied languages by listening to records. Without even realising it I first learnt the most useful and frequent things. Just as one learns Italian. That Summer I had been to Grenoble and I washed the plates in a restaurant. I immediately felt comfortable. In the hostels I had communicated with boys from Europe and from North Africa. I had returned determined to learn as many languages as possible. Many languages badly rather than one correctly. As long as I could communicate with everybody, get to know people and new problems, feel amused at the sacred boundaries of the homelands.

In the three years of *medie* schooling we had done two languages instead of one: French and English. We built a range of vocabulary that was sufficient to keep up any discussion. As long as no fuss was made on grammatical mistakes. Grammar comes to the fore only when one writes. In order to read or speak one can do without it. Then slowly slowly one acquires it by ear. Later, whoever wishes to do so, may study it. (p. 46)



4. SYNTAX AND LEXIS OF THE *LETTERA*

Issues related to languages, included in the *Lettera*, do not only engage with the way they are taught or with the implications that their use in schools may have on students. In fact, the style chosen in order to write the *Lettera*, the variety of Italian used by the authors, as well as syntactic structures often resorted to in order to create a sense of emphasis, all implicitly transmit a message of immediacy and, in some cases, outright urgency. To do so, in a number of instances, the written word of the *Lettera* is heavily marked by colloquialisms to the extent that it seems a direct representation of spoken forms. The *Lettera*'s intrinsic linguistic style is distant from conventional Italian writing and especially from those structures which are very heavily conditioned by prescriptive standard Italian, a language variety which is rarely used for everyday communicative purposes<sup>9</sup>. Although the writers only resort to dialectal and local forms very sparsely, they explicitly use a language variety which is accessible to all readers. Distance is deliberately kept between this style and academic or literary forms of writing which the authors define as "the second dead language"<sup>10</sup> (p. 134).

The linguistic style of the *Lettera* is extremely direct and straightforward and often the language variety used approaches spoken Italian through the use of several discourse markers, short fragmented sentences, ellipses and deixis. This is also rendered more engaging as the *Lettera* is addressed to a specific individual: a teacher in a Primary school who personifies his/her profession. The direct reference to this addressee is often based on the interplay between the use of the first person (I), referring to the author/s, and the second person (you), referring to the teacher:

You will not even remember my name. (...) On the other hand, I have often thought of you, of your colleagues, about that institution that you call school, about the children who you "turn away". (p. 35)

The *Lettera*, because of its intent and purpose, is also rife with irony and metaphors, the latter often containing negative connotations. This implies that, at a lexical level, terms are chosen purposely by the authors in order to convey very specific meanings. This emerges clearly, for example, when the authors refer to some of the negative teacher's comments on their written work and when they include their reactions to them:

"Childish. Puerile. Shows immaturity. Unsatisfactory. Trivial".

What use is it for the child to know this? He'll send his grandfather to school, he's more mature. (p. 129)

These comments contrast sharply with those on Pierino's work, and the authors are very ironic about this, as clearly expressed in the final sentence of the extract below:

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Until you get to those children touched by the gods: “Spontaneous. You are not short of ideas. Work done with your own ideas that denote a certain personality”.

Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you”. (pp. 129-130)

Pierino, who represents children of families of high socio-economic status, is “touched by the gods” and the authors cannot refrain from writing their provocative thought in reaction to the way the teacher writes her comments: “Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you””. Besides irony, such comments also transmit a sense of spontaneity, typical of spoken discourse. The same occurs when the authors vent their anger and frustration, as in the following case with reference to words said by the teacher to Gianni who, in contrast to Pierino, represents those coming from families of lower socio-economic backgrounds:

But during the exams a female teacher told him: “Why do you attend a private school? Can’t you see that you do not know how to express yourself?” “...”

At this point we wished to add the words that we wished to say that day. But the editor would not print them. (p. 43)

The language variety used to write the *Lettera* also reflects the authors’ feelings through the syntactic structure of several sentences. The following example, which is quoted in Italian followed by the translation in English, represents an example of how specific syntactic structures are used in order to reproduce a style which approximates spoken, informal speech:

*Un professorone disse: “Lei reverendo non ha studiato pedagogia. Polianski dice che lo sport è per il ragazzo una necessità fisiopsico...” Parlava senza guardarci. Chi insegna pedagogia all’Università, i ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli. (...) Finalmente andò via e Lucio che aveva 36 mucche nella stalla disse: “La scuola sarà sempre meglio della merda”. Questa frase va scolpita sulla porta delle vostre scuole. Milioni di ragazzi contadini sono pronti a sottoscriverla. Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi.*<sup>11</sup>

An important professor said: “You, Reverend, have not studied Pedagogy. Polianski says that for boys, sports is a physiopsych... necessity”. He spoke without looking at us. Those who teach pedagogy at University do not need to look at the boys (...) Finally he left and Lucio, who has 36 cows in the stable, said: “School will always be better than shit”. This sentence ought to be engraved on the door of your schools. Millions of peasant-boys are ready to subscribe to it. It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play. (p. 38)

From a semantic point of view the schoolchildren are the main focus of the above extract. They are represented through the words of a poor peasant-boy (Lucio) and they are the object of the *professorone*'s<sup>12</sup> indifference. Towards the end of the extract their role becomes more prominent through the use of *milioni di ragazzi contadini* (millions of peasant-boys) who all wish to unite as one voice in order to express their thoughts about schools. The focus on the role of these schoolchildren is marked through the syntactic structure of two sentences: in the first one, *I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli* [literally: 'The children he does not need to see them'], one finds a syntactic structure that does not follow the subject-verb-object sequence of written standard Italian<sup>13</sup>. The constituent '*i ragazzi*', which is the main focus of this utterance, is placed in sentence-initial position and is then also referred to by means of the enclitic third person masculine pronoun '*li*' in '*guardarli*'. In this sentence the grammatical subject ('*un professorone*') is not explicitly expressed through a noun or through a pronoun, as Italian is a pro-drop<sup>14</sup> language.

A similar syntactic structure is also found in the final sentence of the extract presented above: *Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi* [literally: 'That the children hate the school and love play you say it']. In this case the subordinate clause ('*che i ragazzi odiano la scuola*') precedes the main clause ('*voi dite*')<sup>15</sup>. Even here '*i ragazzi*' is placed in sentence-initial position and is anaphorically linked to the preceding sentence referred to in the paragraph above (*I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli*). Another feature, which is also present in the example above, regards the final segment: *lo dite voi*, which in a word-for-word transliteration reads as 'it say you'. This phrase is marked by the fact that the pronoun *voi* 'you (plural)' follows the verb rather than precedes it, despite being the grammatical subject. The phrase is therefore a direct accusation towards the teacher, as the authors implicitly express the thought that "it is you (referring to the teacher) who say it (not anybody else)". Consequently, syntactic order has an important communicative function, as throughout the *Lettera* the authors repeatedly stress the information which is most relevant to them by altering the position of the linguistic constituents that form their utterances.

The following example represents another instance in which syntactic structures are characterised by and organised according to communicative prominence:

*Di latino naturalmente ne sapevamo poco*, literally 'Of Latin naturally we knew little of it'. (p. 52)

In this sentence there is a typical syntactic feature of colloquial Italian, namely dislocation. Dislocation in Italian involves a reduplication of a particular constituent. The subject-verb-object order of the sentence above would read as follows: *Noi sapevamo poco di latino*, 'We knew little about Latin'. However in the above sentence a constituent, namely '*di latino*' is placed in sentence-initial position as it becomes the main feature of the marked sentence. Moreover, it is reduplicated by the use of the partitive pronoun *ne*. Since such forms are associated to spoken language

their correctness in formal written varieties of Italian is debatable. Yet today such syntactic structures are a very common feature in forms of Italian writing which are close to the spoken variety, such as informal e-mails, computer chat and even newspaper articles. It is indeed noteworthy that this feature is used extremely frequently in the *Lettera*, despite being written in the 1960s, and this represents a clear indication of the authors' intent to use an informal style of writing. The authors of the *Lettera* often resort to such structures when they wish to stress those concepts which are at the heart of their writing.

Pronoun reduplication, in syntactic structures which are communicatively similar to the one presented above, is found in other instances in the *Lettera*. In the two examples below one finds two forms of indirect pronouns used simultaneously, the first person singular forms *a me* and *m' (mi)* and the second person plural forms *a voi* and *vi*:

(1) *A me invece m'hanno insegnato* [literally: To me, on the other hand, they taught me]<sup>16</sup>

(2) *A voi vi fa paura* [literally: to you (plural) it frightens you (plural)]<sup>17</sup>

A prescriptive, normative grammar of Italian would consider such forms to be inappropriate – if not outright incorrect – in the standard written variety, although they are frequently used in spoken language (e.g. '*a me mi piace*', literally: to me I like it). By using a pronominal form, such as '*a me*' or '*a voi*', together with a contracted form of the same pronoun, more emphasis is placed on the concept being expressed. Personal deixis is further strengthened by the explicit use of two pronouns thereby creating forms which, in the spoken variety, would also normally be accompanied by prosodic features, such as variation in intonation, raising one's voice etc.

The above syntactic structures are rendered even more emphatic through lexical choices: the 'art' of writing becomes alive in the *Lettera* through the very fact that words are chosen with great care. Furthermore, derivational suffixes are used in order to convey explicit meanings: the professor of pedagogy is therefore ironically addressed as a *professorone* 'a great professor'; Homer's translations are produced '*dalla testolina del Monti*'<sup>18</sup>, with '*testolina*' clearly carrying a disparaging connotation; the children of the rich are *signorini, figlioli, studentelli*.

Pierino is often called '*creatura*'<sup>19</sup> in order to refer to the fact that these children are mollycoddled by their family from the day of their birth. On the other hand, children who have problems at school are *respinti* (repelled, turned away) by this institution: schools do not 'just' fail them but they are made to feel different and unwanted in order to avoid becoming an obstacle towards whoever, for various reasons, may have a better predisposition towards learning. School is an *infezione* (infection) from which successful students may be 'breast-fed' '*poppare*' till when they are twenty-five years old and are therefore ready to enter the *casta* ('caste') or the *razza pregiata* ('prestigious, chosen race'). One of the concluding extracts of the

*Lettera* is aptly entitled *disinfezione* (disinfection): the authors express their extraneousness from the system created in schools and the need to ‘disinfect’ themselves from it.

#### 5. TRANSLATING THE *LETTERA* INTO ENGLISH

Since language use and style, together with linguistically-related reflections, are deemed to be such a central part of the *Lettera*, it follows that translating this work needs to take account of all the implications and connotations which result from the authors’ writing. The importance given to communicative skills implies that the authors choose their words and organise their sentence structures with specific communicative intentions in mind, as illustrated above. Translating entails the responsibility of reproducing the words and sentences in the original version in Italian as faithfully as possible, as well as conveying meanings which are vital in order to transmit the philosophy underlying the *Lettera* in a precise manner.

In the translation of the *Lettera* presented in this volume, wherever possible and feasible, a faithful, almost word-for-word approach was preferred to a more general one: the main priority is to limit the distance from the original text as much as possible.

However, translating from Italian to English involves a number of linguistic constraints which are mainly due to the fact that the source language (Italian) is typologically different from the target language (English), especially at a morphological level. For example, whereas Italian has a very rich verb inflection morphological system, which therefore implies an alteration, through suffixation, to each verb ending in agreement with personal pronouns (e.g. verb *cantare* [to sing], present tense: *io canto* [I sing]; *lui canta* [he sings]; *noi cantiamo* [we sing]), this is not the case for English which, for example, only adds the morpheme –s to the third person singular of verbs in the present tense, whilst the rest of the paradigm is unaltered. Italian, being a pro-drop language, allows the omission of personal pronouns, whereas this is not the case for English (e.g. in Italian one may simply say *cantiamo* [we sing], but in English one cannot omit the personal pronoun ‘we’ to express the equivalent form). Languages which are rich morphologically have more syntactic freedom. Therefore, whilst in Italian the subject-verb-object syntactic order is altered very frequently, according to emphasis and prominence which may be placed on one linguistic constituent rather than on another, this is much less common in English. This implies that certain structures, which are perfectly acceptable in forms of both spoken and written Italian, cannot be translated literally into English, as they would be ungrammatical.

Reference is made to a sentence which has already been quoted previously: *Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi*, literally ‘That boys hate school and love play you say it’. A literal, word-by-word translation of the above sentence would be unacceptable in English, but, as explained earlier, since this syntactic

structure is used by the authors to reach a precise communicative goal, in a translation it is necessary to provide a faithful representation of the message being transmitted. For this reason, whenever it was not possible to translate such sentences into English by retaining an identical word order as in the original, or the same syntactic structure, every effort was made so that the communicative goal being expressed would be presented in a manner considered to be as close as possible to the authors' intentions. The above sentence was therefore translated as: "It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play", a cleft sentence in English which corresponds communicatively to the marked syntactic structure used in the source language of the *Lettera*.

This is also relevant in cases of pronoun reduplication and topicalisation, discussed earlier, which would be ungrammatical if a transliteral word-by-word representation in English were to be provided.

At a lexical level, certain terms are chosen purposely by the authors of the *Lettera* in order to convey very specific meanings. In the translation, a corresponding term was used so that such meanings and connotations would not be lost. Yet another issue regards the use of punctuation. In many parts of the *Lettera* punctuation is used sporadically and sometimes also unconventionally. In the English translation the use of punctuation reflects the original Italian text as closely as possible, although because of linguistic constraints, in some instances the use of punctuation in the translation varies slightly from its use in the source text.

For the reasons illustrated above, certain extracts of the translated version include sentence structures and lexical items which may not correspond to what one might expect in formal, written English. This is a deliberate choice as it reflects the intrinsic style of the *Lettera*, as documented through various examples in this chapter. After all, when referring to Don Lorenzo Milani, a friend of his and a renowned Italian journalist, Oreste del Buono stated that: "*Era diverso da tutti noi: spregiudicato, bastiancontrario. Gli piaceva sempre andare controcorrente. Si comportava come scriveva: senza curarsi della punteggiatura e della sintassi*". (Fallaci, 1994:70) [He was different from all of us: open-minded, controversial. He always liked to go against the current. He behaved just like he wrote: without giving much thought to punctuation and syntax"].

## 6. CONCLUSION

The authors of the *Lettera* clearly show that language use, as well as the languages they learned at school and the way they were taught, were very close to their heart. In some instances their powerful choice of words and their use of Italian syntax craftily match their provocative intentions and the accusations made at the teacher. They convey their message in an unconventional manner which often does not reflect, in terms of style and content, the standard written use of Italian. Their linguistic style is accessible to all and distances itself from a scholarly form of writing: the authors

adopt a communicative technique, also aimed at raising widespread awareness on the social situation that existed in the Sixties in Italy.

Their message has certainly reached its destination if one considers that today, over forty years after the publication of the *Lettera*, it is still being read and discussed: what was reported through these students' experience in the tiny mountain village of Barbiana has been extensively debated and reflected upon in Italy and beyond. It still creates a stir and has an impact on teachers, educators and pedagogists. Don Milani himself is still a highly controversial figure: on the one hand, he is considered to be a saintly and prophetic individual; on the other, he was also called a 'mascalzone' (rascal)<sup>20</sup>: undoubtedly, however, the *Lettera* and Don Milani himself have a major impact on whoever comes in contact with them and they rarely leave one indifferent or unmoved.

In the final part of the *Lettera*, the authors ask readers to correspond with them in order to provide feedback and share thoughts. Sadly, any such letters would have never been read by Don Milani himself, who died shortly after it was published. One of such letters, dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 1968, sent by a teacher of a school in Sora, in Central Italy, shows that the *Lettera* reached its goal and left its mark. It is a reply which is still relevant today and which stimulates reflection among all educators: *I am a teacher. I have read your book which, in a certain sense, is also addressed to me (...) I recognised myself in some of your writings, I was unmasked in some of my attitudes, exposed in some words (...) I owe it to you if, over the last few days, in my classes, I look at those who are weakest and incompetent with a new heart, and with a sort of, I am not ashamed to say it, astonishing fondness.*<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The notion of standardization of languages is a complex issue, which has been dealt with in the works of several authors (e.g. Fishman, 1972; Trudgill, 1992; Duranti, 1997). This notion will not be discussed in this context, but it is worth pointing out that many contemporary European languages have attained their status as a result of their use in writing, mainly after prestigious literary works and historical developments led to the Western ideology of "one State equals one Nation". As a result of such processes certain languages were elevated to 'standard' forms, against which other varieties, including regional dialects, are often 'judged' and 'measured'. This is also the case of Italian, the standard variety of which was largely influenced by the literary tradition that emerged in the Middle Ages through the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Whereas the prestige of the Tuscan variety rose, other dialects did not attain the same status and were considered to be inferior, despite being extremely widespread and although they are still used by large communities till the present day.
- <sup>2</sup> "Means of information and of entertainment that use traditional techniques, such as periodical and non-periodical printed matter and theatre, and means which rely on recent techniques, such as cinema, radio and television, have exerted a double linguistic action in Italy: they have spread and consolidated the knowledge of the common language at the expense of dialects; they have led to new stylistic models which are intrinsically part of the techniques used to determine and transmit messages" (De Mauro, (1995, 1st edition, 1963:110-111, *my translation*).
- <sup>3</sup> The distinction between spoken and written form is not a dichotomous one, as clearly shown by Berruto's (1987, 2004) and Crystal's (2005) works. For example, there are cases where spoken forms are more written-like (e.g. a university lecture) and writing forms which are more spoken-like (e.g. SMSs, computer chat).

#### LANGUAGE USE AND STYLE

- <sup>4</sup> *Sormenti* is a local variant of *sarmenti*, ‘plant-shoots’.
- <sup>5</sup> Some students of Barbiana recount their experiences in foreign countries where they could practice the foreign language learnt at school. Don Milani managed to organise these trips abroad for them, despite the logistic problems faced at the time. This anticipates one of the aspects that today is considered vital in order to learn a second or foreign language, namely using them in practical contexts which go beyond the classroom, possibly by interacting with native speakers.
- <sup>6</sup> Received Pronunciation (RP) has been subject to extensive debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion of RP will therefore be restricted to two definitions, which are also useful in the light of the topic under study: “Great prestige is still attached to this implicitly social standard of pronunciation (...) suggesting that it is the result of a social judgment rather than of an artificial decision as to what is ‘correct’ or ‘wrong’” (Gimson, 1980: 89); RP is “widely regarded as a model for correct pronunciation, particularly for educated formal speech” (Wells 2000: xiii).
- <sup>7</sup> *owls, pebbles and fans* refer to three words in French which, in the words of the authors of the *Lettera*, “are harder than the others. Old-fashioned teachers make students learn them by heart from the first days of school”.
- <sup>8</sup> Although over the recent years there has been an important shift in second and foreign language teaching – from a grammatical-translation approach to more communicative-oriented (Nunan, 1989) and task-based (Ellis, 2003) approaches and methods – one still encounters contexts where foreign modern languages are taught devoid of a communicative context with emphasis placed on declarative knowledge (*savoir*) rather than on skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*) and ‘existential’ competence (*savoir-être*), (Council of Europe, 1996: 101-108). This occurs especially in highly exam-oriented schooling systems where ‘coaching’ students takes priority over communicatively meaningful goals. As also mentioned in the *Lettera*, languages cannot just serve the purpose of being taught for their own sake without including aspects related to the culture they represent.
- <sup>9</sup> Berruto (1987: 59, *my translation*) affirms that, “there are no native speakers of standard Italian: in Italy nobody (if not in the case of some notable exceptions, which are very special) possesses standard Italian as a mother tongue: the standard variety is not learnt by anyone as a native language, there are no standard native speakers. The standard pronunciation is the artificial result of specific training, and as such it is reserved to specific socio-professional groups”.
- <sup>10</sup> According to the authors of the *Lettera* the gap between formal literary Italian and colloquial forms is so large that this too, like Latin, is a ‘dead’ language.
- <sup>11</sup> Scuola di Barbiana (2007:13).
- <sup>12</sup> *Professorone*. The augmentative suffix – *one* in this case adds an ironical and somewhat demeaning connotation to the term.
- <sup>13</sup> The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Il professorone non ha bisogno di guardare i ragazzi*.
- <sup>14</sup> A language in which the grammatical subject may not be expressed explicitly (either through a noun or through a pronoun). Pro-drop languages are morphologically rich, especially as far as verb inflection is concerned.
- <sup>15</sup> The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Voi dite che i ragazzi odiano la scuola*.
- <sup>16</sup> Scuola di Barbiana (2007:110).
- <sup>17</sup> Scuola di Barbiana (2007:112).
- <sup>18</sup> Scuola di Barbiana (2007: 28).
- <sup>19</sup> This may be considered to be roughly equivalent to ‘darling’.
- <sup>20</sup> This refers to an article written by Sebastiano Vasalli, in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, on the 30th June 1992. This article entitled *Don Milani, che mascazone*, led to widespread controversy. It is published, together with the reactions it provoked, in Scuola di Barbiana (2007: lxx-xcix).
- <sup>21</sup> Scuola di Barbiana (2007: lxxv).



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SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

**LETTER  
TO A TEACHER\***

\* Footnotes with Roman Numerals = translation of footnotes in original text  
Footnotes with Arabic Numerals = translators' notes






PART ONE

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COMPULSORY SCHOOLING  
CANNOT FAIL ITS STUDENTS<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *non può bocciare*, literally ‘cannot fail’. *Bocciare* can only be used transitively in this context. The inclusion of the direct object ‘its students’ in the translated version is necessary, as in English the verb ‘to fail’ can also be used intransitively, therefore leading to an incorrect interpretation of this heading: ‘Compulsory schooling cannot fail’ that could imply that it cannot be unsuccessful.



*T*his book is not written for teachers but for parents. It is a call to get organised.

At first glance, it may seem to be written solely by one boy. However, we, the authors of the book<sup>2</sup>, are eight boys from the school of Barbiana.

Other schoolfriends, who go to work, helped us on Sundays.

We must thank, first of all, our Prior, who educated us, who taught us the rules of the Art<sup>3</sup> and who directed our work.

Then many other friends who collaborated in other ways:

In order to simplify the text, a number of parents<sup>4</sup>.

For the statistical data collection, secretaries, teachers, directors, head teachers, officials of the Ministry and of ISTAT<sup>5</sup>, parish priests.

For other information, trade-unionists, journalists, local council administrators, historians, statisticians, jurists.

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<sup>2</sup> *gli autori siamo otto ragazzi*, literally ‘the authors we are eight children’. Note the lack of agreement between the subject (*gli autori*) and the copula (*siamo*). Such syntactic structures are associated with informal, colloquial Italian. The use of the first person plural copula clearly shows the direct involvement of these authors and marks a style which will be used throughout this *Lettera*: the constant use of the first person (when referring to the authors) and the polite form *Lei* (when referring to the teacher to whom the *Lettera* is addressed).

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the art of writing. This concept will be elaborated upon in several other parts of the *Lettera*.

<sup>4</sup> *Per la semplificazione del testo, vari genitori*. Note the elision of the verb/s in this sentence which implies: ‘We thank a number of parents who helped us in order to simplify the text’. This style is also used in the final three sentences of this prologue and is a concise, simple way of getting one’s message across directly. This is another indication of the style used in the *Lettera*, in which simplicity and concision often take precedence over formal syntactic correctness.

<sup>5</sup> ISTAT, *Istituto nazionale di statistica* (National Institute of Statistics), responsible for the publication of official statistical reports in Italy.

## *Dear Madam,*

You will not even remember my name. You have failed many of them<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, I have often thought of you, of your colleagues, about that institution that you call school, about the children who you “turn away”<sup>7</sup>.

You turn us away<sup>8</sup> to the fields and to the factories and you forget about us.

*Shyness*<sup>9</sup>. Two years ago, when I was in the *prima magistrale*<sup>10</sup> class, you used to intimidate me. After all, my shyness has accompanied me throughout my whole life. When I was young I did not use to raise my eyes from the ground. I used to flatten myself against walls not to be seen.

At first I thought it was a sickness of mine, or, at the very most, of my family. My mother is one of those people who feel intimidated even when she looks at a telegram form. My father<sup>11</sup> observes and listens, but he does not speak.

Later I thought that shyness was the infirmity of mountain people. To me the farmers of the plains seemed to be more confident in themselves. Let alone factory workers<sup>12</sup>.

Now I have seen that workers leave all the posts of responsibility in the parties and all the seats in Parliament to the daddies’ boys<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This pronoun has no direct referent, but it implicitly refers to the students failed by this teacher.

<sup>7</sup> The Italian verb used in the original is *respingere*, represented in square inverted commas: «*respingete*» present tense, second person plural of the verb *respingere*. This verb, which literally means ‘to reject, to refuse, to repel’, is often used euphemistically instead of ‘to fail’.

<sup>8</sup> Even in this case the verb used is *respingete*.

<sup>9</sup> *la timidezza*, literally ‘timidity, shyness’: though the various connotations of this term vary throughout this paragraph, the same form is always used, i.e. *timidezza* as a noun; *intimidire* as a verb.

<sup>10</sup> *istituti magistrali*, teacher training colleges for primary school teachers; *scuole magistrali*, teacher training colleges for teachers of pre-elementary schools.

<sup>11</sup> *il babbo*. This form is used to refer to one’s father in central Italy (mostly in Tuscany). It conveys a sense of affection as it is more personal than the generic ‘padre’.

<sup>12</sup> The generic term ‘operai’ is normally associated with factory workers, but it can also be used to refer to all workers.

<sup>13</sup> *figli di papà*, literally ‘daddies’ sons’, This expression is highly ironic and clearly refers to those who gain power solely on the strength of the family they are born into.

So they are like us. And the timidity of the poor is an even older mystery. Not even I, who am part of it, can explain it to you. Maybe it's neither cowardice nor heroism. It is just a lack of arrogance.

#### MOUNTAIN PEOPLE

##### *The multiclass*<sup>14</sup>

At the *elementari* the State offered me<sup>15</sup> a second-class school. Five classes in one school hall. One fifth of the school that I had a right to.

It is the system used in America in order to create differences between whites and blacks. Worse schools for the poor from when they are young.

##### *Compulsory schooling*

When I finished the *elementari* I had the right to attend three more years of schooling. What is more, the Constitution states that I was obliged to attend. But at Vicchio there was still no *media* school. Getting to Borgo was a feat. Whoever tried had spent loads of money and was then turned away like a dog.

Besides, the teacher had told my parents not to waste money: "Send him to the fields. He is not suitable for study".

My father did not answer her. Within himself he thought: "Had we lived in Barbiana he would have been suitable".

##### *Barbiana*

At Barbiana all the boys used to attend the priest's school. From early morning to night, summer and winter. Nobody was "hopeless<sup>16</sup> for schooling".

But we were part of another people and we were far away. My father was going to give up. Then he got to know that even a boy from S. Martino attended. So he plucked up courage and went to find out<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> *pluriclasse*, refers to a class with includes students of different ages and levels.

<sup>15</sup> The term used in the original is *mi offrì*, third person singular, past tense (*passato remoto*) of the verb *offrire* 'to offer'. It is important to note that the State 'offered' this schooling to the author: the choice of this verb carries polemic connotations, reiterated in the statements that follow.

<sup>16</sup> *negato*, past participle of the verb *negare* 'to deny'. In this context this form carries a negative connotation, 'hopeless, not cut out for'.

<sup>17</sup> *andò a sentire*, literally 'he went to listen'. The choice of this verb is semantically related to the description of the author's father who 'observes and listens', as stated in the paragraph entitled 'shyness'.

*The woods*

When he returned I noticed that he had bought a torch for me for the evening, a little mess-tin<sup>18</sup> for broth, rubber boots for the snow.

On the first day he accompanied me. It took us two hours because we had to make our way using the billhook and the sickle. Eventually I learnt how to get through it in a little bit more than an hour.

I passed by only two houses. With broken windows, recently abandoned. Sometimes I used to start running because of a viper or because of a madman who lived alone at the Rocca and who shouted at me from far away.

I was only eleven years old. You would have been scared to death. Do you see? Everybody has fears<sup>19</sup>. So we are the same.

But only if each one of us stays in his own place<sup>20</sup>. Or if you'd had to sit for exams at our school<sup>21</sup>. But you do not need to.

*The tables*

Barbiana, when I arrived there, did not seem to be a school to me. No teacher's desk, no blackboard, no benches. Just large tables around which class was held and where we ate.

There was only one copy of each book. The boys used to crowd around it. It was hard to notice that one was a bit older and was teaching.

The oldest of those teachers was sixteen years old. The youngest was twelve and I was full of admiration for him. I decided from the first day that even I would teach.

*The favourite one*

Life was hard even up there. There was discipline and some made scenes<sup>22</sup> that could make you lose the desire to return.

However, whoever lacked the basics, who was slow or unmotivated, felt that he was the favourite one. He was welcomed just as you'd welcome the first in class. It seemed as if the school existed solely for him. Until he understood, the others did not move ahead.

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<sup>18</sup> 'gavettino', a food container normally used by soldiers.

<sup>19</sup> The same term used in the earlier section is repeated: 'timidezze'.

<sup>20</sup> *a casa sua*, literally 'at home'.

<sup>21</sup> *dar gli esami da noi*, literally 'give the exams at us'.

<sup>22</sup> *scenate*, 'to make a scene, kick up a row'.

*Break*

There was no break. Not even Sunday was a holiday.

Nobody really minded because work is worse. But every middle-class person who happened to visit us used to complain<sup>23</sup> about this.

An important professor<sup>24</sup> said: “You, Reverend, have not studied Pedagogy. Polianski says that for boys, sports is a physiopsycho... necessity”<sup>i</sup>.

He spoke without looking at us. Those who teach pedagogy at University do not need to look at the boys<sup>25</sup>. He knows them all by heart just as we know the tables.

Finally he left and Lucio, who has 36 cows in the stable, said: “School will always be better than shit”.

*Peasants of the world*

This sentence ought to be engraved on the door of your schools. Millions of peasant-boys are ready to subscribe to it.

It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play<sup>26</sup>. You have not asked us peasants about this. But we are one billion and nine hundred million<sup>ii</sup>. Six boys out of ten agree perfectly with Lucio. Nobody knows about the other four.

All your culture is built in this way. As if you were the world.

*Child teachers*

The following year I was a teacher. That is, I was a teacher for three half-days a week. I taught geography, mathematics and French to the *prima media* class.

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<sup>i</sup> *Polianski* = we do not know who he is, but he is probably a famous educator.  
*Pedagogy* = *the art of educating children*.

*physiopsycho...* = *half of a word used by that professor and which we do not remember fully*.

<sup>ii</sup> In this figure we have included even those who live in worse conditions than peasants: hunters, fishermen, shepherds (Compendium of Social Statistics » ONU New York 1963).

<sup>23</sup> *faceva polemica*, literally ‘used to make a polemic’, implying to express one’s disagreement on this issue.

<sup>24</sup> *Professorone*. The augmentative suffix – *one* in this case adds an ironical and somewhat demeaning connotation to the term.

<sup>25</sup> *i ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli*, literally ‘the boys he does not need to look at them’. A marked syntactic structure: *i ragazzi* is topicalised and therefore emphasised by being placed in the initial position. The same constituent is then reprised through the pronoun *li* in *guardarli*.

<sup>26</sup> *Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi*, literally ‘That boys hate school and love play you say it’. Emphasis is present in this sentence by means of the explicit second person plural pronoun *voi* in sentence-final position. The subordinate clause (*che i ragazzi odiano...*) precedes the main clause and is reprised by the pronoun *lo*.



## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

In order to skim through an atlas or to explain fractions one does not need a degree.

If I made mistakes it did not matter much. It was a relief for the boys. We looked up things together. The hours passed serenely, without fear and without feelings of submission. You do not know how to teach<sup>27</sup> like I do.

### *Politics or avarice*

Then, while teaching, I learnt many things.

For example I learnt that the problems of others were the same as mine. Getting out of them together is politics. Getting out of them on our own is avarice.

I was not yet tainted by<sup>28</sup> avarice. During the exams I used to feel like sending the little ones to hell in order to study myself. I was a child just like yours, but up there<sup>29</sup> I could not admit this, neither to others nor to myself. I had<sup>30</sup> to be generous even when I was not.

To you it might not seem much. But you do less with your children. You do not ask anything of them. You just ask<sup>31</sup> them to gain ground by themselves<sup>32</sup>.

## THE TOWN BOYS

### *Warped*

After the *media* school had been set up in Vicchio, even town boys came to Barbiana. All had been failed<sup>33</sup>, of course.

Apparently the problem of shyness did not exist for them. But they were warped in other ways<sup>34</sup>.

For example they used to consider play and holidays as a right, whereas school was a sacrifice. They had never heard anyone say that one goes to school to learn and that going there is a privilege.

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<sup>27</sup> *fare scuola*, literally 'to make school'.

<sup>28</sup> *non era mica vaccinato*, literally 'I was not at all vaccinated'. *Vaccinato* is used metaphorically, as a synonym of 'experienced'.

<sup>29</sup> Referring to Barbiana.

<sup>30</sup> *mi toccava*, literally 'it was my turn'. Third person singular, past continuous tense (*imperfetto*) of the verb *toccare*, literally 'to touch', used metaphorically in this context.

<sup>31</sup> *invitate*, present tense, second person plural of the verb *invitare* 'to invite'. This choice of verb clearly denotes the passive role of the teacher who 'invites' his/her students to 'gain ground', to go ahead in his/her studies.

<sup>32</sup> The reflexive form *-si* in *farsi strada* again shows that it is the students who are to move ahead and that the teacher, in this respect, takes a passive role.

<sup>33</sup> *Tutti bocciati*, in the passive form: the boys had been failed by the school, therefore not necessarily because of shortcomings from their side.

<sup>34</sup> *erano contorti in altre cose*, literally 'they were twisted in other things'.

The teacher for them was on the other side of the barricade and it was necessary to<sup>35</sup> deceive him. They even tried to copy. Time passed before they understood that there were no report books<sup>36</sup>.

### *The young rooster*

Even with regards to sex, they used the same underhand tactics<sup>37</sup>. They thought that one ought to talk about it secretly. If they saw a young rooster on a hen they used to nudge each other as if they had seen an act of adultery.

However, initially it was the only school subject that would arouse them. We used to have an anatomy book<sup>iii</sup>. They hid in a corner to look at it. Two pages were totally worn out.

Later they found out that even the other pages were delightful<sup>38</sup>. Then they realised that even History is pleasant.

Some of them just did not stop anymore. Now everything interests them. They teach the little ones, they've become like us.

On the other hand, you have managed to freeze some of the others<sup>39</sup> again.

### *The girls*

Not even one girl came from the town<sup>40</sup>. Maybe it was because the road was hard. Maybe it's the mentality of the parents. They think that a woman can live her life even if she has a chicken's brain<sup>41</sup>. Males do not ask them to be intelligent.

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iii *anatomy book* = a book used by medical students. The human body is studied piece by piece.

<sup>35</sup> *conveniva*, literally 'it was necessary'. The choice of this verb indicates that deceiving the teacher is something that would be expected of these boys.

<sup>36</sup> *registro*, literally 'register'. This refers to the record book in which marks of students are kept.

<sup>37</sup> *Anche sul sesso gli stessi sotterfugi*, literally 'Even on sex the same underhand tactics'. Note the elision of the verb, this syntactic structure of this sentence is colloquial and informal.

<sup>38</sup> *belline*, a diminutive form of the adjective *bello*, 'nice', which carries an endearing connotation.

<sup>39</sup> Both these last two paragraphs start with the indefinite pronoun *qualcuno*, 'someone', thereby clearly giving importance to those boys who gained interest in learning and those who were 'frozen' (*ghiacciarlo*) once again by the teacher.

<sup>40</sup> *Delle bambine di paese non ne venne neanche una*, literally 'Of the town girls not one of them came'. A marked syntactic structure with topicalisation of the constituent *Delle bambine*, reprised by the pronoun *ne* 'of them'.

<sup>41</sup> *un cervello di gallina*, literally 'the brain of a hen'.

Even this is racism. But we have nothing to chastise you about, as far as this point is concerned. You hold girls in higher consideration<sup>42</sup> than their parents do<sup>iv</sup>.

*Sandro and Gianni*

Sandro was 15 years old. He was one metre seventy centimetres tall, he was humiliated, he was an adult<sup>43</sup>. The teachers deemed he was an idiot. They wanted him to repeat the *prima* class for the third time.

Gianni was 14 years old. Inattentive, allergic to reading. The teachers judged him<sup>44</sup> to be a criminal. And they were not totally to blame for this, but it's no reason to get rid of him.

Neither one nor the other had the intention of repeating. They had been demeaned to the extent that they wished to find a job in a factory<sup>45</sup>. They came to us only because we ignore your failing grades and we place every child in the right class for his age.

Sandro was put in the *terza* class and Gianni in the *seconda*. This was the first scholastic satisfaction of their poor life. Sandro will remember this forever. Gianni remembers it once in a while.

*The Little Matchstick Girl*

The second achievement was changing the course programme, at last.

You wanted to keep them at a standstill to search for perfection. Perfection is absurd, because the child listens to the same things until he gets bored while, in the meantime, he is growing up. Things remain the same, but he changes. They become puerile in his very own hands.

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<sup>iv</sup>. For example, in 1962-63, in the *prima media*, 65.2% of male students and 70.9% of female students were promoted. In the *seconda media*, 72.9% of males and 80.5% of females (*Annuario Statistico dell'Istruzione 1965 pag. 81* [Annual Statistics of Education, 1965, page 81])

<sup>42</sup> *Le bambine le stimate...*, literally 'the girls you consider them...' The constituent *le bambine* is topicalised once again and it is reprised by the pronoun *le* 'them' (cfr. footnote number 40).

<sup>43</sup> *alto un metro e settanta, umiliato, adulto*. This juxtaposition of adjectives clearly emphasises the dramatic situation of this boy, who has had to suffer humiliation which, in its extent, is directly proportional to his physical appearance.

<sup>44</sup> *L'avevano sentenziato*, literally 'had sentenced him'. Note the choice of verb from the legal semantic field.

<sup>45</sup> *Erano ridotti a desiderare l'officina*, literally 'they were reduced to wish the factory'. This sentence is syntactically concise, but rife with meaning. The verb *ridurre*, 'to reduce', from which the passive voice *erano ridotti* derives, carries a negative connotation, as in 'to demean'. The verb *desiderare* 'to wish' implies that these boys desired manual labour as an alternative to school, having been judged as inadequate. Finally, the term *officina* 'workshop, factory' is used as a metonym for 'manual labour'.

For example in the *prima* class you would have read the Little Matchstick Girl for the second or the third time and the snow that falls falls falls<sup>v</sup>. Instead in the *seconda* and *terza* class you read stuff which is written for adults.

Gianni did not know how write the h in the ‘to have’ verb<sup>46</sup>. But he knew many things about the world of adults. About work, about families, about town life. Some evenings he went with his father to the Communist Party premises or to the Local Council sittings.

You, with Romans and Greeks, had made him hate all History. We could stay on for four hours without budging when we had lessons about the War<sup>47</sup>.

In Geography you would have covered Italy for the second time. He would have left school without having heard a mention of the rest of the world. You would have done him great harm. Even if he just were to read the newspapers.

*You do not know how to express yourself*

In a short time, Sandro became passionate about everything. In the morning he followed the course programme of the *terza* class. In the meantime he took note of the things he did not know and in the evening he rummaged through the books of the *prima* and *seconda* class. In June the ‘cretin’ sat for the *licenza* exam<sup>48</sup> and you had to pass him<sup>49</sup>.

With Gianni it was harder. He had come out of your school illiterate and with a hatred for books.

We turned somersaults for him<sup>50</sup>. I’m not saying that we managed to make him love all subjects, but at least some of them. All that would have been necessary was to fill him with praise and to make him pass the *terza* class. It would have then been up to us, afterwards, to make him love all the rest.

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<sup>v</sup> *The Little Matchstick Girl* = tale by Hans Christian Andersen, Danish writer of the 1800s.  
Snows falls falls falls (*la neve fiocca fiocca fiocca*) = *verse from a poem by Giovanni Pascoli*.

<sup>46</sup> This refers to the present tense of *avere* ‘to have’, wherein the first, second and third person singular and the third person plural are all written with a silent h in initial position: *ho, hai, ha, hanno*.

<sup>47</sup> *Noi sull’ultima guerra si teneva quattr’ore senza respirare*, literally, ‘We about the latest war were held for four hours without breathing’. A marked syntactic structure, with the first person plural pronoun *noi*, ‘we’, placed in sentence-initial position in order to contrast sharply with the second person plural pronoun *voi*, ‘you’, placed in sentence-initial position in the preceding sentence. Also note the lack of agreement between person (*noi*, ‘we’) and verb (*si teneva*, ‘one was held’). Cfr. footnote number 2.

<sup>48</sup> Equivalent to a school-leaving examination.

<sup>49</sup> *vi toccò passarlo*. This indicates that this pass mark was almost awarded against the teacher’s will, who had to accept the outcome of this exam. *Toccò*, past tense (*passato remoto*) of the verb *toccare*, literally ‘to touch’: in the *Lettera*, however, it is often used metaphorically and takes the meaning of ‘to be one’s turn (to do something)’.

<sup>50</sup> *Noi per lui si fecero acrobazie*, literally ‘We for him did acrobatics’. In this sentence there is again lack of grammatical agreement between subject and verb (cfr. footnote 47).

But during the exams a female teacher told him: “Why do you attend a private school? Can’t you see that you do not know how to express yourself?” “...”<sup>vi</sup>

Even I know that Gianni does not know how to express himself.

Let’s all point a finger at ourselves<sup>51</sup>. But be the first to do so because, the year before, you had thrown him out of school.

Your treatment is really nice.

*Without any distinction of language*

After all one ought to agree as to what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor who then continue to renew them infinitely. The rich crystallise them in order to taunt<sup>52</sup> those who do not speak as they do. Or to fail them.

You say that Pierino, son of the doctor, writes correctly. Of course you say so, he speaks just like you do. He is part of the firm<sup>53</sup>.

On the other hand, the language that Gianni writes and speaks is the one that belongs to his father. When Gianni was young he used to call the radio ‘lalla’. And his father said seriously: “It’s not called ‘lalla’, it’s called ‘aradio’<sup>54</sup>”.

Now, if it’s possible, it would be fine if Gianni learnt how to say ‘radio’. Your language could be useful for him. But in the meantime you cannot expel him from school.

“All citizens are equal without any distinction of language”. The Constitution said this with him in mind<sup>vii</sup>.

*An obedient puppet*

But you respect grammar more than the Constitution. And so Gianni never returned, not even to us.

We cannot find comfort in this. We follow him from afar. We got to know that he does not go to church, nor to any political party club. He goes to a factory and cleans

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<sup>vi</sup> At this point we wished to add the words that we wished to say that day. But the editor would not print them.

<sup>vii</sup> In actual fact the honourable members of Parliament were thinking of the Germans in South Tyrol (Alto Adige), but without really meaning it they also had Gianni in mind.

<sup>51</sup> *battiamoci il petto tutti quanti*, literally, ‘let us beat our chests all of us’. A metaphoric manner to say ‘let us first accuse ourselves’.

<sup>52</sup> *sforzare*, literally ‘to tease, take the mickey of’. This is a very informal, almost vulgar term.

<sup>53</sup> *ditta*, literally ‘firm, business, company’. The term is used metaphorically.

<sup>54</sup> Whilst correcting his son’s baby talk, Gianni’s father does not use a standard Italian term *radio*, but a popular form *aradio*, formed by the phonetic integration of the vowel of the article with the noun, *la radio*. This example is indicative of Gianni’s family background.

## LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

up. In his free time he follows the fashion like an obedient puppet. On Saturday he goes to dance and on Sunday to the stadium.

You do not even know that he exists.

### *The hospital*

This is how our first meeting with you took place. Through the children who you do not want.

Even we have seen that with them school becomes harder. Sometimes one gets tempted to get rid of them. But if they are lost, school is no longer school. It's a hospital that heals the healthy and rejects the sick. It becomes an instrument which creates differences which cannot be restrained anymore.

And you, do you feel that you should play this role in the world? So call them back, persist, start everything again from scratch at the cost of being told that you are mad.

It's better to be considered mad, rather than being a tool of racism.

## THE EXAMS

### *The rules of writing*

In June of the third year at Barbiana I sat for the *licenza media*<sup>55</sup> exam as a private candidate.

The essay title was: "The train wagons speak".

At Barbiana I had learnt that the rules of writing are: to have something important to say and that it may be useful to everybody or to many. To know who you are writing to. To gather all that is necessary. To find a logical way of putting it in order. To eliminate any unnecessary words. To eliminate any word which we do not use while speaking. Not to set any limits of time.

This is how I write this *Lettera* with my friends. This is how I hope my students will write when I will become a teacher.

### *The knife in your hands*

But faced with such an essay title, what could I do with the humble and sound rules of the art<sup>56</sup> of all times? If I were to be honest I would have to leave the page blank. Or criticise the essay title and whoever had assigned it to me.

But I was fourteen years old and I came from the mountains. In order to attend the *magistrali* school<sup>57</sup> I required the *licenza*. That little paper<sup>58</sup> was in the hands of five

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<sup>55</sup> cfr. footnote number 48.

<sup>56</sup> cfr. footnote number 3.

or six people who were extraneous to my life and to whatever I loved and knew. Uncaring people who held the knife from its handle<sup>59</sup>.

I therefore tried to write as you would want. Obviously I did not manage. The scripts written by your dear boys<sup>60</sup> certainly flowed much better, they are experts at saying nothing and at just repeating the obvious<sup>61</sup>.

### *The trap complex*

The French paper was a concentrated series of exceptions.

Exams should be abolished. But if you set them, at least be honest. Difficulties must represent a percentage of the ones we face during life. If you include a larger number of them it means that you have got trap-mania. It's as if you were at war with your children.

Who makes you do this? Is it for their good?

### *Owls, pebbles and fans*

It's not for their good<sup>62</sup>. A boy, who in France wouldn't even know how to ask where the toilet is, passed with a nine<sup>63</sup>.

He only knew how to ask for owls, for pebbles and for fans both in the plural and in the singular<sup>viii</sup>. He probably knew two hundred words which were chosen as exceptions and not because they are used frequently.

The result was that he hated French just as much as one could hate Maths.

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<sup>viii</sup> *owls, pebbles and fans* = these three words in French are harder than the others. Old-fashioned teachers make students learn them by heart from the first days of school.

<sup>57</sup> cfr footnote number 10.

<sup>58</sup> *fogliuccio*, 'little piece of paper' refers to the certificate that is given on obtaining the *licenza*. The diminutive form is in contrast (ironically) with the importance that the author attributes to the 'piece of paper'.

<sup>59</sup> *teneva il coltello dalla parte del manico*, a figurative expression to illustrate who holds power in the situation which is presented.

<sup>60</sup> *signorini*, literally 'little boys; little gentlemen'. The diminutive has an endearing connotation, used ironically in this context.

<sup>61</sup> *Esperti nel frigger aria e nel rifriger luoghi comuni*, literally 'experts in frying air and re-frying obvious things'. The use of the verbs *frigger* and *rifriger*, literally 'to fry' and 'to re-fry', clearly denotes the critique being exposed here. Students are just taught to 'fry' air (*frigger aria*) and to 're-fry' the obvious (*rifriger*), thereby unable to show any depth of thinking.

<sup>62</sup> *il loro bene no*, literally 'their good no': the elision of the verb gives rise to a very colloquial structure, in direct response to the question which precedes it.

<sup>63</sup> *passò con nove*, literally 'passed with nine', indicating that the boy in question obtained a satisfactory grade.

*The objective*

I studied languages by listening to records<sup>64</sup>. Without even realising it I first learnt the most useful and frequent things. Just as one learns Italian.

That Summer I had been to Grenoble and I washed the plates in a restaurant<sup>ix</sup>. I felt immediately comfortable. In the hostels I had communicated with boys from Europe and from North Africa.

I had returned determined to learn as many languages as possible. Many languages badly rather than one correctly. As long as I could communicate with everybody, get to know people and new problems, feel amused at the sacred boundaries of the homelands.

*The means*

In the three years of *medie* schooling, we had done two languages instead of one: French and English. We built a range of vocabulary that was sufficient to keep up any discussion.

As long as no fuss was made on grammatical mistakes. But grammar comes to the fore only when one writes. In order to read or speak one can do without it. Then slowly slowly one acquires it by ear. Later, whoever wishes to do so, may study it.

After all this is what happens with our language. One receives the first lesson of grammar after eight years of speaking it. After three years of reading and writing it.

In the new school courses they advise you too to use records. But records are useful in a school that lasts a full day, where languages are learnt to relax during the time in which one feels tired. A couple of hours a day, seven days a week. Not for three hours a week like in your schools.

In your conditions it's better not to use these records at all.

*The Loire<sup>x</sup> castles*

In the oral exams we had a surprise. Your children were like a well of French culture. For example, they spoke confidently about the Loire castles.

Later we got to know that it was the only thing they did in a whole year. Then there were some texts, included in the course, and they knew how to read and translate them.

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<sup>ix</sup> *Grenoble* = city in France  
*hostels* = youth hostels.

<sup>x</sup> *Loire* = a river in France

<sup>64</sup> *Io le lingue le ho imparate coi dischi*, literally 'I the languages I learnt them on records', another case of topicalisation in which the constituent *le lingue* is dislocated to the left hand side of the sentence and reprised by the pronoun *le* 'them'. Furthermore, the explicit first person singular personal pronoun *Io* is emphasised in sentence-initial position.



If there had been an inspector they would have given him a much better impression than we did. The inspector does not deviate from the course programme. And yet both you and he know that that sort of French cannot be useful for anything. So for whom do you do it? You do it for the inspector. He does it for his superior. And his superior for the minister.

This is the most alarming aspect of your school: it exists for its own purposes.

*Career-oriented<sup>65</sup> at 12 years of age*

Even the goal of your children is a mystery. Maybe it does not exist, maybe it's pecuniary<sup>66</sup>.

Day after day they study for the marks<sup>67</sup>, for the reports, for their diploma. And in the meantime they are distracted from the beautiful things they study. Languages, History, Science, everything becomes a mark and nothing else.

Beneath those sheets of paper there is only an individual interest. The diploma is money. None of you says this. But deep down that's the truth<sup>68</sup>.

In order to study willingly in your schools you must already be career-oriented by 12 years of age.

At 12 years of age, few are career-oriented. This is so true, that most of your children hate school. Your coarse invitation<sup>69</sup> did not deserve another sort of answer.

*English*

In the class next door there were some students of English<sup>70</sup>. As misguided as ever.

Even I know that English is useful. But if one really knows it. Not just by touching upon it as you do. It's not just owls and pebbles. They did not even know how to say good evening. And they were discouraged forever.

The first foreign language is an important event in a child's life. It must be a success, otherwise there will be trouble.

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<sup>65</sup> *Arrivisti*, literally 'careerist', a person who is only interested in schooling as a means to pursue a career.

<sup>66</sup> *volgare*, literally 'coarse, vulgar, uncouth'. This probably means that the main goal of these children is simply a monetary one: they obey their teacher and study as they know that this could lead to a well-paid job.

<sup>67</sup> *per il registro*, implying that these students study so that they will obtain high marks which will then be recorded in the school report book.

<sup>68</sup> *Ma stringi stringi il succo è quello*, literally 'but if you squeeze and squeeze that's the juice that comes out of it'.

<sup>69</sup> *il vostro invito volgare*, cfr. footnote number 66.

<sup>70</sup> *c'era una sezione d'inglese*, literally 'there was a section of English' meaning that there were some students who studied English.

We saw that this is possible in practice only with French<sup>71</sup>. Every time there happened to be a guest who spoke French, there was some child who discovered the joy of understanding. That same evening you would see him as he got hold of the records to learn a third language.

He had already accomplished the most important step: desire, certainty that it is possible to achieve a breakthrough, his mind was already challenged by<sup>72</sup> linguistic problems.

### *Mathematics and sadism*

The geometry problem reminded us of a sculpture at an exhibition<sup>73</sup>: “A solid is formed by a hemisphere placed over a cylinder, the surface of which is three-sevenths of that...”

There is no instrument which can measure surfaces. Therefore in life it can never happen that one knows surfaces rather than knowing dimensions. Such a problem can only originate from the mind of a sick person.

### *New labels*

In the New *Media*<sup>74</sup> these things will not be seen any longer. Problems will start from “considerations of a concrete nature”.

In fact Carla, this year, during the *licenza* session had to solve a modern problem based on boilers: “A boiler is in the shape of a hemisphere placed over...” And here again we start from surfaces.

It would be better to have an old-fashioned teacher rather than one who thinks he is modern just because he has changed the labels.

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<sup>71</sup> This consideration is due to the fact that for Italian native speakers the typological proximity with French could make it easier to understand than other languages that are typologically more distant, such as English.

<sup>72</sup> *mente già avviata*, literally ‘mind already started’.

<sup>73</sup> *una scultura della Biennale: Biennale*, literally ‘once every two years’ refers to an exhibition of sculptures. The reference is deliberate, as some modern sculptures shown in such exhibitions are particularly intricate.

<sup>74</sup> This refers to a law (31st December 1962, no. 1859), which introduced the New Middle School or New *Media*. By means of this law the number of years of compulsory schooling was increased to 8 years, and schooling for children between the ages of 11-14 was therefore rendered less elitist.

*A class of idiots*

Ours was old-fashioned. So what happened was that none of the children in his class managed to solve the problem. Two out of four of ours<sup>75</sup> managed to do it. The result: twenty-six failures out of twenty-eight.

He started telling everyone that he had been given<sup>76</sup> a class of idiots.

*The union of fathers*

Whose responsibility<sup>77</sup> was it to control him?

The headmaster or the teacher's council could do it. They did not.

The parents could do it. But as long as you hold the knife from its handle<sup>78</sup> parents will stay quiet. And so we either must remove all knives (marks, reports, exams) from your hand or get the parents organised<sup>79</sup>.

A fine union of fathers and mothers which is capable of reminding you that we pay you and that we pay you to serve us, not to throw us out.

After all it would be your gain. Those who are not criticised age badly. They estrange themselves from history that lives and progresses. They become those poor creatures that you are.

*The newspaper*

The history of this half-century was the one I knew best. Russian revolution, Fascism, war, resistance, liberation of Africa and of Asia. It's the historical period in which father and grandad lived.

I also knew well the times in which I live. That is the newspaper that, at Barbiana, we read every day, aloud, from top to bottom.

During exams we had to tear away from the miserliness of our studies for a couple of hours to read the newspaper. Because there is nothing in the newspapers which is useful for your exams. This proves that there is little of your school that is useful to life.

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<sup>75</sup> The distinction between 'ours' (*dei nostri*), implicitly referring to the Barbiana school, and 'his' (*dei suoi ragazzi*) is worth highlighting.

<sup>76</sup> *gli era toccata*, literally 'he happened to be given': this choice of verb indicates that this teacher disassociates himself from the class, which had been 'given' to him. The shortcomings of his students, according to him, are not his fault.

<sup>77</sup> *A chi toccava...?*, literally 'Who's turn was it?'

<sup>78</sup> cfr. footnote number 59.

<sup>79</sup> Refer to the second sentence of the premise to this *Lettera*: 'it is a call to get organised'.

That is really why one must read it. It's like shouting in your face that a grimy certificate has not managed to turn us into beasts. We only want it for our parents. But politics and daily news, that is the suffering of others, are more important than you and than we are.

### *The Constitution*

That teacher had stopped at the First World War. Exactly at the point where school could reconnect with life. And during the whole year she had never read a newspaper in class. The Fascist posters must have remained in her mind: "Here we do not speak politics".

Once the mother of Giampiero told her: "However it seems to me, that since my child is going to the local council after-school classes he has improved very much". "Reading? Do you know what he reads? The CONSTITUTION! Last year all he thought of were little girls, this year it's the Constitution".

That poor woman thought it was a dirty book. That evening she wanted Giampiero to receive a good whacking from his father.

### *Monti*

That same teacher, during the Italian lessons, wanted at all costs to teach the strange fables of Homer. If only they were Homer's<sup>80</sup>. It was Monti<sup>xi</sup>.

At Barbiana we hadn't read this. Only once, just to have some fun, we got hold of the Greek text and we counted the words in one canto. One hundred and forty-one rather than one hundred!<sup>81</sup> For every three words two are of Homer, whereas one was conceived in Monti's little head<sup>82</sup>.

And who is Monti? Somebody who has something to tell us? One who speaks the language that we need? Even worse: he is one who used to write in a language that was not even spoken in his times.

One day I was teaching Geography to a boy who had only just been expelled from your *media* class. He knew nothing of nothing, however he called Gibraltar the Pillars of Hercules<sup>xii</sup>.

Could you imagine him in Spain asking for a ticket at a train-station booth?

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<sup>xi</sup> *Homer* = ancient Greek poet author of the Iliad and of the Odyssey.

*Vincenzo Monti* = poet of the 1800s. He translated the Iliad into Italian.

<sup>xii</sup> *Pillars of Hercules* = this is the way ancient poets called the Strait of Gibraltar. It is the passageway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

<sup>80</sup> What is being implied is that these fables were not read in their original form, but they were taught through the translation and interpretation of the Italian poet Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828).

<sup>81</sup> Using a colloquial style, this exclamation clearly shows disdain at the fact that the translated version of Homer's work was considerably longer than the original.

<sup>82</sup> *testolina*, literally 'little head'. The diminutive is used with a pejorative connotation.

*Hierarchy of priorities*

When schooling is short the course should be based only on priorities.

Pierino, son of the doctor, has even got the time to read tales. Gianni no. He slipped out of your hands at 15 years of age. He's in a factory. He does not need to know whether Jupiter gave birth to Minerva or vice-versa<sup>xiii</sup>.

It would have been more adequate had the contract of the metal-workers been included in his Italian course. You, madam, have you read it? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? It's the life of half a million families.

You yourself declare that you are learned<sup>83</sup>. You have all read the same books. There is nobody who asks you something different.

*Unfortunate children*

During the Gym exams the teacher threw a ball at us and said: "Play basketball". We didn't know how<sup>84</sup>. The teacher looked at us with disdain: "Unfortunate children".

Even he is like you. The ability to perform a conventional ritual seemed important to him. He told the headmaster that we did not have "physical education" and he wanted to make us re-sit this in September.

We were all capable of climbing an oak tree. Once we'd be up there we wouldn't hold on and we'd chop down a branch weighing a tonne with an axe. Then we'd drag it on the snow up to the doorstep of our home and put it at mother's feet<sup>85</sup>.

They told me of a man in Florence who goes up to his home in a lift. Then he bought another expensive gadget which he pretends to row. You would give him ten<sup>86</sup> in Physical Education.

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<sup>xiii</sup> *Jupiter and Minerva* = the Ancient Greeks believed, or pretended to believe, in gods. Besides they used to tell that a male (named Jupiter) gave birth to a girl (named Minerva).

<sup>83</sup> *Che siete colti ve lo dite da voi*, literally 'That you are learned you say it yourself'. Note the reduplication of the second person plural pronoun: *ve* and *da voi* (cfr. also footnote no.26).

<sup>84</sup> *Noi non si sapeva*. A colloquial structure characterised by lack of agreement between the explicit first person plural pronoun, *Noi*, and the verb *si sapeva*, third person singular past (*imperfetto*) tense (cfr. footnote number 2).

<sup>85</sup> *fin sulla soglia di casa ai piedi della mamma*, literally 'till the doorstep at the feet of mother': a hyperbolic and highly expressive sentence, which creates a sharp contrast between the manliness of climbing up a tree and chopping down the branch and the lack of capability of participating actively in Gym lessons.

<sup>86</sup> Referring to the highest mark.

*Latin in Mugello*

Naturally we knew little Latin<sup>87</sup>. Parliament had already done away<sup>88</sup> with it two years ago<sup>xiv</sup>. In that same year it was no longer a requirement at Cambridge and Oxford<sup>xv</sup>.

But the peasants of Mugello had to know it all. The professors passed by the benches as solemn as priests. Custodians of the extinguished wick.

I stared wide-eyed at these strange people. I had never met anyone similar.

THE NEW *MEDIA*

*In your hands*

We read the law and the courses regarding the new *media*.

Most of the things written in it suit us fine<sup>89</sup>. And then there's the fact that the new *media* exists, it's the only one, it's compulsory, the right wing<sup>90</sup> did not like it. It is a positive fact.

The only sad thing is that we know it's in your hands. Will you render it classist again, like the other one<sup>91</sup>?

*The time-table*

The old *media* class was classist especially because of the time-table and the calendar. The new one did not change them. It's still a school which is cut to the size of the rich. Those who have culture at home and who only go to school to harvest<sup>92</sup> diplomas.

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<sup>xiv</sup> The law by means of which the New *Media* had been established is dated 1962.

<sup>xv</sup> *Cambridge and Oxford* = old English universities reserved for the rich. Till some time ago whoever did not know Latin could not frequent them.

<sup>87</sup> *Di latino naturalmente ne sapevamo poco*, literally 'Of Latin naturally we knew little of it'. A marked syntactic structure in which *Di Latino* is topicalised and reprised by the pronoun *ne*. In this manner the main issue being considered in this paragraph, that is Latin, is emphasised.

<sup>88</sup> *l'aveva già seppellito*, literally 'had already buried it', third person singular of the pluperfect form of the verb *seppellire* 'to bury'. Both the choice of verb and the tense used impart a pejorative and distant connotation to the concept being expressed.

<sup>89</sup> *a noi ci vanno bene*, literally 'to us, they suit us'. The reduplication of the pronominal forms *a noi* 'to us' and *ci* 'we, us' gives a very colloquial semblance to this statement.

<sup>90</sup> Referring to the political factions.

<sup>91</sup> Referring to the *scuola media* as it was prior to the introduction of the new *media*.

<sup>92</sup> *mietere*, literally 'to harvest', a verb selected from the agricultural semantic field which, of course, is not normally associated to a schooling qualification such as obtaining a diploma.

However there is a thread of hope in article three. It establishes after-school classes of at least ten hours a week. Just after, in the same article, there is a loophole which gives you the possibility not to do it: the after-school classes will take effect “subject to the ascertainment of local circumstances”. So the thing is back in your hands.

### *Its realisation*

In the first year of the new *media*, the state after-school classes functioned in fifteen towns out of 51 in the province of Florence.

In the second year in six towns, reaching 7.1% of the children. Last year in five towns, 2.9% of the children<sup>xvi</sup>.

There are no more after-school classes<sup>93</sup> organised by local councils<sup>xvii</sup>.

You cannot blame the parents. They understood that you couldn't care less. If not, as servile as they are, they would have sent their children to you, not only to the after-school classes, but even to bed.

### *Opposition*

The Mayor of Vicchio, before opening the after-school local council classes asked for advice from the State teachers. 15 letters arrived. Thirteen were against and two in favour. The recurring reason was that if the after-school classes were not done well, better not do them.

The town children were in the bars and in the streets. The peasant children were in the fields. Having to compete with this situation, the after-school classes could never go wrong. Anything is fine. Even that abortion<sup>94</sup> that you call school is alright.

If you are against after-school classes I advise you not to show it. People are malicious. They might think that you give private lessons to the sons of the rich<sup>95</sup>.

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<sup>xvi</sup> “*La new scuola media al termine del primo triennio* [The new *media* school at the end of the first three years]”. Education office of the province of Florence. June 1966.

<sup>xvii</sup> “... after some courageous experiences of the past years, which cannot be repeated because of the negative attitude of the responsible authorities, there is no after-school class administered by the local councils” (same as above, page 5).

<sup>93</sup> *Di doposcuola comunali non ne esiste più*, literally ‘Of after-school classes organised by the local councils there exist no more of them’. The dislocation of the constituent *di doposcuola comunali*, reduplicated by the use of the pronoun *ne* places emphasis on the main topic being presented in this paragraph.

<sup>94</sup> *quell'aborto*, ‘that abortion’. This strong term is used to mean that schooling often interrupts a process before completion, especially in the case of children who fail or are expelled.

<sup>95</sup> *signorini*. The diminutive is used here again to give a pejorative connotation to this term, in line with the ironical style used within this paragraph. (Cfr. footnote number 60).

*South Africa*

Others hate equality.

A headmaster in Florence told a woman: “Do not worry, send him to me. Mine is the least unified *media* class in Italy”<sup>96</sup>.

Fooling the sovereign people is easy. You just have to gather the “good”<sup>97</sup> children in one section. There is no need to know them personally. You see their report, their age, their place of residence (rural, urban), the place from which they originate (North, South), father’s occupation, references.

Thus two, three, four different *medie* classes will live together in the same school. The A class is the “Old *Media*”. The one that gets on well. The most respected teachers will fight for it.

A certain type of parents will do whatever is necessary<sup>98</sup> to place their child in it. The B class will not be quite as good and so on.

*The Duty*<sup>99</sup> *of elbowing*

All are respectful people. The headmaster and the teachers do not do things for themselves, they do them for Culture<sup>100</sup>.

Not even those parents do things for themselves. They do it for the Future<sup>101</sup> of the child. Making way by elbowing is not right, but if it’s done for him it becomes a sacred duty. They would be ashamed if they did not do it.

*Disarmed*

The poorer parents do nothing. They do not even imagine that these things happen. On the contrary, they feel moved. In their time, in the rural areas, there was only the *terza* class<sup>102</sup>.

If things do not get on well, it is the child who is not cut out for studying. “The Teacher<sup>103</sup> said it. What a well-mannered person. He told me to sit down. He showed

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<sup>96</sup> This means that it does not include children who are coming from different areas of Italy, but consists mainly of children from one area, and consequently of similar social background. The ‘unification’ referred to is an ironical reference to the Unification of Italy, dated 1861.

<sup>97</sup> *Per bene*, which means ‘good’ in many senses, as it also has a social connotation, thereby including those who are well-off.

<sup>98</sup> *si dà da fare*, literally ‘will do what it takes’.

<sup>99</sup> capital letter, *Dovere*, used in the original.

<sup>100</sup> capital letter, *Cultura*, used in the original.

<sup>101</sup> capital letter, *Avvenire*, used in the original.

<sup>102</sup> This implies that most of them left school after three years of Primary schooling.

<sup>103</sup> capital letter, *Professore*, used in the original.



me the marks register. Some work full of blue marks<sup>104</sup>. We were not blessed with an intelligent one. Patience. He will go to the fields just as we did”.

## STATISTICS

### *At a national level*

At this point you will object by telling us that we happened to sit for our exams in particularly unfortunate schools. That, to confirm what we say, the news that we heard from external sources was also all sad. That you know of tens of episodes as authentic as ours, but that show that the opposite is true.

So let's do this: let us, both us and you, abandon any excessively passionate position and let's go down to scientific grounds.

Let's start our story from scratch, but this time using figures.

### *Unsuitable for studies*

The job of statistics has been taken up by Giancarlo. He is 15 years old. He is another one of those town boys who you judged as unsuitable for studies.

With us he's gearing up<sup>105</sup>. For example it is now four months that he's immersed in these figures. Not even Mathematics seems barren<sup>106</sup> to him.

The educational miracle that we performed in him has a very precise recipe.

We gave him the chance<sup>107</sup> to study for a worthy cause: to feel like a brother of 1,031,000 children who failed with him and to feel the joy of revenge for him and for them<sup>xviii</sup>.

### *The presumptuous teacher*

Tens of Statistical Annual Reports, tens of schools which have been visited, others contacted through correspondence, trips to the Ministry and to ISTAT in order to find missing data, whole days spent using the calculator<sup>xix</sup>.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Failures of compulsory schooling in the 1963-64 scholastic year (refer to the source in the footnote to table A).

<sup>xix</sup> ISTAT = *Istituto Centrale di Statistica* (Main Institute of Statistics)

<sup>104</sup> In Italy it is traditional to mark serious errors in blue and less serious errors, or to include suggestions, in red.

<sup>105</sup> *da noi carburava bene*. The use of the verb *carburare* 'to carbure' is from the semantic field normally related to vehicles.

<sup>106</sup> *arida*, 'dry, arid, barren'.

<sup>107</sup> A regionally marked syntactic structure: *Noi gli s'è offerto*, literally 'We to him we offered...', where preference is given to the use of the auxiliary *essere* 'to be' rather than *avere* 'to have'

Others before us must have done similar jobs. But they are those unfortunate ones<sup>108</sup> who then do not know how to interpret the results using everyday language.

We have not read them. Neither have you teachers.

So none of you have a clear idea of what goes on in schools.

We pointed this out to a teacher who came to visit us. He was deadly offended: “I have been teaching for thirteen years. I have known thousands of children and parents. You see things from the outside. You are not well-versed<sup>109</sup> in the problems of schools”.

As if he is well-versed in them, he who has only known children who are selected beforehand<sup>110</sup>. The more he gets to know, the more distorted his views become.

### *Gianni is millions*

Schools have only one problem. The children that they lose<sup>111</sup>.

Your “compulsory schooling” loses 462,000 every year by the wayside<sup>xx</sup>. At this point, the only ones who are incompetent about schooling are yourselves, as you lose them and do not go back to find them. Not us, as we meet them in the fields or in the factories and we know them closely.

It’s the mother of Gianni, she who does not know how to read, who is aware of the problems of schools. They are known to whoever cares dearly for a child who has failed and to whoever has the patience to have a look through the statistics.

Then the figures start screaming against you. They say that there are millions of Giannis and that you are either stupid or evil.

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<sup>xx</sup> The figure is extracted from Table A, following the procedure presented in Table C.

in the present perfect (*passato prossimo*) tense of the verb *offrire*. This creates topicalisation of the pronoun *Noi* which is not in agreement with the third person singular of the verb *s’è offerto*. The standard Italian form would be: *Noi gli abbiamo offerto*, without the pronominal form *si*.

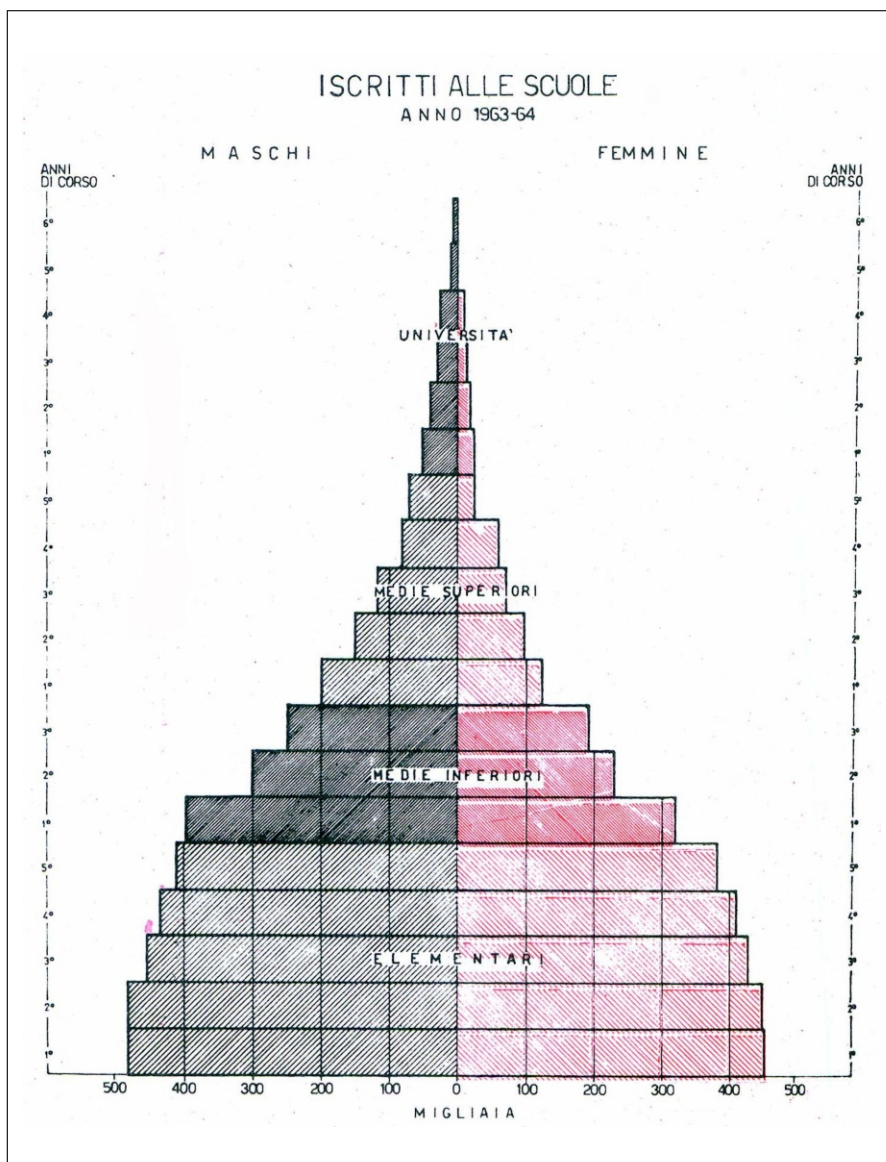
<sup>108</sup> *poveretti*, literally ‘poor ones’, formed by the adjective *povero* with the diminutive suffix *-etto*, which conveys a pejorative sense to the term.

<sup>109</sup> *addentro*, literally ‘within, involved’. The choice of this term implies that the accusation is that the authors do not face the schools’ problems directly or that they do not have first hand experience of them.

<sup>110</sup> *E allora è addentro lui che ha conosciuto solo ragazzi già selezionati*, literally ‘And so he is well-versed he who has only known the children who are already chosen’. This sentence is highly ironic and rebuts the accusation made previously.

<sup>111</sup> *I ragazzi che perde*, literally ‘The children it loses’, referring to those children who fail, drop out or are expelled.

COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS



*The pyramid*

Fearing that the statistical tables would cause you discomfort<sup>112</sup>, we have placed them in the appendix. Here, within the text, we will cut them down to a humane dimension. As large as a class which can be embraced by means of an affectionate glance<sup>xxi</sup>.

We opted to place the pyramid here<sup>xxii</sup>. It's a symbol that remains in one's eyes.

From the *elementari* classes upwards it's as if it's cut with an axe. Every blow is a dear child<sup>113</sup> who goes off to work before being equal.

*1951 tracking down*

But the pyramid has the defect of putting children<sup>114</sup> of 6 years of age and of 30 years of age on the same sheet. Old and new faults.

Let us therefore try to pursue a levy<sup>115</sup> of children throughout the eight years of obligatory schooling.

Since the most recent figures are not available let's pursue the '51<sup>xxiii</sup> levy.

*Prima elementare class*

Let's enter, on October 1st, a *prima elementare* class. There are 32 children. If one looks at them they seem to be equal. In reality there are already 5 repeaters among them.

At 7 years of age, with the apron and the bow, they are stamped as repeaters<sup>116</sup> for which they will pay a high price at the *medie*.

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<sup>xxi</sup> That is, we have imagined a *prima elementare* class of 32 children in 1957-58. That is 29,900 times smaller than reality. Even the following figures are to a scale of 1:29,900. Whoever prefers the original figures may find them in the appendix to Table C 1951.

<sup>xxii</sup> The figures used to design the pyramid are taken from the Annual Statistics of Education 1965

<sup>xxiii</sup> The '52 levy would have been better as it was the first year of the *New Media*. Too much data is missing in order to examine it thoroughly.

For now a comparison between the two media classes is only possible with the prime classes. It is enough to show that nothing substantial has changed. In the *prima* class of 1962-63 (*Old Media*) the failures were 33.3%. In the *prima* class of 1963-64 (*New Media*) the failures were 28.2%.

<sup>112</sup> *le restassero indigeste*, literally 'they may cause you indigestion', implying that they may be hard to accept.

<sup>113</sup> *una creatura*, literally 'a creature'. This term is used to convey an affectionate sense to the children being referred to, associating them to the young of an animal, thereby transmitting a sense of dependence and vulnerability.

<sup>114</sup> *ragazzi*, 'boys, children, youths'. This term is used both to refer to 6 year-olds and to 30 year-olds.

<sup>115</sup> *leva*, 'levy'. The term pertains to the military semantic field. In this case it is used to refer to a class or to a group of students.

<sup>116</sup> *segnati col marchio del ritardo*, literally 'marked with the stamp of delay'.

*Lost earnings*<sup>117</sup>

Before starting, 3 children are already missing. The teacher does not know them, but they have already been to school. They tasted the first failure and they did not return ever again.

If they had returned they would have been with her<sup>118</sup>. In a certain sense, she has lost them. As we say, there have been lost earnings.

Even in the following classes the same fact will repeat itself. If we were unkind we'd be able to double the count of failed<sup>119</sup> children every year: those who you expelled and those that are missing among the repeaters.

Had you been kind, you yourself would count them<sup>xxiv</sup>.

*The truants*

We do not count those who never came to school<sup>120</sup>. At a national level there is no data regarding them. It seems, however, that they are few. For example here in Mugello<sup>121</sup>, Giancarlo has not found any of them.

However, as far as they are concerned, we'd have nothing to blame you for. It would be the fault of others. Especially of the parish-priests who know all the people and could convince parents<sup>122</sup> or report them.

*The failures*

In June the teacher fails 6 children<sup>xxv</sup>. She disobeys the law of the 24th December 1957 which requests her to get them through the two years of the first cycle<sup>xxvi</sup>.

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<sup>xxiv</sup> For further explanations refer to Tables B and C and the notes to them in the appendix.

<sup>xxv</sup> We have seen that in the *prima* class of the preceding year there were 8 failures (3 who did not turn up and 5 repeaters).

The difference is due to the smaller number of births in '51 and the repeaters of the 57-58 year.

Here in the text, in order to simplify, we call failures even those children who dropped out throughout the year. In the documentation the two categories are distinct.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The *elementare* school is divided in two cycles: I and II (first cycle) III, IV and V (second cycle). "The teacher is not to admit a student to the following class of the following cycle only in exceptional circumstances (a relevant number of absenteeism, psycho-physical deficiencies) a justification which is to be included in a written report to the director of studies". In the first 5 years in which the law came into effect the failures in the *prima* class were 15.14%, those in the *seconda* class 16.88%. In a school which is organised (differential classes etc.) like the one in Vicchio the failures of the *prima* class are down to 6.9% (1965-66).

<sup>117</sup> This paragraph is entitled *mancato guadagno*, literally 'a missed, lost earning' implying the loss of something which could possibly have been gained.

<sup>118</sup> This implies that they would have been placed in the same teacher's class.

<sup>119</sup> *persi*, literally 'lost'. The children who do not attend school, having been deemed to be failures in the past, are 'lost'. The choice of this verb again indicates the responsibility of teachers and schools for this 'loss'.

But the dear teacher<sup>123</sup> does not accept orders from the sovereign people. She fails and goes on holiday<sup>124</sup>.

*Shooting in a bush*

Failing is like shooting in a bush. Maybe it was a child, maybe a hare. Then we'll see at our convenience.

Till the following October you do not know what you have done. Did he go to work or will he repeat? And if he repeats, will it do him good or will it harm him? Will he gain ground in order to follow his studies better or will he grow older faultily on school programmes which are not fit for him?

*The seconda elementare class*

In October, in the *seconda* class, the teacher still has 32 children<sup>xxvii</sup>. She sees 26 familiar faces and she feels as if she is once again among *her*<sup>125</sup> children who she loves.

Then she sees 6 new children. Five are repeaters. One of them has already repeated two classes, he is almost 9 years old.

The sixth new boy is Pierino son of the doctor<sup>xxviii</sup>.

*Pierino*

The doctor's chromosomes are powerful<sup>xxix</sup>. Pierino already knew how to write when he was 5 years old. He did not need to attend the *prima* class. He enters the *seconda* class at 6 years of age. He talks like a textbook.

He is already branded, but this time with the brand of the prized race.

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xxvii From here onwards it may be useful to keep the figure on page 76 at hand, or better still Table D.

xxviii In our book Pierino is the representative of those 30.000 children who every year skip the *prima* class. Refer to Table E and the note on it.

xxix *chromosomes* = Those microscopic little things that make children resemble parents.

120 *Quelli che non sono mai venuti a scuola non li contiamo*, literally 'Those who never came to school we do not count them'. This syntactic structure, which includes reduplication by using both *quelli* 'those' and *li* 'them', places emphasis on the truants, those who never attended school. It is preferred to the unmarked form (*Non contiamo quelli che non sono mai venuti a scuola*), which would have featured the authors (as grammatical subject of the verb *contiamo* 'we count') in the first position of the sentence.

121 Mugello is an area in Northern Tuscany.

122 Implies that they could convince their parents to send them to school.

123 *maestrina*, again the use of the diminutive form *-ina* conveys a sense of endearment with a highly ironic connotation.

124 *Boccia e parte per il mare*, literally 'She fails and goes off to sea'.

125 Italics in the original.

*Sour bread*

Among the six failed children, four are repeating the *prima* class. For the school they are not lost, but for their classmates they are.

Maybe the teacher does not give it much thought because she knows they are safe in the class next door. Maybe she has already forgotten them.

For her, she who has 32 students, one child is a fraction. For the child the teacher is much more. He has had only one and she threw him out.

The other two did not return to school. They are working in the fields. In all that we eat there is a little bit of their illiterate fatigue.

*The mothers*

In all, six mothers have already learnt what your school is like. Four of them saw their child uprooted from his class and from whatever he loves. Exiled to grow older among classmates who are always younger.

Two of them saw their child excluded forever.

Mothers are not saints. They do not see beyond their threshold. It's a great defect. But their child is on their side of the threshold. At least they will never be able to forget him<sup>126</sup>.

*Priests and whores*<sup>127</sup>

The teacher, on the other hand, is sheltered by her forgetfulness of a part-time mother. Who is missing has the defect of not being seen. A cross or a coffin on his bench would be necessary in order to remember him.

Instead there is a new child in his place. An unfortunate one like him. The teacher has already become fond of him.

Teachers are like priests and whores. They fall in love quickly with their dear ones<sup>128</sup>. Then if they lose them they do not have time to cry. The world is an immense family. There are many other dear ones to serve.

It's nice to see beyond the threshold of one's house. We must only be sure not to have excluded somebody ourselves<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> *Lui almeno non lo potranno mai dimenticare*, literally 'Him, at least they will not be able to forget (him)'. Again a marked structure, with reduplication of the third person masculine pronoun (*lui* and *lo*) in order to place emphasis on the figure of the child who has been excluded from school.

<sup>127</sup> The vulgar term *puttane* 'whores' is used rather than the less compromising form *prostitute* 'prostitutes'.

<sup>128</sup> The term used in the original is *creature* (cfr. footnote number 113).

<sup>129</sup> *con le nostre mani*, literally 'with our own hands'.

*Fractions of equality*

At the end of the *elementari* school, 11 children have already left school because of the teacher.

“School is open to all. All citizens have a right to eight years of schooling. All citizens are equal”. But those 11 are not.

Two have zero equality. To sign they make a cross. One has one-eighth of equality. He knows how to sign. The others have 2, 3, 4, 5 eighths of equality. They read as best they can, but they do not know how to read the newspaper.

*Family cheques*

Not even one of them is a child of the rich. The thing is so obvious that it makes one smile.

The farmers have only just received their family cheques<sup>xxx</sup>. Fifty-four *lire* a day for each child<sup>130</sup>. Workers earn 187<sup>xxxii</sup>.

It is not the teacher who has made these laws. But she knows that they exist. Whenever she failed a student<sup>131</sup> she tempted the poor children to leave. Not the rich.

*Peasants*

The temptation to work burdens the poor of different ages whether they are peasants or workers.

The 11 children who went to work during the five years of the *elementari* were from seven to fourteen years old.

Most of them were peasants or, anyway, people who live in isolated houses where there is always some chore to give to a little child<sup>xxxii</sup>.

*Men before their time.* The State forgot about them. It does not include them anymore in that scholastic register and it does not include them in the one regarding the workforce.

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<sup>xxx</sup> 1st January 1967.

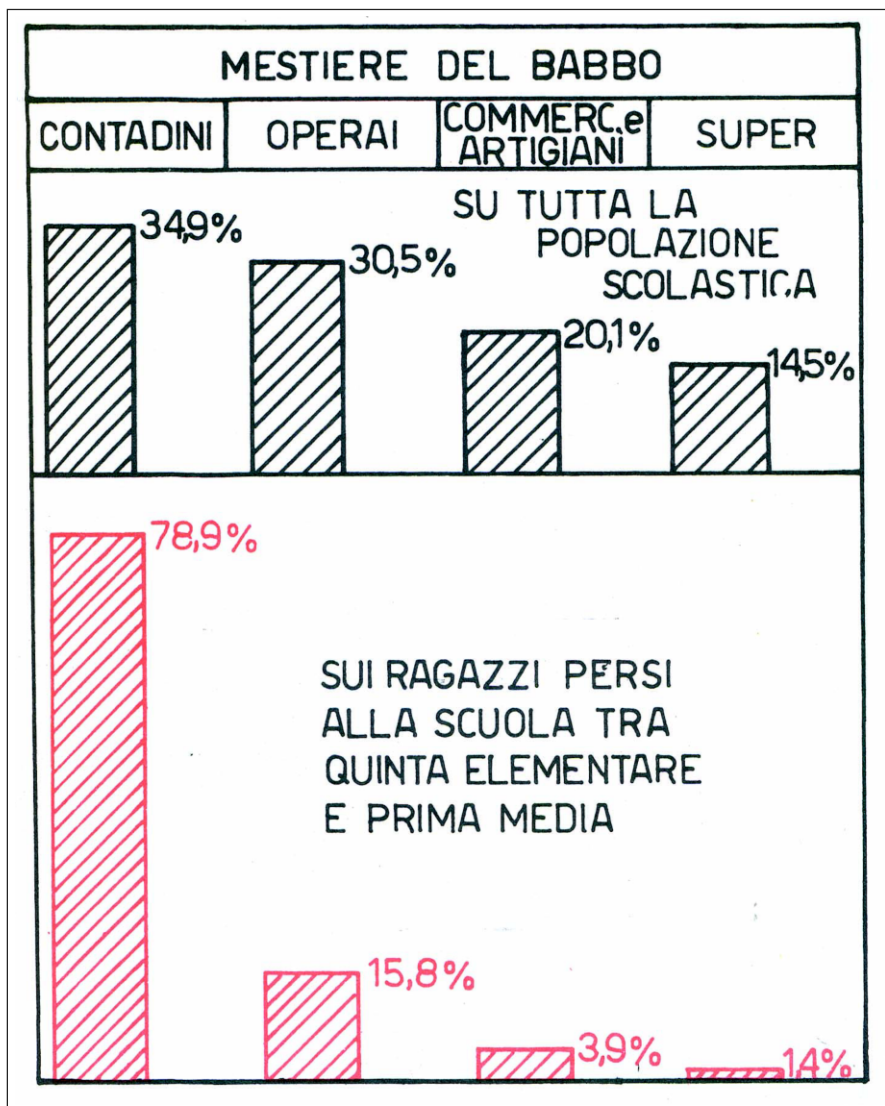
<sup>xxxii</sup> The cheques, in actual fact, are a bit higher. But they can be cashed only on working days whereas the children of the poor have the bad habit of eating also on Sundays.

<sup>xxxii</sup> It is not necessary to prove it. However in the table of page 64 one may see a finding of ours regarding a commune of the Florence province (scholastic years 1963-4, 1964-5, 1965-6). In the “super” category we included employees (small and big), teachers, professionals, businessmen, directors.

<sup>130</sup> *figliolo*, a term which has a more affectionate connotation than the more neutral *figlio*, ‘child’.

<sup>131</sup> *a ogni bocciatura*, ‘for every failure’. In the translation the direct object has to be added for the same reasons explained in footnote 1.





Yet they work, and between the lines of the law one finds out that this is known, but it is not said.

The law of 29-1-1961 "Safeguarding women and children at work"<sup>132</sup> forbids work before 15 years of age. This does not apply to agriculture. It's fair. The lesser race does not have children. We<sup>133</sup> are all men before our time.

Article number 205 of the INAIL<sup>134</sup> text establishes that peasants who are 12 years old or older are to be compensated for injury during their work. So it is known that we work.

*Mystery*

Despite all these lost children, the first glance at the pyramid is an honour to the teachers of the *elementari*. The pyramid takes its shape only at the *medie* classes.

In fact in the *prima* class the teacher has 32 children. In the *quinta* class<sup>135</sup> she has 28. One could say that she has only lost 4.

The reality is that she has lost 20<sup>xxxiii</sup>. How one could lose 20 children out of 32 and still have 28 is a mystery that requires an explanation<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

*The lake*

Try having a look at a lake on the atlas. It seems to contain lots of water when in fact it contains the same water of the river. It has just slowed down. It moves slower, it takes up a large place. Then it starts running again and one sees that it is a river just like before.

The lake is the *elementari* schools. If a child always passes he takes up 5 benches. If he repeats he takes up 6, 7, 8 ... meritorious<sup>136</sup> Pierino takes up only 4 of them.

When you will stop failing you will also solve, straight away, the problem of the classrooms<sup>137</sup>.

*The table in colour*

The whole problem is better understood by means of the table in colour. If everything were fine every column would be of one single colour. And instead there are an array of colours which are out of place.

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xxxiii This data is taken, like all the others, from national-scale statistics. It is therefore inferior to what happens in reality because internal migrations do not figure in it (from South to North, from the mountains to the plains, from the countryside to the city).

xxxiv Prof. Dino Pieraccioni, member of the Superior Council of Education told a journalist (15-2-1967): "... a poor level of preparation of the children of the *elementare* schools, where, as it is known, nobody or almost nobody is failed".

<sup>132</sup> *Sulla tutela del lavoro delle donne e dei fanciulli*, literally 'On the Safeguarding of Work by Women and Children'.

<sup>133</sup> Note the change in pronoun: from the third person plural in the preceding paragraph to the first person plural in this sentence, as well as in the final sentence of this section.

<sup>134</sup> *Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione Contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro*, 'National agency for insurance covering injuries sustained at the workplace'.

<sup>135</sup> The fifth class of Primary schooling.

<sup>136</sup> *benemerito*, this literary form is used ironically.

<sup>137</sup> This implies the problem of the crowded classrooms.

Try to take an interest only in the yellow. There are those born in '50. The little stripe out of place on the left are the Pierinos<sup>138</sup>.

The large part that comes down vertically are the children born in the right year. Those who never failed. It always gets thinner. In the *terza media* class it is already composed of a privileged group, almost as large as the group of the Pierinos.

The dispersion of yellow on the right are the repeaters.

Gianni's mother saw the figure. We told her the yellow is Gianni. She followed it with her finger. At every failure she moved a bit more to the right. Always further away, more isolated, more different.

### *Nomads*

For the teacher it's rubbish that she kindly threw away on her colleagues. But who does such things must expect to receive something similar<sup>139</sup>. From the left, more or less, just the same amount arrives to her.

In all, in five years, she had 48 children in her hands and she delivers 23<sup>xxxv</sup>. 29 Giannis<sup>140</sup> passed through her class horizontally without leaving any trace. Of the 32 children she had under her responsibility in the *prima* class 19 are left.

### *Getting old is forbidden*

It's in the *medie* school that the damage suffered by the 18 dispersed children of the following levies appears<sup>141</sup>. They have grown older. And growing older is forbidden.

Till when there were 5 years of compulsory schooling it was different. Six plus 5 makes eleven. Before reaching the age in which one could work there was enough space to fail for 2 or 3 times.

Now, instead, 6 plus 8 is fourteen. One's employment book may be obtained at 15 years of age<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

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xxxv 11 to work + 18 repeaters = 29 lost children for one class

29 lost for one class + 19 survivors of the *prima* class = 48 children who were in her hands.

xxxvi But be careful. Somebody may find work, illegally, even at 13-14 years of age. And even "legally". In the year we took into consideration there were 129,000 children between the ages of 10 and 14 who were working with a special authorisation! ("National data on the workforce 20th October 1962" ISTAT 1963).

<sup>138</sup> Refers to those children who can be likened to the previously mentioned Pierino, son of the doctor.

<sup>139</sup> In the original an idiomatic form is used: *chi la fa l'aspetti*, literally 'Who does it must expect it'.

<sup>140</sup> Refers to those children who can be likened to the previously mentioned Gianni, son of peasants.

<sup>141</sup> A cleft sentence, which reproduces the syntactic structure present in the original text.

*There's no space*

It appears that there is still space to fail once more. But at this stage observe the month of birth. The oldest of the children registered for the *prima elementare* class is born in January. He is 6 years nine months old.

Counting them individually one notices that three-fourths of the children register for the *prima* class when they are older than 6 years old<sup>xxxvii</sup>. They cannot fail even once.

*Fail students*

If the teacher is dying to fail<sup>142</sup> she could vent her feelings on the sons<sup>143</sup> of the rich.

I would make an agreement with the parents: "Pierino is young, when he comes to face life choices he will be immature. What do you say, doctor, if we were to hold him back for a year?"

I can't wait to be a teacher in order to feel this sense of satisfaction. With any luck,<sup>144</sup> with your own little grandson<sup>145</sup>.

*The immature one*

But the teacher does not agree with me. Pierino always passes<sup>xxxviii</sup>. It's strange. He

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xxxvii The data simply makes the supposition that the number of births is equal every month and that all register their children to the *prima* class as soon as they reach the age required by law. Since national data is missing we tried to provide it in two close-by communes and we obtained figures that are higher than three-quarters (79% and 81%).

xxxviii *First test:* From the initial stages to the *seconda* class Pierino passed with more ease than those students who are *interni* (translator's note: those who follow all the lessons in their schools). For example, in the year 62-63, 87.6% of the *interni* and 96.9% of the *privatisti* (translator's note: those who have the option to follow lessons on a private basis) were promoted. The issue regarding the better grades of the *privatisti* recurs during all the *elementari* schooling. From the *medie* schools onwards the opposite occurs. ("Annuario Statistico Italiano 1965" [Annual Statistics of Italy 1965] tables 90 and 97).  
*Second test:* The number of Pierinos does not diminish, on the other hand, it tends to increase (some other children, who skip a year, are added on). In the *seconda* class (59-60) there are 30,000 Pierinos. Four years later in the *prima media* class they are 24,400 (refer to Table E).

<sup>142</sup> *muore di voglia*, literally 'dies of the desire'. The choice of the verb *morire* 'to die' in this context conveys a very strong connotation to the concept being expressed.

<sup>143</sup> The term *figlioli* (refer to footnote number 130) is used. However in this context it has an ironical connotation.

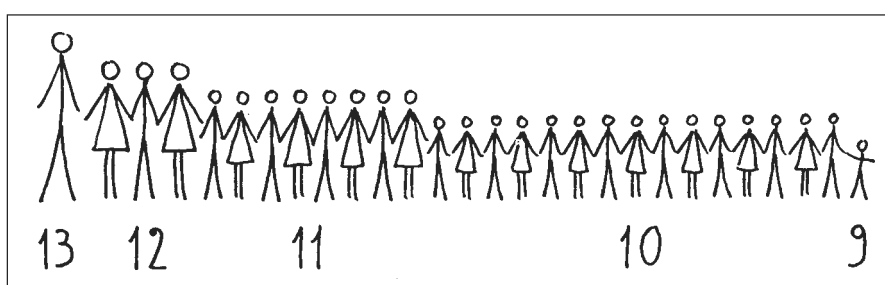
<sup>144</sup> *Magari*, literally 'If only, with any luck, hopefully', used ironically in the context of this sentence.

<sup>145</sup> *nipotino*, which could either mean 'little grandson' or 'little nephew'.

is so young<sup>146</sup>. According to the psychologists he should have difficulties<sup>xxxix</sup>. It's the strength of the doctor's chromosomes!

Pierino found himself in the *quinta* class at nine years of age<sup>xl</sup>. He has always lived among more mature schoolmates. He did not mature but he trained himself to face adults. He is one of those who will feel at ease with you.

Gianni, on the other hand, has always been at school with children who are younger than him. He is a little bit of a bully with them, but when facing adults he does not open his mouth.



*The prima media class*

In the *prima media* class the children are 22<sup>xli</sup>. For the teacher<sup>147</sup> they are all new faces. Of the 11 lost ones, she knows nothing. Rather, she is convinced that nobody is missing.

Sometimes she grumbles: “Now that they all come to school it is not possible to teach. Some illiterate children are coming”.

She has studied lots of Latin, but she has never seen a book of Annual Statistics.

<sup>xxxix</sup> *psychologists* = Those who think that they can study the human mind in a scientific manner.

<sup>xl</sup> Here and in the following illustration the ages refer to October. The division by age is taken from “The distribution by age of the students in our *elementari* and *medie* schools” ISTAT 1963 (our table E).

<sup>xli</sup> So that the representation of the number of lost children remains clear we will keep, even for the *medie* school, the 1:29,900 scale. In actual fact, in the *medie* school the number of sections has decreased very much and it decreases more throughout the course. For this reason teachers never meet classes which are so small and they do not manage to get an idea of the selection that has been made.

<sup>146</sup> *Lui che è così giovane*, literally ‘He who is so young’. This syntactic structure gives an emphatic connotation to the sentence, even though an exclamation mark is not used.

<sup>147</sup> The term used is now *professoressa*, which is the title given to the *medie* schoolteacher. The *elementari* schoolteachers have been always referred to by means of the term *maestra*.

*The placard*

And it would not be enough for her. It is necessary to study their ages on the results sheet. There are childish little faces and thin body-frames that are deceptive.

At the Birth Registry they do not look at one's appearance<sup>148</sup>. Whoever is of the right age gets his employment booklet<sup>149</sup>. He could slip away<sup>150</sup> from your school from one moment to another.

The best thing to do would be that each child carries a large placard "I am 13 years old, do not fail me".

*The tragedy<sup>151</sup> of the older ones*

But nobody carries the placard. And the teachers do not look at the date of birth on the results sheet. They look at the marks.

Maybe some of them act in good faith. Maybe they actually intended to save the older ones. Then, there, in front of a piece of work full of mistakes they forgot all the resolutions.

The fact is that, inexorably, failure hits the older children<sup>xlii</sup>. Those who have a job within arm's reach.

Instead those children<sup>152</sup> who are within the correct age-frame pass. They had no reason to fail them in the past years. They have no reason to do so now either.

Their house is not exactly like that of Pierino, but it's clear that not much is missing.

The class gets chopped down like this<sup>xliii</sup>.

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xlii Refer to Table F. Since it is a serious statement we wanted to corroborate it by means of particularly rigorous research. Giancarlo collected data in 9 Tuscan schools, in two from Lombardy, one from the Marche, one from Emilia and one from Veneto, for a total of 1960 children of the *prima* class and 1814 of the *seconda* (scholastic years 1964-5, 1965-6).

xliii In the figure the ages refer to the end of the year, so the Pierinos are now eleven years old, and so on. The figure is based on Table E for the classification according to age and on Table F for the age of those who fail.

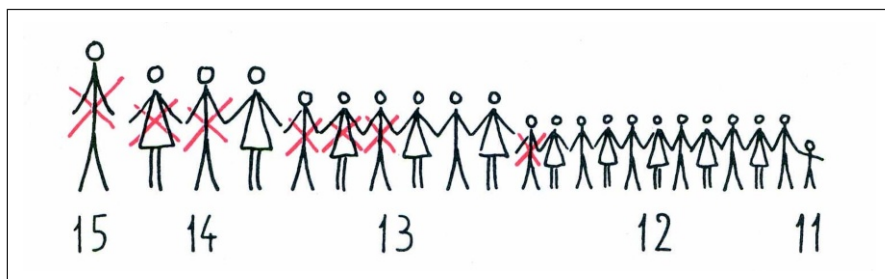
<sup>148</sup> *non guardano in faccia*, literally 'they do not look at the face'.

<sup>149</sup> This implies that the child could be old enough to start working.

<sup>150</sup> *scappare*, literally 'to escape'. The choice of this verb indicates that the child may leave school before the teacher even notices. Furthermore within this phrase the use of the indirect pronoun, in the polite form 'Le' (to her), in *Le può scappare*, literally 'they could escape for you' shows that the author assumes that the responsibility of this 'escape' clearly falls on the teacher.

<sup>151</sup> *strage*, literally 'massacre, disaster, tragedy'. A term which is chosen specifically to convey a sense of great negativity.

<sup>152</sup> *ragazzucci*, literally 'little dear children'. In this case the plural suffix '*ucci*' conveys a sense of endearment, which however carries an ironical connotation.



*The tragedy of the poor*

By failing the older ones the teachers have also hit the poorest ones.

We have studies regarding the father's occupation of those who grew older in the *elementari*.

The results may be seen in the Table on page 70<sup>xliv</sup>.

*Receiving a pay-cheque*

Gianni is now 14 years old and he is to start the *prima media* class again. At this stage it has become almost absurd. Even if he were always to pass, he'd complete the *medie* at 17 years of age.

The boredom caused by school is at a peak. Work is easy to find<sup>xlv</sup>. Within a few months it's also legal.

Gianni knows well enough that work is no fun, but he wants to receive a pay cheque. It bothers him when he is scolded for every penny he spends.

His parents themselves insist more and more weakly. In them and in the child a perseverance which few have would be necessary. A passion for studies which is innate and which is so strong that it would not have let itself be felled by failure.

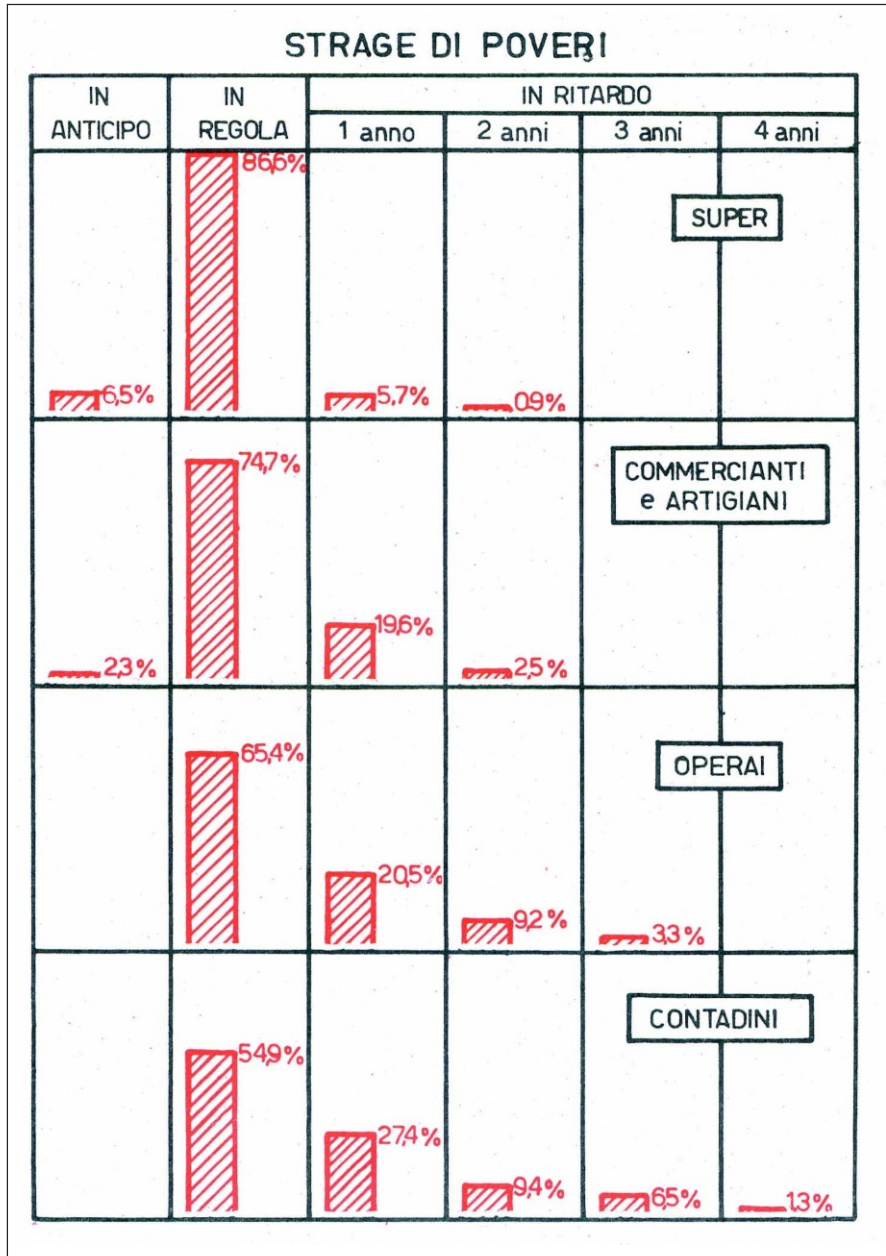
A helping hand from your side would have been necessary. You have extended your hand to make him tumble<sup>153</sup>.

<sup>xliv</sup> The data refer to the III, IV and V classes of the *elementari* in 35 school of the provinces of Florence, Milan, Mantova for a total of 2252 children (scolastic years 1965-6, 1966-7).

For the "super" category refer to footnote xxxii on page 62.

<sup>xlv</sup> With the current rules on apprenticeship (January 1955 law), engaging apprentices has become convenient. In the most developed areas children are also approached for recruitment at home while, maybe, their fathers, who are labourers, may have difficulties to find work. For example, Prato, in the Florence province has two records: one of industrial development and one of absenteeism from compulsory schooling. (refer to "*L'adempimento dell'obbligo scolastico*" [Fulfilling compulsory schooling], Office for Studies of the Florence Province 1966).

<sup>153</sup> This sentence is in stark contrast with the preceding one and implies that instead of giving a helping hand, the teacher stretched out a hand to create more obstacles, to make the child 'tumble'. This is also evident in the syntactic structure used in the original: *La mano l'avete stesa per farlo ruzzolare*, literally



'The hand you extended it to make him tumble'. This marked syntactic structure is used in order to place the noun *mano* 'hand' in sentence-initial position (reprised by the pronoun *l'* 'it'), thereby creating cohesion with the prior sentence *Ci voleva una mano da parte vostra*. Also worth noting is the choice of verb *ruzzolare*, which denotes clearly the action of tumbling down, not merely of falling.



*The greengrocer*

Maybe you did not mean to. Certainly the teacher who sent him to you when he was so old is also at fault. Even the world may be at fault, even Gianni may be at fault.

But when the teacher meets a child who serves her at the greengrocers' I would not like to be the one who has failed him.

It would be totally different if she could tell him: "Why don't you come back to school? I passed you on purpose so that you'd return. Without you school is pointless"<sup>154</sup>.

*The seconda media class*

In the *seconda* class, since the older students are missing, the average age has decreased. The gap between the Pierinos and the others starts lessening.

One may say that the failures in the *elementari* make the age of classes older and many of those who fail repeat the year. At the *medie* schools they become younger as many of the older students find a job.

*The place of one's home*

The class is transformed even socially.

We have a study, carried out by friends of ours in a nearby commune. They attempted to place the failed students of the *prima* and *seconda media* classes into social categories. The results may be seen in the following graph<sup>xlvi</sup>.

*A task that deserves four marks*<sup>155</sup>

When the teachers saw this table they said it was an insult to their honour as impartial judges.

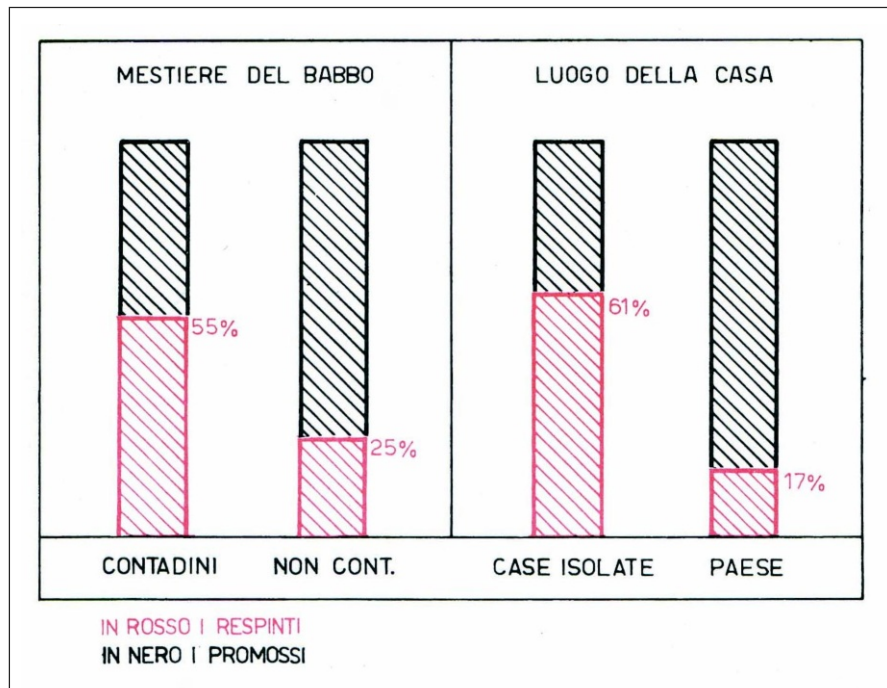
The most tenacious one protested by saying that she had never looked for and she never had information about the families of the children: "If his work deserves four marks I will give him four marks". And she was not understanding, poor woman, that this was exactly what she was being accused of. Because there is nothing as unjust as trying to create equality among those who are not equal.

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<sup>xlvi</sup> The households classified as "towns" are the more populated areas, with all the services: water, light, streets, shops. Those classified as "isolated" are generally on the slopes of Monte Morello or of Calvana.

<sup>154</sup> *non sa di nulla*, literally 'tastes of nothing'.

<sup>155</sup> This implies that the work is of very poor quality.



*About whom is she talking?*

Whether it is age or social class, the fact remains that in the *seconda media* class the teacher starts breathing freely. It is easier for her to finish the course programme.

She cannot wait to get to June. She will get rid of four other skivers and she will finally have a class which she deserves.

“When I got them from the *prima* class they were totally illiterate. Now, instead, they do their work for me in a completely correct manner”.

About whom is she talking? Where are the children that she got from the *prima media* class? The only ones that remained are those who used to write correctly even then and maybe even when they were in the *terza elementare* class. Those who had already learnt it all at home.

The illiterates she had in the *prima media* class are still illiterate. She has just brushed them away from in front of her eyes.

*Compulsory*

And she knows this well. So much so, that in the *terza* class she only fails a few. Seven in the *prima* class, four in the *seconda* class, one in the *terza* class<sup>xlvii</sup>. The exact opposite of what she should have done.

In compulsory schooling, she would have dutifully respected the compulsory element had she made everybody get as far as the *terza* class. It's in the final exam<sup>156</sup> that she could have vented her instincts to be selective.

We'd have nothing more to say. On the other hand, if the child does not know how to write she'd be right to fail him.

### *Summary*

The figure on page 74 provides a summary of the eight years of compulsory schooling<sup>xlvi</sup>.

The class has lost 40 children. Sixteen of them went off to work before having completed these compulsory years. Twenty-four are repeating. In all 56 students have gone through this class. In the *terza media* class there are only 11 of the 32 children entrusted to the teacher in the *prima elementare* class.

### *Father's profession*

At this point in time it is necessary to provide information about the job of the fathers of those who complete the *medie* school. But the ISTAT<sup>157</sup> did not do this. How could it believe that Compulsory Schooling creates class distinctions?

To compensate for this it studied the occupation of the daddies of those who completed<sup>158</sup> the *medie superiori*. The results may be seen in the figure of page 75<sup>xl</sup>.

These are children who have had 12 or 13 years of your schooling. Eight of those years are compulsory schooling.

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xlvi For the reason explained in the footnote on page 67, we presuppose the *medie* classes to be very small. This gives the impression that the *medie* teachers fail less than the *elementari* ones. If the issue is seen in percentage terms, it is very different.

15.4% are failed in the *prima elementare*, 18.1% in the *seconda*, 12.9% in the *terza*, 14.9% in the *quarta*, 17.9% in the *quinta*, 33.3% in the *prima media* class, 23.2% in the *seconda*, 5.1% in the *terza* (refer to Table A).

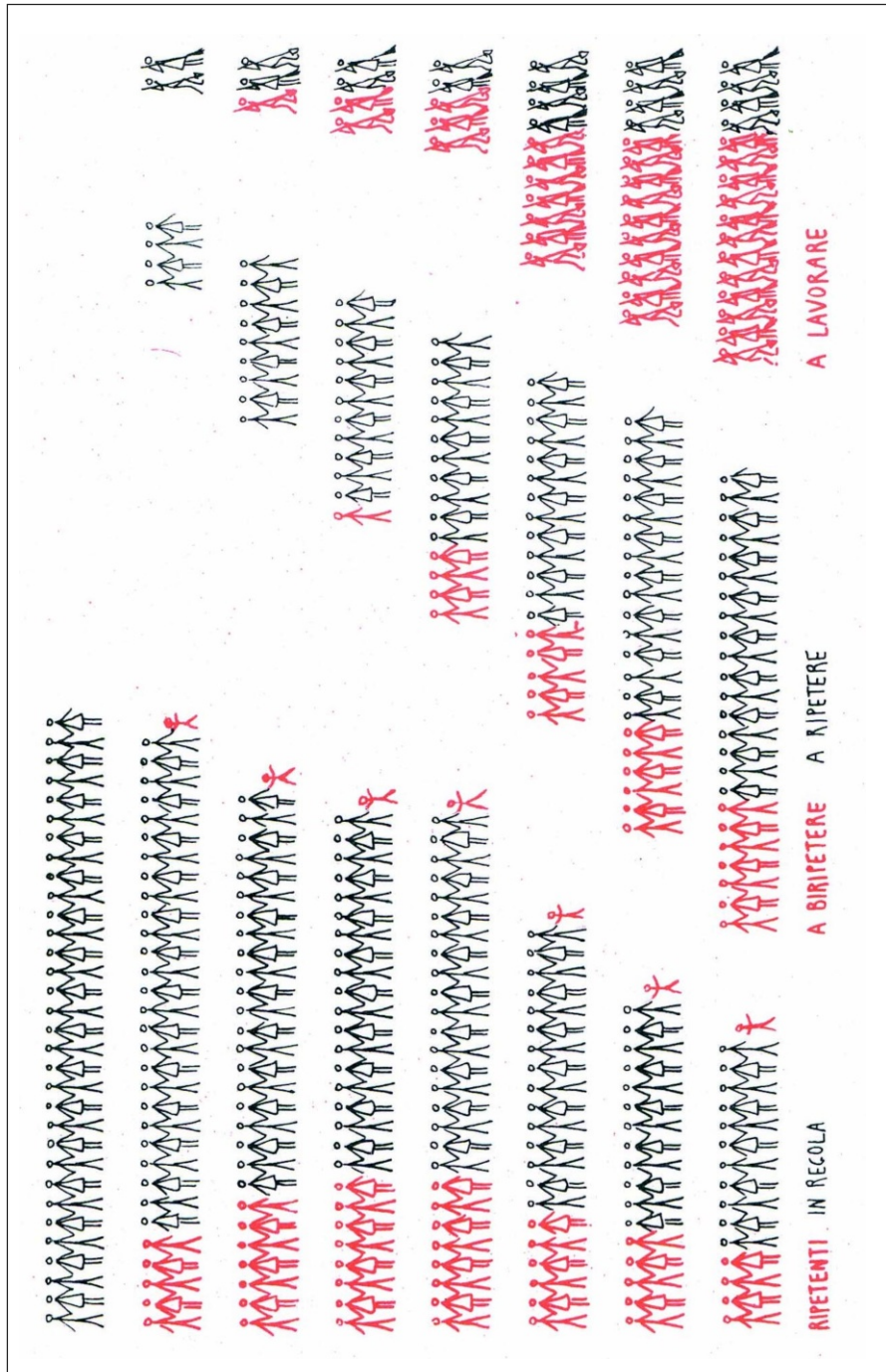
xlvi For the interpretation of this figure see Table D and the notes accompanying it.

xl We chose 30 as the maximum number as we thought it would be too much to draw 100 children for each category. The figure presupposes that all the children of businessmen and professionals complete the *medie superiori* schooling. The data are taken from the *Annuario Statistico Italiano* [Annual Statistics of Italy] 1965 tables 13 and 103.

<sup>156</sup> *l'esame di licenza* refers to the exam held at the end of a course.

<sup>157</sup> Cfr. footnote number 5.

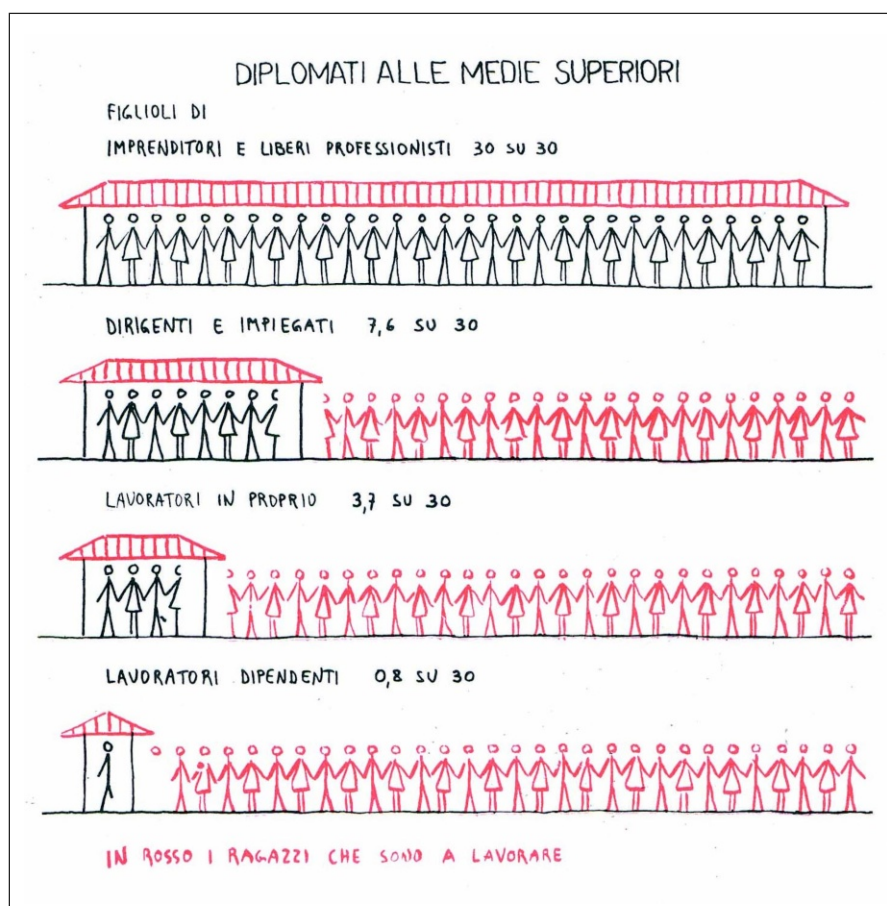
<sup>158</sup> *diplomati*, that is those students who receive a certificate or a diploma to testify that the course has been completed.



## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

*It is not poverty due to lack of money.* Someone may even have interrupted his studies because he did not have enough money, which would not be your fault. But there are labourers who manage to keep their child at school for 10 or 11 years till the *terza media*<sup>1</sup>.

They have spent just as much as Pierino's father, but Pierino at that age has already completed his *media superiore* schooling.



<sup>1</sup> Out of the 16 children we studied in the *terza media* class, one completed his studies at 17 years of age and two at 16 years of age.

BORN DIFFERENT?

*Cretins and unwilling*

You say that you have failed the cretins and the unwilling.

So you maintain that the will of God is that the cretins and the unwilling are born in the homes of the poor. But God does not do these spiteful things to the poor. It's much more likely that the spiteful one is you.

*Defending the race*

At the Constituent Assembly the person who defended the theory of the race was a Fascist: "The Hon. Mastroianni referring to the word *compulsory*<sup>159</sup> observes that there are some children who are completely, organically inadequate to attend school."<sup>ii</sup>

Even the headmaster of a *media* school wrote:

"The Constitution unfortunately cannot guarantee, to all children, the same mental development, the same aptitude towards studies"<sup>iii</sup>. But he would never say so about his child<sup>160</sup>. Won't he make him complete the *medie* schools? Will he send him to plough fields? They told me that these things happen in Mao's China. But is it true?<sup>161</sup>

Even rich people have their difficult children. But they make them get ahead.

*The children<sup>162</sup> of the others*

Only the children of some of the others at times seem to be cretins. When one follows them closely one notices that they are not. And they are not even unwilling. Or at least we feel that it's a moment, that will pass, that there must be a solution.

So it's more honest to say that all children are born equal and if at a later stage they are not equal anymore, it's our fault and we must remedy this.

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ii *Constituent Assembly* = The Parliament [*Camera dei Deputati*] between 1946 and 1948. Besides its normal work it also prepared the text of the Constitution. The sentence cited above was included in the discussion to article 34 of the Constitution (compulsory schooling) of the First Sub-Commission [*Prima Sottocommissione*] (Sitting of the 29th October 1946).

iii Letter signed by the headmaster and by 18 teachers as an answer to the study mentioned on page 53.

<sup>159</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>160</sup> *figliolo*, cfr footnote number 130.

<sup>161</sup> *Ma sarà vero?* The future form *sarà*, 'will be' is used here in order to express a hypothetical meaning.

<sup>162</sup> *figlioli*, cfr. footnote number 130.

*Removing obstacles*

It is exactly what the Constitution says when it talks of Gianni:

“All citizens are equal in front of the law, without distinction of race, language, personal and social conditions.

It’s the Republic’s job to remove those economic and social obstacles, which, by limiting the freedom and the equality of citizens, impede the full development of the human person and the active participation of all workers within the political, economic and social organisation of the Nation” (Article 3).

IT WAS YOUR JOB<sup>163</sup>

*Passing the buck*

A colleague of yours of the *medie* school (a meek newly-wed<sup>164</sup> who in the *prima* class had turned away<sup>165</sup> 10 out of 28, she and her husband are both active Communists) objected:

“I have not chased them away, I only failed them. If their parents do not decide to send them back, too bad for them”.

*Gianni’s father*

But Gianni’s father went to work at a blacksmith’s when he was 12 years old and he did not even complete the *quarta* class<sup>166</sup>.

At 19 years of age he left to become a *partigiano*<sup>167</sup>. He did not understand fully what he was doing. But he certainly understood better than you do. He hoped for a better world that would at least render Gianni equal. Gianni, who then was not even born.

For him Article 3 sounds like this: “It is the job of Mrs. Spadolini to remove the obstacles...”.

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<sup>163</sup> *Toccava a voi*, literally ‘it was your turn’.

<sup>164</sup> *una mite sposina*, a very ironic description of this teacher described as ‘meek’ and as a *sposina*, literally ‘a little bride’. The innocence of this descriptions contrasts sharply with her other characteristics described in the following phrases.

<sup>165</sup> *ne ha respinti*, literally ‘turned away, rejected’ (cfr. footnote number 7). The sense conveyed here is that this teacher failed 10 students out of 28.

<sup>166</sup> the fourth year in the Primary School.

<sup>167</sup> The *partigiani* were soldiers, often untrained, who resisted Fascism. The height of their activities was reached during World War II when thousands of them perished for the cause of the liberation of Italy from Mussolini’s dictatorship.

Besides he even pays you well. He, who gets 300 lire an hour, gives 4300 to you<sup>168</sup>.

And he is prepared to give you even more as long as you have more decent working hours. He works 2150 hours a year, you work for 522 hours (I'm not counting exams, they're not teaching)<sup>liii</sup>.

### *Substitutes*

But he<sup>169</sup> who has these impediments cannot remove them. He does not even know what kind of discipline a child who attends the *medie* requires, how long he should stay at his desk, if it's right that he recreates himself. If it's true that by studying one gets a headache and "one's eyes start trilling", as Gianni says.

If one knew how to do things oneself one would not have sent Gianni to your school. It's your responsibility<sup>170</sup> to provide him with everything: instruction and education. They are two facets of one problem.

Gianni in the future, if you were to guide him<sup>171</sup>, will be a better prepared father and he would collaborate in a different way. His father for now is as he is. That little that the rich allowed him to be.

### *Repetition classes*

If he knew it all, poor man<sup>172</sup>, he'd get hold of the rifle again. There are some teachers who hold repetition classes at a fee. Instead of removing the obstacles, they work to increase the differences.

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liii The net salary of a teacher of the *medie inferiori* school ranges from a minimum of 1,223,000 lire a year (1st grade of stipends with no increment) to a maximum of 3,311,000 (4th grade of stipend 17th increment).

Teaching time ranges from a minimum of 468 hours a year (foreign languages and Mathematics) to a maximum of 540. Minimum stipend and maximum hours of work give a result of 2264 lire an hour. Minimum hours of work with maximum stipend gives a result of 7074 lire an hour.

In the text we give average values.

Our data are updated to 1966.

<sup>168</sup> *Lui che prende 300 lire l'ora, a voi ve ne dà 4300*. A marked syntactic structure which literally reads 'He who gets 300 lire an hour, to you he gives 4300 of them', with the reduplication of the second person pronoun, *a voi ve*. This creates a contrast between Gianni's father (referred to by means of the explicit sentence-initial pronoun *Lui*) and the teacher.

<sup>169</sup> Refers to Gianni's father.

<sup>170</sup> *Tocca a voi*, a reprise of the title of this section.

<sup>171</sup> *ce lo portate*, an idiomatic form which refers to the way a person can be led or nourished by others.

<sup>172</sup> Refers again to Gianni's father.



In the morning they are paid by us to teach all equally. In the afternoons they take money from the richer ones in order to teach their young gentlemen<sup>173</sup> differently. In June, at our expense, they preside at the tribunal and they judge the differences.

*The insignificant civil servant*<sup>174</sup>

It's not that Gianni's father does not know that there are repetition classes. It's just that you created an atmosphere in which nobody says anything<sup>175</sup>. You seem to be men of honour<sup>176</sup>.

If an insignificant civil servant, at home, at a high price, produces certificates efficiently and correctly, whereas at work<sup>177</sup> he produces them slowly and incorrectly, he'd be sent to prison<sup>178</sup>.

Imagine then if he were to whisper to the public: "Here you'll get your certificates late and they'll be useless. I advise you to go to somebody who does them at home against payment". He'd be sent to prison.

But a teacher who I know said the following to a mother is not sent to prison: "He can't make it. Send him to repetition classes". He literally said this. I have witnesses. I could proceed against him in court.

In court? In front of a judge whose wife gives repetition classes? And besides, on the Criminal Code this crime, who knows why, is not considered.

*Onions*

You all agree. You want to crush us. Just do it, but at least do not pretend to be honest. It's very easy to be honest when the rules are written by you to suit you.

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<sup>173</sup> Cfr. footnote number 60.

<sup>174</sup> *impiegatuccio*, from *impiegato*, 'civil servant' with the diminutive suffix *-uccio*, which in this context denotes insignificance, unimportance.

<sup>175</sup> At the beginning of this paragraph two cleft sentences are used, both introduced by means of forms which will create emphasis on the constituents that follow: *Non è che...* 'It's not that'; *È che ...* 'It's that...'

<sup>176</sup> The term used in the original, *galantuomini*, has very strong connotations as it is normally related to the semantic sphere of criminality, especially to the Mafia. The choice of term is clearly related to the preceding sentence, in which it is stated that an atmosphere is created in which nobody says anything, just like the *omertà* code of honour in the Mafia.

<sup>177</sup> *allo sportello*, literally 'at the counter', referring to the counter where people are served in institutional-bureaucratic settings.

<sup>178</sup> *andrebbe dentro*, literally 'he'd go in'. A colloquial form used to express, quite forcefully, the concept of somebody who'd be sent to prison. The same phrase is repeated to the letter at the end of the next paragraph.

An old friend of mine stole 40 onions from a market-garden. He got 13 months in jail without probation. The judge does not steal onions<sup>179</sup>. It's too much bother. He tells his servant to buy them for him. The money for the onions and for his servant is earned by his wife who gives repetition classes.

*Priests are better*

Certain schools run by priests are more honest. They are instruments of class struggle and they do not hide it from anyone. At the Barnabites in Florence the charge for half-board is 40,000 lire a month. At the Scolopis<sup>180</sup> it's 36,000.

Day and night at the service of only one master. Not at the service of two masters like you.

*Freedom*

The other obstacle you do not remove is fashion<sup>181</sup>.

One day, talking about television, Gianni told us: "They expose us to these things. If they showed us school, we would go to school".

With that impersonal subject he meant society, the world, somebody who is unknown and who steers the choices of the poor.

We showered him with insults: "you had two schools and you left". But, between us, is it true that he left out of his own free will?

In town he is influenced by all the fashions except by the right ones. Whoever does not follow them gets isolated. One would need the sort of courage that he, who is so young, uneducated, not helped by anyone, cannot have. Not even by his father who also falls into the rut. Not even by the parish priest who offers games against payment at the ACLI<sup>182</sup> bar. Not even by the Communists who offer games against payment<sup>183</sup> at their centre<sup>184</sup>. They are in competition in order to drag him down even more.

As if the urges we have inside us are not enough.

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<sup>179</sup> *Il giudice le cipolle non le ruba*, literally 'The judge the onions he does not steal them'. Another marked structure which is very much in line with the colloquial forms used in this narrative episode. The elliptical phrase which follows, *troppa fatica*, 'too much bother', clearly replicates this style.

<sup>180</sup> Barnabites refers to a Roman Catholic Order (also referred to as Cleric Regulars of Saint Paul) whereas Scolopi refers to the church of San Giovanni degli Scolopi in Florence, where there was an oratory dedicated to St. John the Evangelist.

<sup>181</sup> Referring to peer-pressure and other negative influences from the outside world.

<sup>182</sup> ACLI, *Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani*, Christian Association of Italian Workers.

<sup>183</sup> *vendono giochi*, literally 'they sell games'.

<sup>184</sup> *Casa del Popolo*, literally 'the People's Houses', refers to the local centres run by the Communist Party.

*Fashion*

Fashion tells him that the ages from 12-21 are the years of sport-games and of sex, and of hatred for studies.

It concealed that the ages between 12-15 are the right years to master one's words. The ages between 15-21 to use them within unions and political parties.

It concealed that there is no time to lose. At 15 years of age goodbye to school. At 21 the age of private thoughts is forthcoming: engagement, wedding, children, wealth. So he will have no time for meetings, he'll be scared to expose himself, he certainly will not be able to commit himself completely.

*Defending the poor*

You could be the only defence of the poor from fashion. The State gives you 800 billion<sup>185</sup> lire a year for this reason<sup>liv</sup>.

But you are most miserly educators, you who offer 185 holidays as opposed to 180 schooldays. Four hours of school as opposed to twelve without school. An imbecile of a headmaster who enters class and says: "The director<sup>186</sup> has declared the 3rd November a holiday" hears shouts of joy, and he smiles, pleased with himself.

You have presented school as a negative thing, and the children were supposed to love it?

*Let's all hug each other*

At Borgo the headmaster gave permission to the *terza media* class to use a hall for a dance party with their girlfriends. The Salesians, not to feel less important, organise a costume-wearing event<sup>187</sup>. A teacher I know makes himself noticed with the *Gazzetta dello Sport*<sup>188</sup> in his pocket.

They are men who fully comprehend the "needs" of youths. After all it's comfortable to accept the world as it is. A teacher with the *Gazzetta* in his pocket can get on well with a dad labourer who has the *Gazzetta* in his pocket, to speak

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liv "Relazione generale sulla situazione economica del paese 1965 [General report on the economic situation of the country 1965]" Vol. II pg. 495. The figure refers solely to compulsory schools.

<sup>185</sup> *miliardo*, 'billion', can also be translated as thousand million.

<sup>186</sup> *provveditore*, literally 'head of a Civil Servant Office, education officer, superintendent, director'.

<sup>187</sup> *il corso mascherato*, refers to some sort of parade in costume.

<sup>188</sup> A sports' daily newspaper.

about a little son<sup>189</sup> who carries a ball under his arm or about a little daughter who spends an hour at the hairdresser.

Then the teacher makes a small mark on the result sheet and the sons of the labourer go to work when they do not know how to read. The sons of the teacher continue studying till the end even if “they are unwilling” or they “understand nothing”.

#### SELECTION IS USEFUL TO SOMEBODY

##### *Destiny or plan?*

At this stage everyone starts blaming destiny. It’s so comforting to read History in terms of destiny.

If one reads it from a political point of view, it is more disturbing: fashion becomes part of a well-calculated plan so that Gianni is left out. The apolitical teacher becomes one of the 411,000 useful idiots that the master<sup>190</sup> has armed with a result sheet and a report book. Reserve troops whose assignment is to halt 1,031,000 Gianni a year, just in case the fashion game is not enough to distract them.

One million and 31,000 *rejected*<sup>191</sup> a year. It is a technical word pertaining to what you call school. But it is even a word pertaining to military science. Reject them before they are conscripted to the military service. No wonder exams originate from Prussia<sup>lv</sup>.

##### *The tax system*

The curious thing is that the stipend used to throw us out is paid by us, the excluded ones.

The poor are those who consume all their income. The rich are those who consume only a part of it. In Italy, for an inexplicable reason, what one consumes is taxed up to the very last *lira*. Income tax is just a joke<sup>192</sup>.

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<sup>lv</sup> Refer to the term Exams in the Treccani Encyclopaedia.  
*Prussia* = a part of Germany. It is said that the military mania of the Germans comes from Prussia.

<sup>189</sup> In this paragraph son, daughter are referred to as *figliola*, *figliola* as the authors do in previous parts of the text (cfr. footnote number 130).

<sup>190</sup> *il padrone*, ‘the master, director, head’. Refers to the dominant upper classes of society.

<sup>191</sup> Italics in the original, *respinti* (cfr footnote number 7).

<sup>192</sup> *solo per burla*, literally ‘in a way which is not serious, in a mocking way’. The use of this colloquial form is used to express the authors’ derogatory remarks regarding the Italian fiscal system in which income (be it high or low) is taxed minimally, while there are high taxes to be paid on what is consumed.

They told me that the papers on fiscal science call this system “painless”. Painless means that the rich manage to make only the poor pay taxes, without them even noticing it.

At university certain things are said. Only the rich youths<sup>193</sup> are there. On the other hand it is prohibited to speak about these things in the *inferiori* schools<sup>194</sup>. It’s not right to speak politics at school. The master does not want this.

*Who stands to gain from this?*

Let us see who stands to gain from the fact that there’s so little school.

Seven hundred and forty hours a year are two hours a day. And the child keeps his eyes open for another fourteen hours. In the privileged families they are fourteen hours of cultural assistance of all kinds.

For the peasants they are fourteen hours of solitude and silence which make them even more bashful. For the sons of the labourers they are fourteen hours at the school of the occult persuaders<sup>lvi</sup>.

Summer holidays, in particular, seem to coincide with precise interests. The sons of the rich go abroad and learn more than they do in winter. The poor ones, on the first of October, have forgotten the little they knew in June. If they have re-sit sessions in September, they cannot afford to pay for repetition classes. Normally they do not sit for them<sup>lvii</sup>. If they are peasants, they give a hand in the heavy summer chores not to burden the farm with further expenses.

*Saying things clearly*

In Giolitti’s<sup>195</sup> times these things used to be said in public: “... a gathering of important landlords met at Caltagirone and proposed, as a complete reform, the abolition of the *elementare* schools, so that peasants and minors would not absorb, by reading them, new ideas”<sup>lviii</sup>.

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<sup>lvi</sup> *occult persuaders* = adverts are called occult persuaders when they convince the poor that unnecessary goods are necessary.

<sup>lvii</sup> We know many cases like these. However it seems difficult for us to obtain objective statistical data on the issue.

<sup>lviii</sup> “Memorie della mia vita [Memories of my life] Milano 1922 vol. 1 pg. 90.  
Giovanni Giolitti = many times head of government between 1892 and 1921.

<sup>193</sup> Cfr. footnote number 60.

<sup>194</sup> Refers to Primary schooling.

<sup>195</sup> Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928), Italian politician who served as Prime Minister in five different legislatures.

Even Ferdinando Martini<sup>196</sup> was sincere. Complaining about the introduction in the *secondarie* school of the *inferiori* classes he said: “Because of this our ruling class had to increase its efforts relentlessly in order not to lose any political and economical superiority”<sup>lvix</sup>.

*The Fascists.* Even at the times of the Fascists, the laws were clear: “Schooling in the urban towns and in the larger rural towns is normally composed of the *inferiore* and the *superiore* courses (5 years of studies). That of the smaller rural towns, have, as a rule, only the *inferiore* course (3 years of study)”.<sup>lx</sup>

At the Constituent Assembly the Fascists requested that compulsory schooling be lowered to the age of 13<sup>lxi</sup>.

### *Poor Pierino*

But they remained alone. The others realised that today it is necessary to speak subtly.

When in Parliament the New *Media* was discussed, it was forbidden to speak negatively of the poor. All that was left was to shed tears on poor Pierino and on Latin.

The most emotional one was a Christian Democrat<sup>197</sup>: “Why on earth, should those who are intellectually gifted and motivated be humiliated in a school where it is necessary to clip their wings, in order to keep them at the flight level of those who by nature must necessarily proceed slowly?”<sup>lxii</sup>

## THE MASTER

### *Does he exist?*

Often we have mentioned the master who manipulates you. Of somebody who has designed schooling to fit your size.

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<sup>lvix</sup> Parliamentary speech 13-12-1888.

*Ferdinando Martini* = Parliamentary Secretary and then Minister of Education between 1884 and 1893.

<sup>lx</sup> Article 66 of the *Testo Unico* 5-2-1928

<sup>lxi</sup> Tumminelli amendment of article 34 of the Constitution.

<sup>lxii</sup> The Hon. Limoni. Parliamentary discussion on the institutive law of the New *Media*. Sitting of the 13-12-1962.

<sup>196</sup> Ferdinando Martini (1841-1928), Italian politician, author and journalist.

<sup>197</sup> *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC), an Italian political party, which throughout its history has held close ties with the Catholic Church. It spent several years as the main party in power, from the post-war years till the mid-Nineties.

Does he exist? Could it be a group of men around a table, with the strings of everything in their hands: banks, industries, parties, the press, fashion?

We do not know this. We feel that when we say it our book becomes a bit novel-like. If we did not say it we'd be naive. It would be as if to say that many cogs come to function together by chance. And out of this a war-tank is built which goes to war all alone, without anyone to steer it.

*Pierino's house*

Maybe Pierino's story can provide us with a clue. Let's try to show affection even toward his family.

The doctor and his wife are smart people<sup>198</sup>. They read, they travel, they entertain friends, they play with their child, they have time to dedicate to him, they know how to do all this well. The house is full of books and of culture. At five years of age, I could use the shovel expertly. Pierino the pencil.

One evening, almost jokingly, as a result of facts more than any other thing, the decision is taken: "What for should we put him in the *prima* class? Let's place him in the *seconda*". They send him to do the exams without giving much importance to them. If he fails nothing changes.

He does not fail, he obtains a nine in all of them<sup>199</sup>. There's a serene joy in the family just as there would be in mine.

*It never rains but it pours*<sup>200</sup>

The only strange thing that there is in all this is the law that the wedded couple found laid out for them<sup>201</sup>. It forbids a five-year old child to enroll in the *prima* class but it allows a six-year old child to enroll in the *seconda*.

Is it an idiotic law, or is it too intelligent for us to understand?

It has not been written by those two<sup>202</sup>. They did not even take notice of it. So who wrote it? My mother?

<sup>198</sup> An idiomatic form is used in the original: *sono gente in gamba*.

<sup>199</sup> Implies that he practically obtains full marks in all the exams.

<sup>200</sup> An idiomatic form is used in the original: *piove sul bagnato*.

<sup>201</sup> The phrase used in the original text is both ironical and metaphoric. The couple is referred to as *sposini*, again with the suffix *-ini* which conveys an endearing sense, with an ironical connotation. The law referred to has been *scodellata* 'dished out', as if to say that it suited Pierino's parents perfectly and irrefutably.

<sup>202</sup> Refers to Pierino's parents. Note the progressive detachment expressed in their regard. From the sense of understanding in the previous paragraphs the authors move to irony (*sposini*) and now they distance themselves from them by using the demonstrative *quei* 'those' and by referring to them by means of a mere numeral, *due* 'two'.

*Special*

What happened in the *prima elementare* class, happens again year after year. Pierino always passes and almost without studying.

I fight with clenched teeth and fail. He even manages to fit in sports, the *Azione Cattolica* or the *Giovane Italia* or the *F.G. Comunista*<sup>203</sup>, his puberty crises, the year of melanchony, the year of rebellion<sup>lxiii</sup>.

At 18 years of age he is less balanced than I was when I was 12. But he always passes. He will graduate with full marks. He will work for free as a university assistant.

*He works for free*

Yes free. Nobody would believe it: assistants who work as volunteers do so without receiving a stipend.

We've come across another strange law. But it has glorious forerunners. The Statute of Carlo Alberto<sup>lxiv</sup> stated: "The work of senator or parliamentary deputy is not entitled to any reimbursement or indemnity"<sup>lxv</sup>.

This is not some sort of romantic lack of interest in money<sup>204</sup>, it is a refined system in order to exclude the inferior race without saying things to them directly<sup>205</sup>.

Class struggle, when done by gentlemen, is gentlemanly<sup>206</sup>. It does not cause scandal, either to priests or to professors who read the *Espresso*<sup>207</sup>.

*Pierino's mother*

So Pierino will become a professor. He will find a wife just like him. They will bring up a Pierino when it's their turn to do so. More of a Pierino than ever.

Thirty thousand of such stories every year.

If one were to take Pierino's mother into consideration on her own, one would

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<sup>lxiii</sup> *Giovane Italia* = today it is an organisation of Fascist students.

<sup>lxiv</sup> *Carlo Alberto* = king of Piedmont Liguria and Sardinia up to 1848.

*Statute* = a sort of Constitution on which laws were based between 1848 and 1948.

<sup>lxv</sup> Article 50. The same applied to the Mayor and to the *Giunta Comunale* [Local Council]. Article 50 was officially effective till 1948. In England parliamentary deputies have been paid since 1911.

<sup>203</sup> All refer to youth organisations, either associated with the Catholic church or with political parties.

<sup>204</sup> *Questo non è un romantico disinteresse*, literally 'This is not a romantic lack of interest'. It clearly refers to the fact that certain duties are carried out without reimbursement as there are other vested interests.

<sup>205</sup> *senza dirglielo in faccia*, literally "without saying it to them in their faces".

<sup>206</sup> *quando la fanno i signori è signorile*. In the original text the noun *signori* 'gentlemen, rich' and its adjectival form *signorile* 'gentlemanly' are used thereby creating an emphatic effect.

<sup>207</sup> An Italian weekly which deals mainly with political, economic and social issues.



## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

say that she is not a beast. She is just a little selfish<sup>208</sup>. She disregarded<sup>209</sup> the children of others. She did not forbid Pierino to stay in the company of other Pierinos like him. She herself and her husband surround themselves with intellectuals. So they do not want to change.

The 31 mothers of Pierino's schoolmates either do not have the time she has or they do not know better. They have jobs in which they earn so little that to live they must work from when they're young till when they're old, from dawn till night.

She, on the other hand, attended school until she was 24. Besides in her home she had one of those 31 mothers. The mother of a Gianni who, in order to do her chores, neglects her child.

All the extra time that you have now is a gift of the poor or maybe a theft by the rich.

### *The lion's share*

In conclusion Pierino's mother is neither a beast nor is she innocent. But adding together thousands of little selfishnesses like hers, one forms the large selfishness of a class which wants the lion's share for itself.

A class that did not hesitate to unleash Fascism, racism, war, unemployment. If it were necessary "to change everything so that nothing changes", it will not hesitate to embrace Communism<sup>lxvi</sup>.

Nobody knows the precise mechanism. But when every law is made to size, in such a way that Pierino benefits from it whereas we are cheated<sup>210</sup>, one cannot think that this happens by chance anymore.

## SELECTION HAS REACHED ITS GOAL

### *At university*

At university the daddy's boys are 86.5%. The sons of employees are 13.5%. Among the graduates: daddy's boys 91.9%, sons of employees 8.1%<sup>lxvii</sup>.

If the poor were to form a group it might mean something. But they do not. Rather, the daddy's boys greet them like brothers and they give them<sup>211</sup> all their defects.

In conclusion 100% daddy's boys.

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lxvi. The sentence within inverted commas is in the novel "Il Gattopardo". It is said by a Sicilian prince upon the arrival of the *garibaldini* soldiers (1860). Then even he becomes a *garibaldino* and so he does not lose money and power.

lxvii. *Annuario Statistico Italiano* [Annual Statistics of Italy] 1963 tables 113-114. In the following years this data is missing.

<sup>208</sup> *poco generosa*, literally 'little generous'.

<sup>209</sup> *ha chiuso gli occhi sui figlioli di altri*, literally 'she shut her eyes to the little children of others'.

<sup>210</sup> *si freggi noi*, literally 'we are robbed, swindled'. A colloquial form which renders this final sentence highly expressive.

<sup>211</sup> *gli regalano*, literally 'they gift them, they give them as a present'.

*In the parties*

The parties' leaderships, at all levels, are firmly in the hands of graduates.

The proletarian parties are not different from the others in this respect. The workers' parties do not turn up their noses<sup>212</sup> at the daddy's boys. And the daddy's boys do not turn up their noses at the workers' parties. As long as they occupy the leading posts.

After all, it's cool to be "with the poor". That is, not really "with the poor", I meant to say "the leader of the poor"<sup>lxviii</sup>.

*The candidates*

The party leaders prepare the lists of candidates for the elections. They adorn them, at the bottom, by including some labourers just to save face. Then they make sure that the voting preferences are given to the graduates: "Let it be done by those who know the job. A labourer in Parliament would be lost. And after all the doctor is *one of us*"<sup>213</sup>.

*Parliament*

In conclusion those who go and formulate the new laws are those who are suited fine by the old laws. The only ones who have never lived within the situations that need to change. The only ones who are not competent in politics.

In Parliament<sup>214</sup> 77% are graduates. They ought to represent the voters. But among the voters the graduates are 1.8%.

In Parliament 8.4% are labourers and union members. Among voters they are 51.1%. Peasants in Parliament are 0.1%. Among voters 28.8%<sup>lxix</sup>.

*Black power*

Stokely Carmichael was sent to prison twenty-seven times<sup>lxx</sup>. During the last trial he declared: "There isn't a single white man that I trust".

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lxviii The height of coolness is to be part of a little party without mass following (social-proletariate or Chinese). A "Chinese" public demonstration held in Florence in September 1966 was organised by students who were the sons of important university professors.

lxix "*Elenco alfabetico dei Deputati* [Alphabetical list of the members of Parliament]". Rome 1965. "*Elenco dei Senatori* [List of Senators]" Rome 1966.

lxx Stokely Carmichael (pronounced Stócli Carmáichel) = head of the "Black Power" movement (pronounced blèc póua, it means *potere nero*) in the United States. Those of the Black Power want to take power because they are tired of asking for equality and not obtaining it.

212 In the text an idiomatic locution is used: *non arricciano il naso*

213 Italics in the original.

214 The footnote at the end of the paragraph indicates that both the Italian Parliament and Senate are taken into consideration in these figures.

#### COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

When a white youth who had given his whole life for the cause of the blacks shouted to him: “Really, not even one, Stokely?” Carmichael turned towards the public, he looked at his friend and said: “No, not even one”.

*P.I.L.*

If the white youth gets offended he confirms that Carmichael is right. If he is really on the side of the blacks he must swallow hard, go aside and continue to love. Maybe Carmichael was waiting for that moment.

The newspapers of the centre and left parties always paid honour to the texts written in our school<sup>215</sup>. In this case<sup>216</sup>, maybe, they will join the resentment of the right. Then this will prove that there is a party which is greater than the others: the *Partito Italiano Laureati* [Italian Party of Graduates].

#### FOR WHOM DO YOU DO IT?

*In good faith*

The good faith of teachers is a different matter.

You are paid by the State. You have dear children<sup>217</sup> in front of you. You studied History. You teach it. You should see things clearly.

Certainly, among the dear children you only meet<sup>218</sup> the chosen ones. You had to learn your culture from books<sup>219</sup>. And the books are written by those on the master’s side. The only ones who could write it. But you could have read between the lines. Is it possible that you are still in good faith?

*The Nazi*

I try to understand you. You have such a respectable appearance. You have nothing in common with the criminal. Maybe just something in common with the Nazi criminal. A very honest and obedient citizen who keeps a record of soap-boxes. He would be discomfited if he were to make a mistake in a number (four, four less), but he does not question if it is soap made out of human flesh.

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<sup>215</sup> Referring to the Barbiana School.

<sup>216</sup> This refers to this book, *Lettera ad una Professoressa*.

<sup>217</sup> *creature*, (cfr footnote number 113).

<sup>218</sup> The verb used is *vedete*, second person plural of the verb *vedere*, ‘to see’. This part therefore refers mainly to the teachers of the Secondary sector of schooling who only ‘see’ the children who are ‘chosen’, that is those who do not drop out or are failed during their Primary schooling years.

<sup>219</sup> *La cultura v’è toccata farvela sui libri*, literally ‘Culture you had to do it from book’. This syntactic structure is colloquial and it is marked by the use of the noun *la cultura* which is reprised by the pronoun *la* (in *farvela*), and by the reduplication of the second person plural *vi* (in *v’è* and in *farvela*).

*Shyer<sup>220</sup> than I am*

But for whom do you do it? What do you gain from a hateful school and from throwing Gianni out in the road?

Now, suddenly, it seems that you are shyer than I am<sup>221</sup>. Are you afraid of Pierino's parents? Of the colleagues in the *superiori* schools? Of the inspector?

If you care so much about your career there still is a solution: cheat with the scripts<sup>222</sup>, correct some errors as you go round the benches.

*For the Honour of the school*

Or, on the other hand, you aren't afraid of anything coming from the outside or of any crudeness<sup>223</sup>. You only fear your conscience. But a conscience that you have developed erratically.

"I would consider this promotion<sup>224</sup> to be damaging to the honour and the dignity of the school" a headmaster once wrote in the minutes. And who is school?<sup>225</sup> We are the school. How do you serve it if you do not serve us?

*For the child himself*

"After all it is for the child's own good. Let us not forget that they are students at the threshold of the *Superiore* school", the headmaster of a little country school said pompously.

Out of the 30 children it was clear that three would go to the *superiori*: Maria, daughter of the haberdasher, Anna, daughter of the teacher and of course Pierino. But even if there were more, what would have changed?

The headmaster forgot to change the record. He hadn't noticed the new school population. A reality which is already alive in 680,000 children of the *prima* class. All poor. The rich were in the minority.

Not a declassified school, as he says. His is declassified. It's at the service of those who had the money to go ahead.

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<sup>220</sup> *timidi*, literally 'shy, bashful', (cfr. footnote number 9).

<sup>221</sup> *Ora si scoprirà*. The use of the future tense, third person singular of the verb *scoprire* 'to discover' has an attenuating effect (*futuro attenuativo*) in the sense that it is used to state a fact, but it is done by presenting it as a supposition or a hypothesis. This subtlety is very much in line with the implication carried in this part of the text.

<sup>222</sup> Refers to exams' or tests' scripts.

<sup>223</sup> *volgare*, literally 'vulgar'

<sup>224</sup> Refers to the promotion of a student from one class to another.

<sup>225</sup> *E la scuola chi è?* literally 'And the school who is it?'

*For Justice*

“Passing those who do not deserve it is an injustice towards the more clever ones” a delicate little soul<sup>226</sup> told us.

Call Pierino aside and tell him what the Master said to the vinedressers<sup>lxxi</sup>: “You, I will pass you, you are knowledgeable<sup>227</sup>. You have two fortunes: that of passing and that of being knowledgeable. I will pass Gianni to give him courage, but he has the misfortune of not being knowledgeable”.

*For Society*

Another one is convinced to have a responsibility toward Society: “Today I pass him in the *terza media* class and tomorrow he becomes a doctor!”

*Equality*

Career, culture, family, the honour of the school, weighing scales to rate children’s work. They are trivial things<sup>228</sup>. Too little to fill the life of a teacher.

Some of you have noticed this and do not know how to get out of it. All because of the fear of that blessed word. And yet there’s no choice. What is not political does not fill the life of today’s man.

In Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the South, in the mountains, in the fields, even in the large cities, millions of children wait to be made equal. Bashful like I am, cretins like Sandro, unwilling like Gianni. The best part of humanity.

THE REFORMS THAT WE PROPOSE

So that the dream of equality does not remain a dream, we propose three reforms to you:

- I – Do not fail.
- II – To those who seem to be cretins, offer full-time schooling.
- III – To the unwilling it’s enough to give them a goal<sup>229</sup>.

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lxxi Gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 20.

<sup>226</sup> *animuccia delicata*. The use of the diminutive *-uccia* with the noun *anima* ‘soul’, together with the adjective *delicata* ‘delicate’, convey an endearing connotation which, as usual, is highly ironical.

<sup>227</sup> *sapere*, ‘to know’.

<sup>228</sup> *piccinerie*, an uncommon term derived from *piccino* ‘small’ and a derivational suffix *-eria* ‘pertaining to something/someone’.

*The turner*<sup>230</sup>

The turner is not allowed to hand in only those bits that he does well. Otherwise he would do nothing to make them all as should be done.

You, on the other hand, know that you can throw away bits as you wish. So you are satisfied to take account of those who manage on their own because of reasons which are external to school.

*Lowest common denominator*

Today this system is illegal.

The Constitution, in article 34, promises eight years of schooling to all. Eight years means eight different classes. Not four classes repeated twice each. If not it would be an ugly game of words not worthy of a Constituent Assembly<sup>lxxii</sup>.

So today getting to the *terza media* class is not a luxury. It is a minimum of common culture that everyone has a right to.

Whoever does not have it all is not Equal.

*The aptitudes*

You can barricade yourselves behind the racist theory of the aptitudes. All children are capable of doing the *terza media* class and they are all capable of following all subjects.

It is convenient to tell a child: "You are not cut out for this subject". The boy accepts it because he is lazy like the teacher. But he understands that the teacher does not consider him as Equal.

It is not educational to say to another: "You are cut out for this subject". If he has a passion for a subject one should forbid him to study it. Tell him that he is limiting himself or that he will not be rounded out. There's lots of time later to close oneself in specialisations.

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<sup>lxxii</sup> In fact nobody put the issue forward neither in the Commission, nor during the parliamentary debate (refer to the typeset report of the sitting 29-4-1947).

<sup>229</sup> In statements II and III a marked syntactic order is used in order to place the children as the topic of the sentence. Statement II reads: *A quelli che sembrano cretini dargli la scuola a tempo pieno* (literally: 'to those who seem cretins give to them school at full-time'). Statement III reads: *Agli svogliati basta dargli uno scopo* (literally: 'to the unwilling enough to give them a goal'). Note how the pronoun *gli* 'to them' in both statements refers to *quelli che sembrano cretini* and to *svogliati*, thereby reprising the children involved, who are clearly the main priority of the proposed reforms.

<sup>230</sup> A person who rounds objects on a lathe.

*By contract*

If each one of you were to know that he had to make each child move ahead, at all costs and in all subjects, he'd sharpen his wit in order to make them work.

I would pay you by contract. A certain amount for each child who learns all the subjects. Or better, a fine for each child who does not learn one of them.

Then your eyes would always turn to Gianni. You would seek in his distracted glance the intelligence that certainly God put in him, in an equal measure to the others. You would fight for the child who is most needy, neglecting the luckier one, just as occurs in all the families. You would wake up at night with your thoughts directed straight to him in order to find a new way of schooling, which is cut to measure for him. You'd go and look for him in his house if he did not come back.

You would not be at peace with yourself, because the school that loses Gianni does not deserve to be called school.

*You are Medieval*<sup>231</sup>

We, in extreme cases, even use the whip.

Do not be squeamish and forget the theories of the pedagogues. If you want the whip I'll get it for you, but put down your pen from the result sheet. Your pen leaves a mark for a year. The whip, the day after, is not felt anymore<sup>232</sup>.

Gianni, because of that "modern" and well-meaning<sup>233</sup> pen of yours, will never read a book in his life. He will never know how to write a decent letter. An exaggerated and cruel punishment.

*Mathematics*

The only person who'd be right to grumble about a school without failures would be the teacher of Mathematics. The lessons of the *seconda* or *terza* class are useless for those who do not know the things of the *prima* class.

But Mathematics is just one subject. You wouldn't wish that, for three hours a week that the child may not be able to follow fruitfully, he'd miss out on 23 which suit him.

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<sup>231</sup> *Medievali siete voi*, literally 'Medieval are you'. This marked syntactic formulation (the unmarked nominal predicate would read: *Voi siete Medievali*, 'you are Medieval') turns this title into an accusation (despite the lack of punctuation, such as the exclamation mark).

<sup>232</sup> *la frusta il giorno dopo non si conosce più*, literally, 'the whip, the day after, is not known anymore'. This, of course, implies that the effects of the whip are not long lasting. The choice of the verb *conoscere* 'to know' is rather peculiar: it has, however, an effect of personifying the whip, thereby rendering more explicit what is being described.

<sup>233</sup> *perbenino*, the diminutive suffix *-ino* is added to the adjective *perbene* 'well-meaning' to create an even more allusive effect.

*Less is necessary*

Besides, regarding Mathematics, one could say the same things that were said in Parliament for Latin.

What are the sums that everyone must know how to do which are an immediate necessity at home or for any type of job or to read a newspaper? In other words: which part of Mathematics does a cultured man, who is not specialised, remember?

All that is included in the eight-year school course, excluding numerical expressions and algebra<sup>lxxiii</sup>.

There remains the problem of enriching one's language with the word algebra. But for this a single lesson of algebra in the whole year is enough.

II. FULL-TIME

*To repeat*

You know well that the current two hours a day of school are not enough to cover all the course for everyone.

Till now you solved the problem as classists. You have made the poor *repeat* the year. To the little bourgeoisie you give *repetition classes*. For the highest class this does not matter, it is all *repetition*<sup>234</sup>. Pierino has already heard whatever you teach at home<sup>235</sup>.

After-school<sup>236</sup> is a more fair solution. The child repeats, but does not miss the year, he does not spend money and you are beside him in guilt and in suffering<sup>lxxiv</sup>.

*Anti-classism*

Let's throw away the mask. Up to the day when your school remains classist and throws out the poor, the only form of serious anti-classism is an after-school that throws out the rich.

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<sup>lxxiii</sup> *numerical expressions* = complicated calculations with which in the *medie* schools one cannot solve any practical problem.

*algebra* = the same calculations made with letters in the place of numbers.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> We deliberately neglected the problem of the differentiated classes and refresher courses. When they work they are the best thing you have. But if you do full-time school you will not need them anymore.

<sup>234</sup> Italics in this paragraph are in the original.

<sup>235</sup> *Pierino quello che insegnate l'ha già sentito in casa*, literally 'Pierino what you teach he has already heard it at home'. A marked syntactic structure with the pronoun *l'* 'it' reprises *quello che insegnate*, thereby placing emphasis on this constituent.

<sup>236</sup> *doposcuola*, a course that is carried out after school hours.



## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

Whoever is not scandalised by failures and by repeaters and protests about this is dishonest.

Pierino is not born of a different race. He became so because of the environment he lives in *after school*<sup>237</sup>. After-school classes must create that environment for others (but of a different culture).

### *An environment*

The word full-time frightens you. To you it seems already difficult to bear the children for those few hours. But you've never tried<sup>238</sup>.

Till now you have held classes with the obsession of the school-bell, with the nightmare of the course to finish before June. You could not broaden your perspective, respond to the children's curiosity, express your arguments right to the end.

So it ended up by you doing everything wrong and, as a result, both you and the children are unsatisfied. It's the dissatisfaction that has tired you out, not the hours.

### *You must believe in it*

Offer your after-school to the *elementari* classes too and even on Sundays and in the Christmas, Easter and Summer holidays. How can one say that children and families do not want a thing that has not yet been offered to them?

It must not be said, however, that this after-school course is offered by that same headmaster who sent a faded circular to the parents. The after-school must be launched just as a good product is launched. Before doing it one must believe in it.

## FULL-TIME AND FAMILY

### *Celibacy*

Full-time school assumes that family does not create hindrance. For example, that of two teachers, husband and wife, who, within the school have a house which is open to all and without a set time.

Gandhi did it<sup>lxxv</sup>. And he allowed his children to mix with others at the cost of seeing them grow up very differently to him. Could you do it?

The other solution is celibacy.

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<sup>lxxv</sup> *Gandhi* = a saint of the Indian religion who lived in our century. He was killed in 1948.

<sup>237</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>238</sup> *Ma è che non avete mai provato*, literally 'But it's that you've never tried'.

*Wife car job*<sup>239</sup>

It's a word that is not fashionable.

For priests the Church understood this about one thousand years after the death of our Lord.

Gandhi understood it, with regards to schooling, at 35 years of age (after 22 years of marriage)<sup>lxxvi</sup>.

Mao singled out a labourer who was castrated in order to be admired by comrades, (the Italian "Chinese" are ashamed to relate this).

88,000

You will need another one thousand years to take up celibacy<sup>240</sup>. But there is something you could do at once: in the meantime start praising and giving worth to the celibates you have.

Among the 411,000 teachers in compulsory schooling there are 88,000 who are not married. Among these 88,000, 53,000 will not get married in the future<sup>lxxvii</sup>. Why not say to others and to yourselves that this is not a misfortune, but it's a fortunate thing in order to be at the school's disposal full-time?

It is said, I do not know on what basis, that today celibates are the least humane teachers. In the future, when it may become a generous choice, they could become passionate about school, love children and be loved. And, above all, feel the joy of a school that succeeds.

FULL-TIME AND TRADE UNION RIGHTS

*Memorable battles*

A trade union newsletter for teachers came into our hands: "No to the worsening of teaching hours! There have been memorable union battles in order to settle compulsory teaching hours and it would be absurd to go back"<sup>lxxviii</sup>.

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<sup>lxxvi</sup> His parents made him get married at 13 according an Indian custom of that time.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> We got to this result by taking account of the civil statutes of the dead and by hypothesising that teachers are neither more nor less celibate than other citizens. Since we cannot predict the future, there is no other means to obtain an approximate percentage of the possibility of those who will get married or not in the future. In proportion: celibate teachers M. 33,000, F. 55,000. Destined to celibacy M. 14,000 F. 39,000.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> "Il Rinnovamento della scuola [The renewal of the school]" 8th October 1966.

<sup>239</sup> *moglie macchina mestiere*, note the alliteration in the title of the original text.

<sup>240</sup> *A voi vi ci vorranno altri mille anni per adottare il celibato*, literally "To you, you would need another one thousand years to take on celibacy". Note the redundant pronominal structure *a voi vi*, which creates emphasis and which makes the sentence sound very much like a provocation.

This put us in an embarrassing situation. Strictly speaking we cannot say anything. All workers fight to reduce working hours and they are right.

*Strange privilege*

But your working hours are indecent.

A labourer works for 2,150 hours a year. Your colleagues employed in state-schools 1,630. You, from a maximum of 738 (teachers<sup>241</sup>) to a minimum of 468 (teachers<sup>242</sup> of Mathematics and foreign languages).

The excuse that you must correct students' work at home and that you must study is not a valid one. Even magistrates must write sentences. You, besides, could decide not to give homework<sup>243</sup>. And if you do assign it, you could correct it with the children at the time they do it.

As far as studying is concerned, everyone has things to study. A labourer would need this more than you. And yet, if they attend evening classes they do not expect to be paid.

In conclusion, let us say that your working hours are a strange privilege. The master gifted them to you from the beginning for his own reasons. It was not the conquest<sup>244</sup> of your union.

*Nervous breakdown*

In the same newsletter one reads that your weekly working hours are: "... enough to exhaust the psycho-physical exertion which a normal person is capable of doing".

A labourer on a press is tense for eight hours a day in fear of losing an arm. You would not say that in front of him.

There are then thousands of teachers who are not too tired to give repetition classes to those who pay them. Until you are not cleansed of them, you're on the other side. It's difficult to see workers with union rights in you<sup>245</sup>.

*Strike*

For example, strikes. It's a sacred right of the worker. But with your working hours your strike is disgusting<sup>246</sup>.

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<sup>241</sup> *maestri*, refers to Primary school teachers.

<sup>242</sup> *professori*, refers to Secondary school teachers.

<sup>243</sup> *Voi poi i compiti potreste non darli*, literally "You, then, the tasks you could not give them". Again a marked structure, in which the topic *i compiti* is reprised by means of the pronoun *li*.

<sup>244</sup> The choice of the term *conquista*, 'conquest' is inherently linked to the semantic field of the 'battle' referred to in the preceding section.

<sup>245</sup> *È difficile vedere in voi dei lavoratori con diritti sindacali*, literally 'It is difficult to see in you workers with union rights'

<sup>246</sup> *fa schifo*. A colloquial expression which conveys a strong meaning of dissent.

If you were to study Gandhi you'd find an infinite number of other techniques of struggle which are identical to strikes in substance but different in form.

A solution could be to enroll in the magistrates' union and go on strike only during the hours in which you work as judges: oral exams, giving marks, exams, filling in result sheets.

When, instead, you remove<sup>247</sup> those few hours in which you teach, people understand that you care nothing about us<sup>248</sup>.

#### WHO WILL HOLD FULL-TIME SCHOOLING?

With your working hours, schooling is a war against the poor. If the State cannot impose an increase in your working hours, it cannot carry out schooling.

This is a serious conclusion. Till now it was said that State schooling is an improvement when compared to Private schooling. Now it is necessary to reconsider this and put schooling in the hands of others: people who have an ideal goal for it and who can teach us.

#### *Careful with words*

Let's keep our feet on the ground.

In the morning and in winter, school will be held by the State. And it will continue to hold it in an "inter-classist<sup>249</sup>" way (careful with words: classism of the rich is called inter-classism).

In the afternoon and in summer it is necessary that somebody else holds it and that it is done in an "anti-classist<sup>250</sup>" way (careful with words: anti-classism is called classism by the rich).

#### *The Local Council*

The first solution is to turn to the Local Administrations. Let them make themselves tell us if they are on our side, through scholastic policies. Asphalt, street-lamps and football fields can be provided even by the monarchists.

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<sup>247</sup> *toccate*, second person plural, present tense of the verb *toccare* 'to touch'. The sense implied is that when teachers go on strike, their teaching hours decrease.

<sup>248</sup> *la gente capisce che di noi non ve ne importa niente*, literally 'people understand that of us you (about us) do not care anything'. A marked syntactic structure with *di noi* 'of us' reprised by means of the pronoun *ne* 'about us'.

<sup>249</sup> *interclassista*.

<sup>250</sup> *anticlassista*.

If the Administrative Provincial Council cuts down funding because “it does not fall within the financial ascriptions of the local councils” they are to answer that it is a Fascist law (1931), they are to resist, make themselves heard.

It is easy to blame the Prefect<sup>251</sup> and do nothing.

### *The Communists*

But it may be possible that the Local Council will not want to have anything to do with this. Even the Communists shy away<sup>252</sup> when classism is involved. Will they want to disrupt employees and shop-owners?

An important person<sup>253</sup> in the party told us that schooling is the job of the State: “When we are in power...” Twenty years have passed since the day of Liberation<sup>254</sup>. The Communists have not gone to power. While the grass grows, the horse starves<sup>255</sup>.

### *Priests*

Priests could maybe hold the after-school classes. But many of them do not know how to love with the firmness of our Lord. They think that the best way to educate the rich is to put up with them.

### *The trade-unionists*

The only class organisations are the trade-unions. After-school is their job.

The trade-unionists, for now, do not want to consider it<sup>256</sup>. They say that in a democracy every organisation has a role which it cannot avoid<sup>257</sup>.

Even they suffer from a bit of shyness.

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<sup>251</sup> *prefetto*. The ‘Prefect’ is a state functionary who represents the government at a provincial level.

<sup>252</sup> *son timidi*, literally ‘are shy, bashful’ (cfr. footnote number 9).

<sup>253</sup> *pezzo grosso*, literally ‘a big piece’. An idiomatic expression which refers to somebody who holds great authority.

<sup>254</sup> 25th April 1945, Liberation from the Nazi-Fascist dictatorship. This day is a public holiday in Italy.

<sup>255</sup> This is a translation of a proverb which is used in the original, *campa contadino che l'erba cresce*, literally ‘Live farmer, that the grass grows’. This is an ironic enticement to go on living and wait for a future event, which however is highly improbable or may occur at a very slow pace. The variant of this Italian proverb on which the translation is based is: *campa, cavallo mio, che l'erba cresce*, literally ‘live, my horse, that the grass grows’.

<sup>256</sup> *non ne vogliono sapere*, literally ‘they do not want to know about it / they do not want to have anything to do with it’.

<sup>257</sup> *scantonare*, a metaphorical expression, meaning ‘to avoid one’s responsibilities’. This implies that trade-unions maintain that every organisation holds its own responsibility and that it should not overstep into the functions and role of these organisations.

And yet they grumble about today's youth which is complacent about everything. They say that it's becoming increasingly difficult to convince workers to strike, to find members, activists, full-time employees. And in the meantime they just consent to the fact that youths are raised by the school of the master.

*At least try*

When the trade-unionists would have banged their heads against a brick wall<sup>258</sup> they will reconsider this. But in the meantime they could, at least, carry out an experiment locally.

CGIL and CISL<sup>259</sup> jointly, or one in competition with the other.

School is cheap, a bit of chalk, a blackboard, some books which could be given as gifts, four older children to teach, sometimes a lecturer in order to say new things for free.

#### FULL-TIME AND CONTENT

*Father Borghi*<sup>260</sup>

While we were writing this letter Father Borghi came to visit us. He criticised us: "To you it seems so important that children go to school and that they stay there all day. They will come out of it as individualists and apolitical, just like the students around us. This is the right breeding ground for Fascism.

Till the day teachers and subjects remain as they are, the less children stay at school the better it is. The factory would be a better school.

In order to change teachers and content one would need much more than your letter<sup>261</sup>. These problems have to be solved at a political level".

*Since there is nothing better*

It's true. A Parliament that would reflect the needs of all the people and not only of the bourgeoisie, with a couple of criminal laws, would really put you in your place. You and your courses.

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<sup>258</sup> *avranno battuto la testa*, literally 'they will have bumped their head'. In this context, however, it could also imply that the trade unions will 'take a fall' or 'will suffer the consequences of their stand'.

<sup>259</sup> CGIL, *Confederazione Generale Italiana del lavoro* [Italian General Confederation of Work]; CISL, *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* [Italian Confederation of Workers Trade Unions].

<sup>260</sup> Don Bruno Borghi (1922-2006), who is described as follows in Fallaci (1993:382): "the intelligent and unconventional friend of Don Milani from his days at the Seminary; another priest who, for the ecclesiastic hierarchies, was as comfortable as a handful of drawing pins on a chair. A worker priest, he put forward his pastoral discourse with extreme coherence..."

<sup>261</sup> This is a direct reference to the *Lettera* that is being written.

## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL STUDENTS

But we have to get to Parliament. The whites will never pass the laws that the blacks need.

In order to get to Parliament, one needs to master the language. For now, since there is nothing better, it's right that children attend classes even held by you.

### *Professional deformation*

Then, certainly, you're not all like Borghi thinks you are.

Maybe you've been deformed by teaching in such schools. You do not favour the rich children maliciously, it's only that you've had them in front of you for too long. Too much of them, and for too long.

At the end you have started to love them, their families, their world, the newspaper that they read in their house.

He who loves these dear children<sup>262</sup> of the rich remains apolitical. He does not want to change anything.

### *The pressure of the poor*

Now things are changing. The school population increases even despite you failing students.

With masses of poor people exerting pressure, with their simple needs, you will not be able to push Pierino's programme forward.

Especially if you were to hold full-time school. The children of the poor will renew you and the courses.

Knowing the children of the poor and loving politics is one and the same thing. One cannot love dear children<sup>263</sup> who are scarred by unjust laws and not wish to have better laws.

## III – A GOAL

### *The school of priests*

Once there were confessional schools<sup>lxxix</sup>. They had a goal and it was worth pursuing. But they were useless for atheists.

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<sup>lxxix</sup> *confessional school* = a school that declares openly that it intends directing children towards a certain religion or a political ideal.

<sup>262</sup> *creature*, (cfr. footnote 113).

<sup>263</sup> *ibid.*

Everybody thought that you'd substitute them with something grand. Then you gave birth to the little mouse<sup>264</sup>: the school for the benefit of the individual.

Now confessional schools do not exist anymore. The priests have asked for equivalence and they give marks and certificates like you do. Even they offer the God of Money<sup>265</sup> to the kids.

### *The Communist school*

If Communists were to teach they would propose something a bit better. But I would not want to be a teacher and have to choose my words<sup>266</sup>. To see doubt in the eyes of the child: is he saying what is right or what is convenient for him?

Is it really necessary to pay this price for equality?

### *Wanted: an honest goal<sup>267</sup>*

Wanted: a goal.

It has to be an honest one. A great one<sup>268</sup>. That it does not presuppose anything in the child except that he is human. That is, it has to suit both believers and atheists.

I know it<sup>269</sup>. The Prior has imposed it on me since when I was 11 years old and I thank God for it. I saved a lot of time. I knew minute after minute why I was studying.

### *Final goal*

The right goal is to dedicate oneself to one's neighbour.

And in this century, how can one wish to love if not through politics or through the trade union or through education? We are sovereign. It's no longer time for begging, but for choices. Against the classists that you are, against hunger, illiteracy, racism, the colonial wars.

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<sup>264</sup> *avete partorito il topolino*, 'you (plural) gave birth to the little mouse'. This idiomatic expression is part of *la montagna ha partorito il topolino*, 'the mountain gave birth to the little mouse', which is used when something for which there is great expectation yields a small, insignificant result.

<sup>265</sup> *Dio Quattrino*. *Quattrini* is a popular way of referring to money. It normally carries a negative semantic connotation.

<sup>266</sup> *dover misurare le parole*, literally 'have to measure words'.

<sup>267</sup> *Cercasi fine onesto*, literally 'Looking for an honest goal'. The form *cercarsi* is derived from third person singular, present tense of the verb *cercare* 'to seek, look for' together with the impersonal pronoun *si*. This form is used frequently in newspaper adverts in order to look for a house, a job etc. For this reason the term 'wanted' used in the translation above conveys the precise implication of this expression.

<sup>268</sup> *Bisogna che sia onesto. Grande*, literally 'It must be honest. Great'.

<sup>269</sup> The pronoun 'it' refers to the aforementioned goal.



*Immediate goal*

But this is only the final goal, which must be remembered from time to time. The one to remember minute by minute is to understand others and to make oneself understood.

And Italian is certainly not enough, as in the world it counts nothing. Man needs to love one another even beyond borders. So it is necessary to study many languages, and they must all be living languages<sup>270</sup>.

Language is formed by words from every subject. So it is necessary to touch on all the subjects, a bit superficially<sup>271</sup>, in order to enrich one's speech. To become amateurs in everything and specialists only in the art of talking.

*Classico and scientifico*<sup>272</sup>

When the new *media* school was discussed in Parliament, we, the mute, were silent because we were not there. The Italy of peasants was absent where schooling for it was being discussed.

Interminable discussions between factions who seemed opposed but who were the same<sup>lxxx</sup>.

They all had come out of the *licei*. Incapable of seeing an inch further<sup>273</sup> than the school that had given birth to them. How could a rich man<sup>274</sup> speak against himself? Spit on himself, on the deformed culture that he was; he was the very words that he said.

The deputies were divided into two factions. The Right were proposing Latin. The Left proposed Sciences. There wasn't one who thought about us, who had been in our situation<sup>275</sup>, who had to make an effort to keep up with his studies in your school<sup>lxxxi</sup>.

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<sup>lxxx</sup> We do not say it thoughtlessly. Two of us patiently read 156 pages of Parliamentary Acts.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> The Communist deputy De Grada during the sitting of the 14-12-1962 declared that "one learns to read and write at the *elementari*".

<sup>270</sup> *e tutte vive*, literally 'all alive'. The reference goes directly to modern languages, which have a daily communicative function. The implication being made is that languages like Ancient Greek and Latin, which played, and still play, a central role in the Italian educational system, are not as useful as these languages are in everyday life.

<sup>271</sup> In the original text an idiomatic expression, *alla meglio*, literally 'as best', is used.

<sup>272</sup> This refers to the *liceo* schooling in Italy. The *licei* (*classico* or *scientifico*) are generally attended by the more academically oriented students. This was especially the case at the time the *Lettera* was written, as the selection process was much more rigid than it is today.

<sup>273</sup> *un palmo più in là*, in the original this idiomatic expression is used, in which *palmo* is the 'span of a hand, the palm'.

<sup>274</sup> *signorino* (cf. footnote number 60).

<sup>275</sup> *che ci fosse stato dentro*, literally 'who had been inside'.

The Right are mice in a museum. The Communists are mice in a laboratory<sup>276</sup>. They are both distant from us, we who do not speak and who need today's language, and not that of the past, who need a language and not specialisation.

### *Sovereign*

Because only language can render equal. Equal is he who can express himself and he who understands the idiom of others. Whether one is rich or poor is not so important. It's enough to speak.

The honourable parliamentary members thought that everybody burnt with the desire to become surgeons or to write 'engineer'<sup>277</sup> on one's letterhead<sup>278</sup>: "The capable ones and those who deserve it, even if they lack the means, have a right to reach the highest levels of their studies"<sup>lxxxii</sup>.

Let us try to educate children to have higher ambitions. To become kings! Rather than<sup>279</sup> becoming a doctor or an engineer.

### *The career-oriented*

When we will all have language competence<sup>280</sup>, the career-oriented ones may well go on with their studies. May they go to university, may they snatch<sup>281</sup> certificates, earn money<sup>282</sup>, make sure that there are all the specialists that are necessary.

As long as they do not ask for a larger slice of power, like they have done up to now.

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lxxxii Article 34 of the Constitution.

<sup>276</sup> *Topi di museo le destre. Topi di laboratorio i comunisti.* In both cases note the syntactic inversion which puts, in both sentences, *topi* 'mice' in the topical position, while placing the subject (*le destre*, 'the right' and *i comunisti* 'the Communists') in sentence-final position. In both sentences the copula (the *essere* 'to be' verb) is omitted.

<sup>277</sup> Single inverted commas added in the translation.

<sup>278</sup> *Gli onorevoli costituenti credevano che si patisse tutti la voglia di cucir budella o di scrivere ingegnere sulla carta intestata*, literally 'The honourable parliamentary members thought that we all suffer the desire to sew up intestines or to write engineer on the letterhead'. *Cucir budella* refers to the medical profession (in an ironical manner), but the whole sentence refers generically to the professions that have the highest status in most modern-day societies.

<sup>279</sup> *Altro che*, literally 'Other than'. This conveys an emphatic, highly expressive nuance to the final sentence of this paragraph.

<sup>280</sup> *Quando possederemo tutti la parola*, literally 'When we will all have possession of the word'. *Parola*, of course, refers to language as the skill to communicate adequately and effectively.

<sup>281</sup> *arraffino*, subjunctive form of the verb *arraffare*, 'to snatch'. Its use is largely colloquial and it also carries a pejorative semantic connotation.

<sup>282</sup> *quattrini* (cfr. footnote 265).

*Disappear*

Poor Pierino, I almost feel pity for you. You have paid dearly for your privileges<sup>283</sup>. Deformed by specialisation, by the books, by your contacts with all the equal people. Why don't you go away?

Leave university, the responsibilities, the parties. Start teaching immediately. Only language and nothing else.

Help the poor improve without improving yourself<sup>284</sup>. Stop reading, disappear. It's the final mission of your class.

*Saving your soul*

Do not try to save old friends. If you speak to them again, even just once, you will always remain like you were before.

Do not worry about science. The miserly ones will be enough to develop it. They will also make the discoveries which are necessary for us. They will irrigate the desert, they will dig out lamb outlets from the sea<sup>285</sup>, they will defeat illnesses.

What do you care?<sup>286</sup> Do not dedicate your soul<sup>287</sup> and your love to things that will go ahead by themselves.

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<sup>283</sup> *Il privilegio l'hai pagato caro*, literally 'The privilege you paid dearly for it'. The marked structure places emphasis on a specific constituent: *il privilegio* is topicalised, and reprised through the pronoun *l'*.

<sup>284</sup> *Fai strada ai poveri senza farti strada*, an idiomatic expression literally meaning 'Make road for the poor without making road for yourself'.

<sup>285</sup> *caveranno bracioline dal mare*, a rather unusual sentence, which of course has to be seen in relation to the previous one (*irrigheranno il deserto*) in order to understand that what is being implied here is that these are goals which are impossible to reach. Again, irony is rife, in the whole sentence and in the concept being expressed.

<sup>286</sup> *A te che te ne importa*, literally 'To you what do you care'. Note the reduplication of the second person singular pronoun *te*, again in order to create emphasis just as normally done in the spoken variety.

<sup>287</sup> *Non dannarti l'anima*, literally 'do not damn your soul'. An idiomatic expression meaning 'to make a great effort'.

PART TWO

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AT THE *MAGISTRALI*<sup>1</sup>  
YOU ALSO FAIL, BUT...

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Footnote number 10, Part One.

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*The real exam*

After obtaining my school-leaving certificate I left for England. I was 15 years old. First I worked at a farm in Canterbury. Then at a wine-seller's in London.

In our schools, going abroad is equivalent to your exams. But it is an exam and a school at the same time. One tests one's culture by applying it to life<sup>2</sup>.

In conclusion, it is a harder exam than yours, but at least one does not waste time on dead things.

*Suez*

I passed our exam well. I returned home alive and I even brought money back. But mainly, I returned full of things I understood that I was able to relate.

Before me, only uncle Renato had been abroad from my family. To Ethiopia, during the war. When I was little, as soon as I learnt a bit of Geography, I asked him to tell me about the Suez Canal. He hadn't even noticed that he had passed through it.

*Pacifist*

But you will not take me abroad to kill peasants<sup>3</sup>. I went there and stayed with a family<sup>4</sup>. There was a boy of my age. A younger girl. They have a stable like we do, they pick potatoes, they work hard. Why should I kill them?

You are much more of a foreigner to me. But don't worry, unfortunately they have taught me to be a pacifist.

*Cockney*. In London they're worse off than in the rural areas. We were in the basements of the City unloading lorries<sup>1</sup>. My workmates were English and

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<sup>1</sup> *City* (pronounced Siti) = area of London where the most important tradesmen have their offices. *cockney* (pronounced còcni) = the dialect of the poor people of London.

<sup>2</sup> *al vaglio della vita*, literally 'by sifting, screening it through life'.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the aforementioned war in which the author's Uncle Renato took part. The Italian army was sent to colonise Ethiopia (1935-36) where it reportedly fought against armies made up of untrained, and virtually unarmed, peasants.

<sup>4</sup> *in casa*, literally 'at home'. This expression conveys a sense of affection and well-being and shows that the author felt comfortable with his host family.

they did not know how to write a letter in English. Often they told Dick to do it for them. Dick sometimes asked advice from me who had studied it from records. Even he only speaks in cockney.

Five metres above our head there were those who spoke “Queen’s English”.

Cockney is not very different, but whoever speaks it is branded. In their schools they do not fail. They turn students to schools of lower prestige. The poor, in their schools, perfect their incorrect speech. The rich their correct speech. From the pronunciation one may understand how rich one is and what job one’s father does. If there were to be a revolution it will be easy to disembowel<sup>5</sup> all of them.

### *Against a wall*

When I returned to Italy I didn’t even remember that I had been a shy person.

Having to explain oneself at the borders, arguing with the principal and with the monarchists, defending oneself against racists and gays<sup>6</sup>, saving, deciding, eating strange food, waiting for the post, experiencing<sup>7</sup> nostalgia. I thought that I had now experienced everything and that I had won.

All I had to do was to get to know your school from close. Now I experienced it. It was like crashing into a wall.

### *Either us or you*

And yet my schoolmates have made it<sup>8</sup> everywhere. Some are already full-time trade-unionists and they are successful. Others work in factories in Florence and they are not intimidated by anyone. They work in trade-unions, in political parties and in local council administrations.

Even the two who attended the *Istituto Tecnico*<sup>9</sup> have succeeded. They pass just like Pierinos.

Our culture holds up<sup>10</sup> wherever there is true life. At the *magistrali* it is useless.

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<sup>5</sup> *sbudelleranno*, literally ‘to disembowel’. A forceful expression.

<sup>6</sup> The term used in the original, *finocchi*, is an offensive way of referring to a homosexual.

<sup>7</sup> *inghiottire*, literally ‘to swallow’.

<sup>8</sup> *hanno sfondato, passato prossimo* (present perfect) third person plural of the verb *sfondare*. Literally this verb means ‘to knock the bottom out of something’, however it is used metaphorically (mostly colloquially) to mean ‘to make a name for oneself’.

<sup>9</sup> Technical Institute, mainly directed to vocational education based on the requirements of industry.

<sup>10</sup> *regge*, present tense, third person singular, of the verb *reggere*, ‘to hold up, to resist, to keep going’.

Let's examine how things happen<sup>11</sup>. Either us or you. Somebody has gone off track<sup>12</sup>.

### *Time schedule*

To get to Florence they wake me up at five. By motorbike to Vicchio, then by train. In the train it's hard to study: sleepiness, crowds, noise.

At eight I was at the school gate waiting for those who get up at seven. Four hours a day of disadvantage.

### *Calendar*

I was there on the first of October<sup>13</sup>. You were not. They told us to return on the sixth. At the "Leonardo"<sup>14</sup> they told them to return on the thirteenth.

The responsibility of the delay is due to a mixture of both the saints and the unwilling. You even use Saint Francis as an excuse to rob another day of school from the poor. After having abandoned them for four months.

I did not understand well whether the unwilling are at a school level, or whether they are at the Education Office or at the Ministry. Certainly it's people who are paid for 13 months a year<sup>15</sup>.

If a worker clocks in five minutes late they remove half an hour<sup>16</sup>. If he does it often he loses his job.

The trains are run by the State, like you are, and they function. When we go through a railway level-crossing we feel safe. The level-crossing keeper is at his place. Summer and winter, day and night. If he misses one, even only once, the newspapers report it. It doesn't report tales about work-rankings, about substitute-teachers, about his child's stomachache. He goes to prison.

Why can only you be special?

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<sup>11</sup> *Studiamo un po' la cosa com'è andata*, literally 'Let us study a little the thing how it went'. The syntactic structure of this sentence, as well as the use of the generic *cosa* 'thing', pertain the spoken variety.

<sup>12</sup> *Qualcuno è fuori strada*, literally 'Somebody is off road'.

<sup>13</sup> *Io il primo ottobre c'ero*, literally 'I on the first October was there'. In the marked syntactic structure the complement (*il primo ottobre*) precedes the verb, as the date has an important significance in this paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> Referring to another school.

<sup>15</sup> Refers to the *tredicesima*, 'the thirteenth'. In Italy it is custom to receive an end-of-year stipend which is referred to as the 'thirteenth-month salary'.

Maybe the master is more concerned that the train functions rather than school. His son has school at home<sup>17</sup>, even at table, but not the train.

For the master all that is necessary is that by June you are ready to give certificates.

#### SUICIDAL SELECTION

##### *Forgetful*

In the first part of this letter one has seen how much damage is done to those who are thrown out<sup>18</sup>. In Florence I realised how right Borghi<sup>19</sup> was. You do most damage to the chosen ones<sup>20</sup>.

The child who always passes always remains in his class. He is more stable than the teachers. He should be able to get closer to his classmates, take an interest in how they fare.

But they are too many. In the space of eight years forty classmates have been cut off from him and burnt like dry branches. After the *media* school another five left school although they passed, and this tallies to 45. Of them and their problems he knows nothing.

##### *Proud*

In the *seconda elementare* class Pierino was among many. In the *quinta* class it is already a more limited group. Of the 100 people who he meets along his way<sup>21</sup>, 40 are already “inferior” to him.

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<sup>16</sup> From the stipend.

<sup>17</sup> *La scuola il suo figliolo ce l'ha a casa*, literally ‘school his son he has it at home’. A marked syntactic structure in which the topicalised constituent *la scuola* is reprised by the colloquial form *ce l'ha*.

<sup>18</sup> *scartati*, past participle of the verb *scartare*, ‘to discard, put aside’.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. footnote number 260, Part 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Il danno più profondo glie lo fate agli scelti*, literally ‘The damage most deep you do it to them the chosen ones’. The syntactic structure of this sentence is quite intricate, as the unmarked proposition would simply read: *Fate il danno più profondo agli scelti* ‘You do the deepest damage to the chosen ones’. In the marked structure used *il danno* ‘the damage’ is placed in a topicalised, sentence-initial position, reprised by the pronoun *lo* ‘it’. However, there is another constituent, namely the final-position *scelti* ‘chosen ones’, which is anticipated by the pronoun *gli*, ‘to them’. This sentence therefore contains both a left and a right dislocation and the constituents to which most importance is being given are put at the initial and final positions of the sentence respectively.

<sup>21</sup> *per strada*, literally ‘on the road’.



After his *media* school-leaving exam, the number of those who are inferior to him goes up to 90 on 100. After the diploma, to 96. After the degree, to 99<sup>ii</sup>.

Every time, he saw that his report was better than that of the classmates he lost. The teachers who wrote that report engraved into his spirit<sup>22</sup> the fact that the other 99 are of inferior culture.

At this stage it would be a miracle if he did not end up with an ailing spirit<sup>23</sup>.

### *The compensation of the poor*

It's really ailing because the teachers told him a lie. The culture of those 99 is not inferior, it's different.

The true culture, the one that no man has yet possessed, is made up of two things: to belong to the mass and to possess the word<sup>24</sup>.

A school that selects, destroys culture. To the poor, it removes the means of expression. To the rich, it removes the knowledge of things.

Gianni is unfortunate because he does not know how to express himself, he is fortunate because he belongs to the vast world. Brother of the whole of Africa, Asia, Latin America. He knows from within the needs of most people.

Pierino is fortunate because he knows how to express himself<sup>25</sup>. He is unfortunate because he speaks too much. He who has nothing important to say. He who just repeats things read in books, written by another person like him. He is enclosed in a refined little group<sup>26</sup>. Cut off from History and Geography.

Selective school is a sin against God and against humanity. But God defended his poor. You want them to be mute and so God has made you blind.

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ii 1961 Census, refer to *Compendio Statistico Italiano* [Italian Statistical Compendium] 1966, table 17. School-leaving certificate of the *elementari* class 27,590,000 (60.5%). *Media inferiore* class 4,375,000 (9.6%). Diploma 1,940,000 (4.2%). Degree 603,000 (1.3%)

<sup>22</sup> *gli hanno impresso nell'anima*, literally 'stamped into his soul'.

<sup>23</sup> *A questo punto sarebbe un miracolo che la sua anima non ne sortisse malata*, literally 'At this point it would be a miracle that his soul does not come out sick of it'.

<sup>24</sup> In the sense of language competence, mastery of language skills.

<sup>25</sup> *parlare*, 'to speak'.

<sup>26</sup> *Lui chiuso in un gruppetto raffinato*, literally 'he closed in a refined little group'. Note how the 'to be' auxiliary *è* is not included before the past participle *chiuso*, from the infinitive *chiudere* 'to close'. This adds emphasis to the initial notion expressed in this sentence, almost as if to contrast the diminutive suffix *-etto*, which in *gruppetto* 'little group' clearly denotes the exclusiveness of this social group.

*Blind*

Whoever does not believe this ought to go to the city on the day of the feast of the *matricole*<sup>iii</sup>.

The rich youths<sup>27</sup> are so unashamed<sup>28</sup> of their privilege that they wear a hat so that they can be noticed. Then, for a whole day, they fool around<sup>29</sup>, alone like dogs, in the middle of the streets. Obscenities, breaking the law, they disturb the traffic and those who are at work<sup>30</sup>. They remove a policeman's hat and they make him wear another one made of rubber tubes<sup>31</sup>.

The policeman bears this in silence. He has understood what the master wants. What is called disorder is only what workers do when they go on strike, seriously, in an orderly manner, called to action because of a desperate necessity.

The rich youths, who are focused on fooling about, do not realise that the servility of that policeman is an accusation against them.

Just as they don't notice the glance of a worker who passes by and does not laugh. They would be capable of stopping him and asking for alms from him too.

*Maintained by others*

The worker gives them alms every day<sup>32</sup> even when he throws salt on his vegetable soup<sup>iv</sup>. The students are studying at his expense. But they do not know it and they do not want to know it.

A student in the *medie* school costs the poor 298,000 lire a year. His father spends 9,800 in school fees. A university student costs the poor 368,000 lire a year. His father contributes<sup>33</sup> 44,000.

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iii *matricole* = first-year university students.

iv The tax rate on the consumption of salt yields 19 billion lire a year.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. footnote number 60, Part 1.

<sup>28</sup> *si vergognano così poco*, literally 'are ashamed of themselves so little'.

<sup>29</sup> *recitano*, literally 'they recite, perform plays'.

<sup>30</sup> *disturbo al traffico e al lavoro*, literally 'disturbance to traffic and to work'.

<sup>31</sup> *canne da clistere*, literally 'enema tubes', the upper part of a medical instrument.

<sup>32</sup> *L'elemosina l'operaio glie la fa tutti i giorni*, literally 'The charity the worker he does it to them every day'. A marked syntactic structure in which the topicalised element *elemosina* is reprised by means of the pronoun *la*.

<sup>33</sup> *ce ne mette*, literally 'puts in of it'.

A doctor costs the poor 4,586,000 a year. His father contributes 244,000<sup>v</sup>. Then with that degree that the poor gave him as a present he asks the poor for 1,500 lire for a visit of a quarter of an hour, he goes on strike against their *Mutua*<sup>34</sup> and he is against a State-run medical practice like the English one.

### *Potential Fascists*

Most of the schoolmates that I met<sup>35</sup> in Florence never read the newspaper. Whoever reads it, reads the master's newspaper. I asked one of them if he knows who finances it: "Nobody. It's independent".

They do not want to know anything<sup>36</sup> about politics. When one of them heard me speaking about trade-unions he confused it with the mayor<sup>37</sup>.

Regarding strike action<sup>38</sup> they only heard it said that it damages production. They do not ask themselves if it is true.

Three are declared Fascists.

Twenty-eight apolitical plus 3 Fascists equals 31 Fascists.

### *Even blinder*

There are students and intellectuals who are a bit different: they read everything, they are militant in the left-wing parties. But maybe they are even blinder.

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<sup>v</sup> "Relazione generale sulla situazione economica del paese 1965 [General report on the economic situation of the country 1965]" Vol. II, page 495 (draft copy)  
The university fee of 44,000 lire is the one of the Medicine course, it is one of the highest.

<sup>34</sup> *Mutua*, the State-run scheme which offers medical services at a very reduced fee or against no payment at all.

<sup>35</sup> *ho trovato*, first person *passato prossimo* (present perfect) tense of the verb *trovare* 'to find'. A colloquial form commonly used instead of *incontrare* 'to meet'.

<sup>36</sup> *Non vogliono saperne di politica*, literally 'they do not want to know of it of politics'. The constituent *di politica* placed in sentence final-position is anticipated by the pronoun *ne* in *saperne*.

<sup>37</sup> 'trade unions', *sindacato*; 'mayor' *sindaco*. The confusion in the schoolmate referred to above is due to the fact that these forms in Italian are very similar.

<sup>38</sup> *Dello sciopero hanno sentito dire*, literally 'Of the strike they just heard say'. In the original the passive form used in the translated version (that was being said) is not used explicitly. However, the verb of perception *sentire* 'to hear' (in the third person plural form of the *passato prossimo*, *hanno sentito*) followed by the infinitive form *dire* 'to say' has a passive nuance.

I heard the teacher who politically is most left-wing speak<sup>39</sup> to the Families' and Teachers' Association. This is what he inadvertently<sup>40</sup> said about the after-school classes: "But what you don't know is that I hold 18 hours of classes a week!"

The hall was full of workers who wake up at four for the train of 5:39. Of peasants, who, in summer work 18 hours every day<sup>41</sup>.

Nobody answered, nor smiled. Fifty impenetrable stares directed at him fixedly in silence.

#### THE GOAL

##### *Bitter*

The fruit of selection is a bitter fruit that never ripens. I realised that most of my schoolmates were at the *magistrali* by chance or because of their parents' choice.

I arrived at the door of your school with a new school-bag. My students gave it to me as a gift. At the age of 15 I had already received my first stipend as a teacher.

I did not tell you this, I did not even say it to my schoolmates<sup>42</sup>. I myself might have been mistaken, but in your school it's hard to speak. Whoever knows what he wants and wishes to help others is considered to be a cretin<sup>43</sup>.

##### *Misers*

None of my schoolmates talked about becoming a teacher. One told me: "I want to work in a bank. At the *scuole tecniche*<sup>44</sup> there is too much Mathematics, at the *liceo* too much Latin, so I came here".

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<sup>39</sup> *Il professore più a sinistra l'ho sentito parlare*, literally 'The teacher most to the left I heard him speak'. The topicalisation of the constituent *il professore* is reprised by the pronoun *l'*.

<sup>40</sup> *gli scappò detto*, literally 'it escaped to him said'.

<sup>41</sup> *18 ore le fanno tutti i giorni*, literally '18 hours they do them every day'. The topicalised constituent *18 ore* is reprised by the pronoun *le*.

<sup>42</sup> *A lei non glie l'ho detto, ai compagni nemmeno*, literally, 'To you I did not say it, to the schoolmates not even'. Note the emphatic reduplication *A lei* 'to you (polite form)' and *gli*, indirect pronoun, which also means 'to you' (polite form)

<sup>43</sup> *passa da cretino*, literally 'passes as a cretin'.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. footnote number 9.

The most recent data on those like him is included in the 1961 census<sup>vi</sup>. 675,975 citizens had the *magistrale* diploma. Let us remove the 60,000 teachers on pension, 201,000 who were teaching in that year and 120,000 who wished to teach (that is the candidates for the *concorso*<sup>45</sup>). There are still around 330,000 citizens who could teach but do not<sup>46</sup> (43%).

### *Unhappy*

More than one of my schoolmates told me that he wished to go to university but they did not know what to study<sup>47</sup>.

Those who received the qualification<sup>48</sup> in '63 were 22,266. The following year there are 13,370 whom we find registered at university.

Out of 100 youths who you qualify as teachers, 60 are not happy<sup>vii</sup>.

### *Calling somebody a teacher*

Only one female schoolmate seemed a bit above the others. She used to study for the love of her studies. She used to read good books. She used to close herself in her room and listen to Bach<sup>viii</sup>.

It's the best<sup>49</sup> that a school like yours can aspire to.

On the other hand, they taught me<sup>50</sup> that this is the worst temptation. Knowledge is only useful to be passed on: "He who calls himself a teacher has no cultural interests when he is alone"<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>vi</sup> In the census the highest level of studies had to be declared. Therefore within these figures those who graduated after the *magistrali* are not included.

<sup>vii</sup> "Annuario Statistico dell'Istruzione Italiana 1965 [Annual Statistics of Education, 1965]" table 152 and table 200.

<sup>viii</sup> Bach = German musician of the 1700s.

<sup>45</sup> The *concorso* is a selective examination which one has to sit for in order to be employed as a teacher.

<sup>46</sup> *che potrebbero insegnare ma non insegnano*, literally 'who could teach but do not teach'. Note the repetition of the verb *insegnare*.

<sup>47</sup> *in che ramo*, literally 'in which branch', refers to the fact that they have not made up their mind as to which university degree to read.

<sup>48</sup> *Gli abilitati*. This term refers to those who are qualified to teach, having completed the course at the *magistrali*.

<sup>49</sup> *il frutto massimo*, literally 'the best, highest fruit'

<sup>50</sup> *A me invece m'hanno insegnato*, literally 'To me instead they taught me'. Note the reduplication of pronouns, *a me* and *m*'.

<sup>51</sup> This implies that a teacher should not just be interested in culture for his own sake.

### *Closed school*

I understand that it must be disheartening even for you to speak about teachers to youths like those. But is it these youths who have ruined<sup>52</sup> you or is it you who have ruined them?

There's the tendency to increase the number of faculties in which one can enroll from the *magistrali*. So the teacher's preparation becomes always more generalised and unmotivating.

In order to form a good teacher what is needed is a closed school that does not lead to anything else. One that makes someone who wants to work in a bank feel out of place. One that makes a child from the race of peasants, who has already chosen, feel at home<sup>53</sup>.

### *The rightful selection*

The problem here is completely different compared to that of compulsory schooling. There everybody has a sacred<sup>54</sup> right to be made equal. Here, on the other hand, it is just a matter of obtaining qualifications<sup>55</sup>.

Specialised citizens at the service of others are formed<sup>56</sup>. They need to be sure of themselves.

For example, be severe when issuing car licenses. We do not want to be run over in the streets. Same said for pharmacists, doctors, engineers.

### *An eye on the goal*

But do not fail the car driver because he does not know Mathematics or the doctor because he does not know the poets.

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<sup>52</sup> *hanno sciupato*, third person plural, *passato prossimo* (present perfect) of the verb *sciupare* 'to waste away'.

<sup>53</sup> *Che ci si sente a casa sua il ragazzo di razza contadina che ha già scelto*, literally 'that he feels at his home the child of the race of peasants who has already chosen'. Both this sentence and the preceding one begin with the conjunction *che* thereby forming two subordinate clauses which are directly dependant on the clause *occorre una scuola chiusa*, 'a closed school is necessary', placed at the beginning of this paragraph.

<sup>54</sup> *profondo*, literally 'profound, deep'.

<sup>55</sup> *abilitazioni*, (cfr. footnote number 48).

<sup>56</sup> *si costruiscono*, literally 'they are constructed'.

You told me<sup>57</sup>, I repeat your words: “You see, you do not know Latin.<sup>58</sup> Why don’t you go to a *scuola tecnica*?”

Are you sure that to form a good teacher, Latin is indispensable? Maybe you have not thought about it. The word teacher does not cross your mind. You just see the courses as they are and you do not react.

### *The individual*

If you had just taken enough interest in me to ask yourself from where I came, who I was, where I was going, Latin would have lost a little of its focus in front of your eyes.

But maybe you would have had to react. To you it’s frightening<sup>59</sup> that a 15 year-old child knows what he wants. You sense the influence of his primary schoolteacher in this.

Woe to whoever touches the Individual<sup>60</sup>. The Free Development of Personality is your supreme creed. You do not care at all about society and about its needs.

I am a youth who has been influenced by my primary schoolteacher and I am proud of it. Even he is proud of it. If not, what does school consist of?

School is the only difference there is between humans and animals. The teacher<sup>61</sup> gives all he believes in, loves, hopes to the child. The child, as he grows up, adds something to it and so humanity moves forward.

Animals do not go to school. In their Free Development of their Personality, swallows have made their nest in the same way for thousands of years.

### *The Seminary*

They told me that even in the seminary there are youths who torment themselves trying to find *their*<sup>62</sup> vocation. If only you had told them from the

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<sup>57</sup> *Lei a me m’ha detto*, literally ‘You to me you told me’. Once again note the reduplication of pronouns, *a me* and *m’*.

<sup>58</sup> *il latino non lo sai*, literally ‘Latin you do not know it’. The topicalised constituent *latino* is reprised by the pronoun *lo*.

<sup>59</sup> *A voi vi fa paura*, literally ‘to you it frightens you’. Note, yet again, the emphatic reduplication of the second person plural personal pronoun *a voi vi*.

<sup>60</sup> *Guai a chi vi tocca l’Individuo*, literally ‘Woe to who touches the Individual’. Note the inclusion of the second person plural personal pronoun *vi*, which conveys the sense that ‘touching’ the individual is an exclusive right of the teacher being referred to in the text, as if he/she were some kind of private property.

<sup>61</sup> *maestro*. The reference is therefore specifically to the primary schoolteacher.

<sup>62</sup> Italics in the original.

*elementari* that the vocation of everybody is the same<sup>63</sup> : to do good wherever we are, they would not waste the best years of their life thinking of themselves<sup>64</sup> .

### *School of Social Service*

At the most, if you wish to leave some more time for precise choices, one could have two types of schools<sup>65</sup> .

Call one of them “School of Social Service” for 14- to 18-year-olds. The ones who will go there will be those who have decided to dedicate<sup>66</sup> their lives only to others. With the same course of studies, one would form priests, teachers (for the eight years of compulsory schooling), trade-unionists, politicians. Possibly<sup>67</sup> with one year of specialisation.

We’ll call the others<sup>68</sup> “Schools of Service to Myself<sup>69</sup>”, and one could leave the ones that there are now with no touching up at all.

### *Aiming high*

The School of Social Service could elevate itself to the joy of aiming high. Without marks, without result sheets, without games, without holidays, without weaknesses towards marriage or career. All the youths guided to total dedication.

Then as we go along<sup>70</sup> , one could aim a little lower<sup>71</sup> . Find a girl, adapt himself to love a more restricted family.

If he spent the best years of his life preparing himself for an immense family, he wouldn’t have missed out on anything. On the other hand he will be a better father or mother, full of ideals, capable of bringing up a child who could return to that school.

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<sup>63</sup> *la vocazione l’abbiamo tutti eguale*, literally ‘the vocation we have it all the same’. Note the use of the noun *la vocazione*, reprised by means of the pronoun *l’* ‘it’.

<sup>64</sup> In the original text, as reproduced in the translation, the syntactic structure of this paragraph is not a linear one.

<sup>65</sup> *si potrebbe fare due scuole*, literally ‘one could do two schools’.

<sup>66</sup> *spendere*, literally ‘to spend’.

<sup>67</sup> *Magari*, literally ‘If only’.

<sup>68</sup> *Le altre le chiameremo*, literally ‘the others we’ll call them’, with topicalisation of *le altre* reprised by the pronoun *le* ‘them’.

<sup>69</sup> *Scuole di Servizio dell’Io*, literally ‘School of Service for the I’. The reference is clearly to a school which is totally self-centred.

<sup>70</sup> *per strada*, literally ‘along the road’.

<sup>71</sup> *può colpire un po’ meno alto*, literally ‘can hit a bit less high’.



Your school of service to myself would aspire to prepare everybody for marriage. It's not very successful even with those who get married. Then those who do not get married become embittered celibates<sup>72</sup>.

### *Unemployed teachers*

One hears complaints that there are too many teachers<sup>73</sup>. It's not true. It's that the post has attracted many people<sup>74</sup> who do not care at all about being a teacher. If you increase the hours of work, they will all disappear.

A married teacher earns as much as her husband. But in truth she leaves home as often as a housewife does. She's an exemplary wife and mother. Whenever her child gets a cold she stays at home. Who wouldn't take such a woman as his wife?

Then there are tens of thousand unfilled posts in the *medie*. You gave them to whoever was of the graduate race or of the race of those who are graduating (pharmacists, vets, modest students<sup>75</sup>).

You denied them to primary schoolteachers who had years of experience at school.

### *Caste*

The parliamentary deputies we have now<sup>76</sup> will never open the *medie* to primary schoolteachers.

On the contrary. Some are proposing that the degree is necessary even for those who teach at the *elementari* level. They say that now pedagogy and psychology are sciences. They should be tackled at university.

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<sup>72</sup> *uno zitellone inacidito*. This noun phrase conveys a sense of deep disapproval. Besides the choice of adjective *inacidito*, literally 'sour, bitter', formed from the noun *acido* 'acid', the authors add the augmentative suffix *-one* to *zitella* 'an old spinster', normally used to describe an unmarried woman in negative terms. Note that in this case the masculine form *zitellone* 'old bachelor' is used.

<sup>73</sup> *maestri*. This sentence refers specifically to the *elementari* sector.

<sup>74</sup> *È che quel posto ha fatto gola a tanti*. In the original text an idiomatic expression is used. Note also the use of the cleft sentence, by means of which emphasis is placed on *quel posto*, 'that post', clearly implying that what attracts people to teaching are the conditions of work and not the profession.

<sup>75</sup> *studentelli*, the suffix *-elli* conveys a pejorative meaning.

<sup>76</sup> *I deputati che c'è ora*, literally 'The deputies there is now'. Note the lack of agreement between the subject (*i deputati* – plural) and verb *essere* 'to be' (singular *è* in the presentative *c'è* 'there is' form), rather typical of colloquial, unrefined language.

When graduates criticise schooling and they say that it is ill, they forget that they are the products of it. They have sucked the infection<sup>77</sup> till they were 25 years old. They are not capable of thinking that those who did not follow their course of studies may be worth something.

However, when they go to speak to their child's teacher, they speak as if one is speaking to somebody familiar<sup>78</sup>. They hide nothing, they collaborate.

When they speak to the teacher of the *medie* school, they measure their words like somebody who is speaking to a rival.

They do not want to say it but they know it too. The *elementari* schoolteachers are good<sup>79</sup> because they did not stay at school for long. The *medie* schoolteachers are what they are because they are all graduates.

#### THE CULTURE THAT ONE NEEDS

##### *Exodus*

We cannot stay on the mountains. In the fields we're too many<sup>80</sup>. All the economists agree on this point.

And even if they didn't? Put yourself in the place of my parents. You would not tolerate<sup>81</sup> that your son remains cut off. So you must welcome us. But not as second-class citizens who are only good for manual labour.

Every people has its culture and no people has less of it than another. Ours is a gift we bring to you. A little bit of life in the dryness of your books, written by people who have only read books.

##### *Agricultural culture*

If one leafs through a primary school textbook it's full of plants, animals, seasons. It seems that only a peasant could have written it.

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<sup>77</sup> *Hanno poppato l'infezione*, third person plural *passato prossimo* (present perfect) of the verb *poppare*, literally 'to suck milk from the mother's breast' is used. The choice of this verb conveys a very precise and clear meaning. The choice of the term *infezione* is clearly related to the fact that previously the authors refer to the 'illness' of the school.

<sup>78</sup> *a uno di casa*, literally 'one from home'.

<sup>79</sup> *valgono*, third person plural present tense of the verb *valere* 'to be valuable, to count'.

<sup>80</sup> *Sui monti non ci possiamo stare. Nei campi siamo troppi*. Note how both sentences start with the complement: *sui monti; nei campi*.

<sup>81</sup> *non permetterebbe*, third person singular, simple conditional mode of the verb *permettere*, 'to permit, allow'.

However, the authors come out of your school. It's enough to look at the illustrations: left-handed peasants, round shovels, hook-shaped hoes, blacksmiths with tools used in Roman times, cherry trees with plum-tree leaves.

My teacher of the *prima elementare* class told me: "Climb up that tree and cut two cherries for me". When my mother got to know about it she said "Hey, who gave her the certificate?"<sup>82</sup>

You gave her the teaching certificate and you do not give it to me<sup>83</sup>, who in all my life, never told somebody anything incorrect about trees<sup>84</sup>. I know the name of each and every one of them.

I even know the plant-shoots<sup>85</sup>. I pruned them, I gathered them, I used them to bake bread. You marked the word *sormenti* as an error in my work. You say that one should say *sarmenti* because that's how it is said in Latin. Then, making sure nobody sees you<sup>86</sup>, you go on to check what it means in the dictionary.

### *Alone like dogs*

You know less than us even about mankind<sup>87</sup>. The lift is a machine by means of which one ignores people living in the building. The car to ignore the people who use the tramway. The telephone not to see people's faces and to avoid going to people's houses<sup>88</sup>.

Maybe it's not your case, but of how many people<sup>89</sup> do your children who study Cicero<sup>ix</sup> know the family closely? Of how many of them have they gone into the kitchen? For how many did they stay by their side during the night? For how many did they carry the dead on their shoulder? How many can they rely on in case of need?

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<sup>ix</sup> *Cicero* = a Latin author.

<sup>82</sup> "*O chi le ha dato la patente?*": the initial *O* is an exclamation, typical of central Italian regions. *La patente*, literally 'the license', refers to teacher's certificate or warrant.

<sup>83</sup> *la negate a me*, literally 'you deny it to me'.

<sup>84</sup> *a me che d'albero non glie l'ho mai dato a nessuno in vita mia*, literally 'to me that of tree I never gave to anybody in my life'. A colloquial sentence, with a marked syntactic structure.

<sup>85</sup> *sormenti*. This is a local variant of *sarmenti*, 'plant-shoots'.

<sup>86</sup> *di nascosto*, literally 'in hiding'.

<sup>87</sup> *Anche sugli uomini, ne sapete meno di noi*, literally 'Even about men, you know less about them than us'. The topicalised element *sugli uomini* is reprised by the pronominal form *ne*.

<sup>88</sup> *Il telefono per non vedere in faccia e non entrare in casa*, literally 'The telephone in order not to see in face and not enter in home'.

<sup>89</sup> *vivi*, literally 'people alive'.

If there hadn't been the flood<sup>90</sup> they wouldn't know the number of people in the family on the ground floor.

I went to school for a whole year with those schoolmates and I know nothing about their home. And yet they are never quiet. Often they raise their voice above mine and they continue to speak as if nothing else matters. After all, everybody just listens to himself.

### *Human culture*

The engines of a thousand cars roar under your windows every day<sup>91</sup>. You do not know whose they are and where they are going.

I know how to interpret<sup>92</sup> the sounds of the valley for many kilometres around me. This engine far away is Nevio, who is going to the station a little bit late. Would you like me to tell you everything about hundreds of creatures, tens of families, relatives, personal ties?

If you speak to a worker you err in everything: the words you use, your tone, your jokes. I know what a person who lives in the mountains thinks when he is quiet and I know what he is thinking when he says something different.

This is the culture that the poets you love wished to have. Nine-tenths of the world has it and nobody has managed to write it down, to draw it, to film it.

Be humble, at least. Your culture has gaps as large as ours. Maybe even larger. Certainly more damaging to a primary schoolteacher.

### THE CULTURE THAT YOU ASK FOR

### *Latin*

In your school<sup>93</sup>, the most important subject is the one that we should never teach.

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<sup>90</sup> Refers to the disastrous flood that occurred in Florence, and in the whole Tuscan region, on the 4th November 1966.

<sup>91</sup> *A lei le rombano sotto le finestre mille motori al giorno*, literally 'To you roar under your windows thousand engines a day'. Note the marked structure in which *a lei* is placed in sentence initial position, reduplicated by the indirect pronoun (polite form) *le*. The grammatical subject '*mille motori al giorno*' is placed in sentence-final position.

<sup>92</sup> *leggere*, 'to read'.

<sup>93</sup> *Da voi*, literally 'at you'.

You even expect to translate from Italian to Latin. But who placed a sign<sup>94</sup> where Latin ends and Italian begins?

Somebody, who knows who it may have been, even wrote a grammar book for you. But it's a vulgar swindle. For every rule it would be necessary to have the date and the region where it was spoken in that way.

The career-oriented children accept the imposition, they learn it by heart. They are only concerned with passing exams and with repeating the game when they will be teachers. You, on one of my tasks, marked the word "portavit"<sup>x</sup>. For you it's a crime to make things simple when they can be complicated. The curious thing is that Cicero often used to say "porto". He was a Roman and he did not<sup>95</sup> even know it<sup>xi</sup>.

### *Mathematics*<sup>96</sup>

The second subject that is incorrect is Mathematics. In order to teach it at the *elementari*, it's enough to know that of the *elementari*. Whoever has completed the *terza media* class is three classes ahead. It can therefore be abolished from the *magistrali* course.

On the other hand, it would be necessary to learn how to teach it, but this is not Mathematics. It concerns teaching practice or Pedagogy.

One can take other measures regarding higher level Mathematics as part of one's general culture. Two or three lectures by a specialist who can explain what it's all about.

If, in the future, all compulsory schooling will be in the hands of primary schoolteachers, the problem does not change.

It's not true that a degree is necessary in order to teach Mathematics at the *medie*. It's a lie invented by the caste of those whose children are graduates. They have laid their hands on<sup>97</sup> 20,478 work posts which are quite special. It's the teaching post in which one works the least (16 hours a week). It's the one

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<sup>x</sup> *portavit* = in Latin to say *portare* [to bring] there are two verbs. One is easy (*porto*) the other is hard (*fero*).

<sup>xi</sup> A verse from "Scoperta dell' America [Discovery of America] by Cesare Pascarella (a poet who wrote in the Romanesco variety of Italian).

<sup>94</sup> *Ma chi l'ha messo il segno...* literally 'But who put it the sign'. In this case the right dislocation of *il segno* is preceded by the use of the pronoun *l'* 'it'.

<sup>95</sup> *Era romano e manco lo sapeva*. The negation particle *manco* is typically Romanesco, the regional variety of Italian used in Rome and other areas of central Italy. In standard Italian one would use *non* or *neanche*.

<sup>96</sup> *ne ha tre anni di troppo*, literally 'has three years too much of it'

<sup>97</sup> In the original an idiomatic expression is used *ha messo la zampa*, literally 'he put his paw'.

in which keeping oneself updated is not necessary. It's enough to repeat, for years, the same silly things<sup>98</sup> that every diligent boy of the *terza media* class knows. Corrections are done in a quarter of an hour. Those that are not right are wrong.

### *Philosophy*

Philosophers studied from a textbook become odious<sup>xii</sup>. There are too many of them and they have said too many things.

Our teacher never took sides. We have not understood if he likes them all or if he does not care about any of them.

In my case, between an indifferent and a maniacal teacher, I prefer the maniacal one. One who either has his own opinion or a philosopher who he likes. May he talk to us only about that one, may he speak negatively of the others, may he read his original texts for three continuous years. We'd leave school convinced that Philosophy can fill a life.

### *Pedagogy*

I would remove Pedagogy as it is now<sup>99</sup>. But I'm not sure of this. Maybe if we had more of it we would discover that it does have something to tell us.

Then, maybe, we will discover that it only has one thing to tell us. That children are all different, the histories<sup>100</sup> and each moment of each child are different, the towns, the backgrounds, the families are different.

So a little page in the whole book would be enough to say this and the rest could be thrown away.

At Barbiana there wasn't a day in which we did not deal with Pedagogical problems. But not with this name. For us they always had the exact name of a child. Case by case, hour by hour.

I do not think that there is a paper written by somebody that includes something that we do not know about Gianni.

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<sup>xii</sup> *Philosopher* = thinker

*Textbook of philosophy* = a book that summarises what the philosophers have said in their books.

<sup>98</sup> *cretinate*, literally 'silly things, stupidities'. This noun has carries a highly negative connotation.

<sup>99</sup> *La pedagogia così com'è la leverei*, literally 'Pedagogy as it is I would remove it'. A marked syntactic structure in which the topicalised constituent *la pedagogia* is reprised by the pronoun *la*.

<sup>100</sup> *i momenti storici*, literally 'the historical moments'.

### *Gospel*

Three years on three poor translations of the old epic poems (Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid). Three years on Dante. Not even a single minute on the Gospel.

Do not say that the Gospel should be priests' concern. Even if one were to put the religious issues aside – it is still the book to study in every school and in every class.

In Literature, the longest chapter should be about<sup>101</sup> the book that left its mark most, the one that went beyond countries' borders.

In Geography the most detailed chapter should be on Palestine. In History, the facts that preceded, accompanied and followed the life of the Lord.

Besides, a specific subject would be necessary: a glance at the Old Testament, the reading of the Gospel on a synoptic, criticism of the text, linguistic and archaeological issues<sup>xiii</sup>.

How come you have never thought of it? Maybe whoever built your school had some misgivings about Jesus: too much of a friend to the poor and too little a friend of material goods.

### *Religion*

When you will give the Gospel the place it deserves, the Religion lessons will become a serious thing.

What will be involved is only guiding the children to interpret the text. A priest could do it, maybe even by discussing it together with a teacher who is not a believer<sup>102</sup>, but who is serious. That is, someone who knows the Gospel as well as he does.

As you look for these teachers, the limitations of your culture will emerge. In Florence there are tens of priests who are capable of holding a biblical lesson at a high level. Individuals who read the Greek text fluently and if necessary know how to refer<sup>103</sup> to the Hebrew version<sup>xiv</sup>.

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<sup>xiii</sup> *synoptics* = book in which the four gospels are printed one beside the other instead of one after the other.  
*criticism of the text* = a study of the differences that are found in the ancient manuscripts of the Gospel.  
*archeology* = the study of the ancient objects that are found underground.

<sup>xiv</sup> The oldest part of the Bible is written in Hebrew. The more recent part (e.g. the Gospel) is written in Greek.

<sup>101</sup> In this paragraph, though in the original Italian version the verbs used are in the imperfect past tense, they do not convey a past meaning but they are used in a hypothetical sense.

<sup>102</sup> *non credente*, literally 'non believer', implying a teacher who is not a Roman Catholic.

<sup>103</sup> *sa mettere gli occhi*, literally 'can put their eyes on'. A metaphoric expression.

Could you give me a name of a layman who has the necessary level of formation to be able to keep up with him<sup>104</sup>? But someone who came out of your school, not from the seminary.

I heard a lecture delivered by one of those intellectuals who has read all the books in the world<sup>105</sup> (except one): “If the wheat grain does not fall to the ground and does not die it will not bear fruit as Gide says”<sup>xv</sup>.

I do not know who this Gide is. But I’ve been studying the Gospel for years and I will study it for all my life<sup>106</sup>.

### *The Count*

From people who forget about the Gospel one can expect anything. It is a fact that one can have doubts about everything you teach. One wishes to know who has made the decisive choices.

The fact is that your school originated badly.

It’s date of birth was in 1859. A king wanted to extend his family’s possessions. He started preparations for war. The first thing he did was to place a general in government. Then he sent all the deputies on holiday. Then he called for a Count and he made him write all the laws regarding public education<sup>xvi</sup>.

That law which was imposed by force of arms in all Italy is still the backbone of your school<sup>xvii</sup>.

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<sup>xv</sup> *Gide* = we read in the dictionary that he is a French author. Probably he quoted that phrase from the Gospel in one of his books and this professor thought it was his own.

<sup>xvi</sup> *a king* = Vittorio Emanuele II

*a general* = Alfonso La Marmora

*on holiday* = when there was war Vittorio Emanuele dissolved Parliament and took power in his hands.

*a Count* = Gabrio Casati. The Casati law dates 13th Nov. 1859. It was not voted for neither in the Piedmont Parliament nor, subsequently, by the Italian one.

<sup>xvii</sup> “...in spite of the 1923 and the 1930-40 reforms, and in spite of the different constitutional role of the school after the proclamation of the Repubblica, the Casati law is still the basic structure on which our school developed, at any level and grade” Luigi Volpicelli [translator’s note: refers to an Italian journalist, historian and pedagogue, born 1900 – died 1982, who had great interest in the schooling system of the Soviet Union]

<sup>104</sup> *a tenergli testa*, an idiomatic expression, which if translated literally is approximately equivalent to ‘keep up with him’.

<sup>105</sup> *Tutti i libri che c’è nel mondo*: note the lack of agreement in number between the subject *Tutti i libri* (plural) and the *essere* verb in the presentative form *c’è* (singular). This is typical of informal, colloquial Italian.

<sup>106</sup> Both the final two sentences are marked: *Io questo Gide non so chi sia*, literally ‘I this Gide do not know who he is’; *Ma il Vangelo lo studio da anni e lo studierò tutta la vita*, literally ‘But the Gospel I study it for years and I will study it all my life’. Note the emphatic *Io questo Gide* in the first sentence and, the topicalisation of *il Vangelo* reprised twice by the pronoun *lo* ‘it’.



### *History*

History is the subject that has suffered most.

There may be some books which are a little bit different. But I'd like to obtain information about the ones which are used most<sup>107</sup>.

Generally it's not history. It's a little provincial and biased story written<sup>108</sup> by the winners to the peasants. Italy is the centre of the world. The losers are all bad, the winners are all good<sup>109</sup>. All that is mentioned are kings, generals, stupid wars between nations. The suffering and struggles of the workers are either ignored or given marginal importance<sup>110</sup>.

Woe to whoever is disliked by generals or producers of armaments. In the book which is considered to be most modern, Gandhi is mentioned<sup>111</sup> briefly in 9 lines. Without a mention of his philosophy<sup>112</sup>, let alone the methods he used.

### *Civics*

Another subject that you do not cover and that I can relate to well<sup>113</sup> is Civics.

Some teachers defend themselves saying that they teach it implicitly within other subjects. If that were true, it would be great<sup>114</sup>. So, if you know this method, which is the right one, why don't you teach all the subjects in this way, in a well-connected building where everything blends and can be easily accessed?

Instead of saying this<sup>115</sup>, you should say<sup>116</sup> that it is a subject that you do not know. You do not know well what a trade-union is<sup>117</sup>. You have never

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<sup>107</sup> This implies: used most widely as schools textbooks.

<sup>108</sup> *fatto*, past participle of the verb *fare* 'to do'.

<sup>109</sup> *L'Italia centro del mondo. I vinti tutti cattivi, i vincitori tutti buoni*. Verbs and copulas are omitted, and the nominal construction that results renders both these sentences similar to newspaper headlines.

<sup>110</sup> *messe in un cantuccio*, literally 'put in a little corner'.

<sup>111</sup> *è sbrigato*, passive form of the verb *sbrigare* 'to hurry up'. This implies that the figure of Gandhi is just mentioned fleetingly.

<sup>112</sup> *al suo pensiero*, literally 'his thoughts'.

<sup>113</sup> *che io saprei*, literally 'that I would know'. The use of the conditional mode gives a hypothetical connotation to this verb.

<sup>114</sup> *sarebbe troppo bello*, literally 'it would be too nice'.

<sup>115</sup> *Piuttosto*, literally 'rather'.

<sup>116</sup> *Dite*, second person plural of the imperative of the verb *dire* 'to say'. Though the form used is in the imperative, it has the connotation of giving advice or of exhortation.

<sup>117</sup> *Lei il sindacato non sa bene cos'è*, literally "You the trade union you do not know well what it is". Note the lack of punctuation in the original in which the explicit pronoun *Lei*, followed by the direct complement and not by the verb, is used to formulate a clear accusation.

dined in the house of a worker. You do not know the terms of the controversy on public transport<sup>118</sup>. You only know that the traffic jam has disturbed your private life.

You have never studied these things because they frighten you. Just like taking Geography seriously<sup>119</sup> frightens you. In our book there was everything except hunger, monopolies, political systems, racism.

*The comments*<sup>120</sup>

There is a subject that you haven't even included in the course: the art of writing.

It's enough to read the comments that you write on the essays. Here I have a small collection. They are assertions, not working tools<sup>121</sup>.

"Childish. Puerile. Shows immaturity. Unsatisfactory. Trivial" What use is it for the child to know this?<sup>122</sup> He'll send his grandfather to school, he's more mature.

Or: "Poor content. Modest concepts. Dull ideas. Does not feel part of what he writes". So giving him an essay was wrong. You shouldn't even have asked him to write.

Or: "Try to improve the form. Incorrect form. Not fluent. Not clear. Not well structured. Various uncertainties. Try to be more simple. The sentence structure is warped. Expressions used are not always correct. You should control your way of expressing ideas more". You have never taught this<sup>123</sup> to them, you do not even believe it can be taught, you do not accept the objective rules of the art, you are obsessed with nineteenth-century individualism.

Until you get to those children<sup>124</sup> touched by the gods: "Spontaneous. You are not short of ideas. Work done with your own ideas that denote a certain

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<sup>118</sup> *In casa di un operaio non ha mai cenato. Della vertenza dei trasporti pubblici non sa i termini*, literally 'In the house of a worker you have never dined. Of the controversy on public transport you do not know the terms'. In both these sentences, complements are placed in sentence initial position. The marked structure of both of them is very much a continuation of the accusation formulated in the preceding sentence.

<sup>119</sup> *andare al fondo*, literally 'going deeply into'.

<sup>120</sup> *I giudizi*, literally 'the judgments'. This refers to the comments which are written by the teachers on students' writing task.

<sup>121</sup> This implies that they are not comments which could be useful to improve the child's work.

<sup>122</sup> *Che gli serve al ragazzo sapere questo?*, literally 'What use to him to the child to know this?'. A marked syntactic structure with a right dislocation of *al ragazzo*, 'to the child', preceded by the pronoun *gli* 'to him'.

<sup>123</sup> refers to the 'art of writing'.

<sup>124</sup> *creature*, refer to (cfr. footnote number 113 Part 1).

personality”. Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you”.

### *The genius*

As you gave me back an essay with a four<sup>125</sup> you told me: “One is born to be an author, one cannot become one”. But in the meantime you earn your salary as *a teacher of Italian*.<sup>126</sup>

The theory of the genius is an invention of the bourgeoisie. It is born from a mix of racism and laziness.

Even in politics, rather than entangling oneself in the complex thoughts of parties, it is easier to take someone like De Gaulle as an example, and say that he is a genius, that France is him.

That is what you do with Italian. Pierino has the gift. I do not. Let’s all have a rest<sup>127</sup>:

It’s not necessary for Pierino to reflect about what he has written. He will write books like the ones there are around. Five hundred pages that one could reduce to 50 without missing out on a single concept.

I can give up and head to the woods.

You can continue being lazy at your teacher’s desk putting your little marks on the result sheet.

### *School of art*

The art of writing is taught just like any other art.

But at this stage we have started quarelling among ourselves. Some of us wanted to describe what methods we use<sup>128</sup> to write. Others said: “Art is a serious thing, but it’s made up of tiny techniques. They will laugh at us”.

The poor will not laugh. Let the rich laugh and we will laugh at them as they do not know how to write a book or a newspaper for the poor.

Finally we decided to describe everything for the benefit of those readers who will love us.

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<sup>125</sup> Refers to the fact that the author obtained four marks out of ten in this writing task.

<sup>126</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>127</sup> This implies: let’s all relax, take it easy.

<sup>128</sup> *come facciamo*, literally ‘how we do’.

*A humble technique*

So this is what we do<sup>129</sup> :

First of all each one of us keeps a notebook in his pocket. Every time he gets an idea he takes note of it. Every idea on a separate little piece of paper with writing only on one side.

Then one day all the little pieces of paper are placed on a large table. We go through them one by one and remove the duplicates. Then we put all the related papers together in large piles and these are the chapters. Every chapter is divided in smaller piles and these are the paragraphs.

Now we try to give a title to each paragraph. If we cannot it means it contains nothing or it contains too many things. Some paragraphs disappear. Others are split<sup>130</sup> in two.

Using the title of the paragraphs, we discuss the logical order and create a scheme. Using this scheme we re-order the little piles.

We take the first little pile, we spread out the little papers on the table and we put them in order. Now we just jot down the text as a draft<sup>131</sup> .

We cyclostyle them so that everyone has a copy in front of him. Then scissors, glue and coloured pencils. We shuffle everything<sup>132</sup> . We add new little pieces of paper. We cyclostyle them again.

We start a competition in order to find words to remove, excess adjectives, repetitions, lies, difficult words, sentences which are too long, two concepts in one single sentence.

We call one outsider after another<sup>133</sup> . We make sure that they haven't been at school for too long. We make them read it aloud. We check if they understood what we meant to say.

We accept their advice as long as it for clarity. We reject their advice if it is for prudence.

After having made all this effort, following rules which are valid for all, we find an intellectual cretin who states: "This *lettera* has an extremely personal<sup>134</sup> style".

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<sup>129</sup> *Noi dunque si fa così*, literally "We so do like this". Note the explicit personal pronoun *Noi* which however is not in agreement with the impersonal verb form (*si fa*, literally 'one does'). This is a typically colloquial form in which emphasis is mainly focused on the first constituent, namely *Noi*.

<sup>130</sup> *diventa*, literally 'become'.

<sup>131</sup> *come viene viene*, literally 'as it comes, it comes'.

<sup>132</sup> In the original an idiomatic expression is used: *si butta tutto all'aria*, literally 'Everything is thrown in the air'.

<sup>133</sup> *Si chiama un estraneo dopo l'altro*, literally 'We call an extraneous one (a stranger) one after the other'.

<sup>134</sup> *personalissimo*, literally 'most personal'. *-issimo* is the superlative suffix.

*Laziness*

Rather than saying this you should say<sup>135</sup> that you do not know what art is. Art is the opposite of laziness.

Even you, do not say that you do not have time. One writing task in a year is enough, but it has to be done all together.

Talking about the lazy. I propose an amusing exercise for your children. Spend a year translating Saitta to Italian<sup>xviii</sup>.

CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

At the moment you work for 210 days of which 30 are wasted doing exams and another thirty days or so doing classwork<sup>136</sup>. 150 schooldays remain. Half of these hours are wasted<sup>137</sup> carrying out oral exams and this makes up 75 days of schooling to 135 days of proceedings<sup>138</sup>.

Even without touching your work contract, you could multiply school hours by three.

*Classwork*

During classwork you went round the benches, you used to see me in difficulty or making mistakes but you said nothing<sup>139</sup>.

I am in those conditions even when I am at home. I have nobody who I can turn to for kilometres around. Not one more book. Not the telephone.

Now, on the other hand, we are at "school". I came here on purpose, from far away. There isn't mother, who promised that she'll stay quiet and who then

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xviii Saitta = a history book.

<sup>135</sup> *Dite piuttosto*, (cf. footnote number 115). The initial exhortation of this sentence is identical to the one used in the paragraph entitled *Civics*.

<sup>136</sup> *compiti in classe*. This refers to tasks which are set out and which are completed in class, not necessarily with the direct intervention of the teacher.

<sup>137</sup> *Metà dell'ora la sciupate*, literally 'Half of the hour you waste it'. The topicalised constituent *Metà dell'ora* is reprised by means of the pronoun *la*.

<sup>138</sup> This term is used purposely as it pertains to the legal semantic field. What is therefore being stated is that during the school-year there are more days of classwork, tests and exams than days dedicated to teaching. The teacher therefore spends more time testing and judging his students (hence 'proceedings') rather than teaching.

<sup>139</sup> As stated above (cf. footnote number 136) this also refers to when the author was doing tests or exams in class.

interrupts me hundreds of times. There isn't the son of my sister who needs help in his homework. There's silence, a pleasant light, a bench all to myself.

And there you are, standing straight, two steps away from me<sup>140</sup>. You know all these things. You're paid to help me.

And instead you waste your time keeping an eye on me<sup>141</sup> like a thief.

### *Laziness and terror*

You yourself told me that oral exams are not schooling: "When I am here during the first hour you may catch the later train, you might as well, as in the first half hour I will hold oral exams".

During the oral exams the class is immersed in laziness and terror. Even the boy who is being examined wastes time. He tries not to expose himself. He avoids the things he understood least, he stresses those he knows well.

In order to please you, it's enough to sell wares. Never stay quiet. Fill in the empty spaces with empty words. Repeat the comments of Sapegno<sup>xix</sup> while putting on a face of somebody who has read the texts<sup>142</sup> in the original.

### *Personal opinions*

Or even better, just state<sup>143</sup> "personal opinions". You hold personal opinions in great consideration<sup>144</sup>: "According to me Petrarca..."<sup>xx</sup> Maybe the boy read a couple of poems, maybe not even one.

They told me that in certain American schools, after every word the teacher says, half the class raises its hand and says: "I agree". The other half says: "I

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<sup>xix</sup> *Sapegno* = a book on the history of Literature. The author of it has read many books. He compares one to the other and comments about them. The teachers are satisfied to repeat what he says.

<sup>xx</sup> Petrarca = Italian poet of the fourteenth century.

<sup>140</sup> *E lì, ritta a due passi da me, c'è lei*, literally 'And there, standing straight, two steps away from me, there you are'. The use of the deictic *lì* 'there' creates a clear and highly effective visual image of the situation.

<sup>141</sup> *sorvegliarmi*, literally 'to guard me'.

<sup>142</sup> *i testi se li è letti*, literally 'the texts he read them'. Note the use of the impersonal form (*se li è letti*), together with the left dislocation of the constituent *i testi* reprised by the pronoun *li*.

<sup>143</sup> *buttar giù*, literally 'to throw down', used metaphorically in this context.

<sup>144</sup> *Lei le opinioni personali le tiene in grande considerazione*, literally 'You the personal opinions you hold them in great consideration'. Once again (cfr. footnote number 117) the explicit pronoun *Lei* is followed by the complement *le opinioni personali* which is then reprised by the pronoun *le*.

do not agree”. The next time they exchange their roles as they continue making an effort to chew gum.

A child who has a personal opinion on things which are greater than him is considered to be an imbecile. He must not gain satisfaction. One goes to school to listen to what the teacher has to say.

Only rarely do things come up for which the class and the teacher need us<sup>145</sup>. But not opinions or things we’ve read. They are precise accounts of things we see with our own eyes in our homes, in the streets, in the woods.

### *An intelligent question*

You have never asked me about these things. I would not say them without being asked<sup>146</sup>. On the other hand, your little rich boys used to ask you things they already knew, putting on an angelic face. And you used to encourage them: “It’s an intelligent question!”

A useless comedy for all of us. Damaging for the soul of those suckers. Cruel for me as I did not know how to play the game.

### *The second dead language*

“Ma ove dorme il furor d’inclite geste  
e sien ministri al vivere civile  
l’opulenza e il tremore, inutil pompa  
e inaugurate immagini dell’Orco  
sorgon cippi e marmorei monumenti”<sup>xxi</sup>

“Change into prose” My eyes roamed around those strange words without knowing on which to rest. You were smiling at me: “Come on, it’s easy, I explained it yesterday. You have not studied”.

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<sup>xxi</sup> An extract from ‘Sepolcri’ by Foscolo.  
Ugo Foscolo = Italian poet of the beginning of the nineteenth century. Maybe that poem says some important things. If the teacher does not want us to miss out on them it’s her job to help us read it (Parallel text, permission to use notes).

<sup>145</sup> *Solo rare volte capita qualcosa di nostro di cui la classe e il maestro hanno bisogno*, literally ‘Only rarely something of ours happens that the class and the teacher need’. By *qualcosa di nostro*, the authors refer to whatever may pertain to their own culture, situations which are familiar to them.

<sup>146</sup> *Lei a me non le ha mai chieste. Io da me non le dicevo*, literally “You to me never asked them. I from my side did not use to say them’. Two very concise sentences in which the two initial explicit personal pronouns *Lei* and *Io* create a clear contrast.

*Inaugurare*<sup>147</sup>

It was true. I had not studied it. I will never tell my students that *inaugurare*<sup>148</sup> means to augur misfortune<sup>149</sup>. It's written in the annotations. But it's a lie. Foscolo invented it because he did not love the poor. He did not want to make an effort for us.

You used to make me keep a copybook with notes to force me to learn that language by heart. And to whom would I speak this other language that I had to learn?

In order to reach out to Dick, to get beyond the language barrier, I had to do acrobatics. When, during work, he used to see me sitting down, he used to make an effort to say: "Doulce vita"<sup>150</sup>. I used to answer terribly, in the worst cockney. I used to make an effort to pronounce words badly like him. That cockney that is useless in offices. That one with which one remains poor.

*Blackmail*

Meanwhile time was passing and my mouth wouldn't open. I was immersed in anger and despair.

Those poor children could not understand me. You have got them used to Monti's<sup>151</sup> language since when they were young. They are resigned to feeling bored. They expect nothing else from school.

They were all supporting me with their compassionate liking for me<sup>152</sup>. Just like St. Vincent's youths<sup>153</sup> who do not notice hatred.

Nobody wished me misfortune. Not even you: "I'm not going to eat you". You had an encouraging tone. You wanted to do all your duty towards me.

And in the meantime you were destroying every ideal of mine, using the certificate that was in your hands as blackmail.

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<sup>147</sup> This refers to the verb *inaugurare* used in the fourth verse of the extract cited above from Foscolo.

<sup>148</sup> Italics not in the original.

<sup>149</sup> *Inaugurare*, 'to inuagurate'. In standard Italian this word is not normally used in the way it is used in Foscolo's 'Sepolcri'. In the extract cited above *inaugurare* is formed by using the negative prefix *in-* together with the verb *augurare* 'to augur'. It's meaning is therefore 'to augur misfortune, to forebode'.

<sup>150</sup> A non-native variant of the standard Italian form *dolce vita*.

<sup>151</sup> Cfr footnote number 80, Part 1.

<sup>152</sup> *simpatia pietosa*, literally 'with compassionate sympathy'.

<sup>153</sup> This refers to Society of St. Vincent de Paul, a charitable, social and humanitarian organization.



*The art*

If only I had, during those interminable minutes of the oral exam, the time to calm down. The time I have here with my schoolmates to say all those things. I would have convinced you. I am sure. Not even you are a beast.

But then, the only words that came to mind<sup>154</sup> were dirty words and insults. Those words that here in writing we manage to control with some effort and transform them into topics.

So we have learned what the art is. It is wishing misfortune on somebody or on something. Reflecting upon it at length. Getting help from friends through patient team-work.

Slowly the truth that lies beneath the hatred emerges. The work of art is born: an arm reaching out to the enemy so that he changes.

THE INFECTION

After a month at your school, even I had caught the infection.

At school, during the oral exams, I would feel my heart stop beating. I wished for the others what I did not want for myself.

During the lessons I did not listen any more. I was already thinking of the oral exam of the following hour.

The most beautiful and diverse subjects all end up there. As if they were not part of a world that was larger than that square metre between the blackboard and the teacher's desk.

*A worm*

At home I wouldn't notice if mother was unwell. I would not ask news about the neighbours. I would not read the newspapers. At night I would not sleep<sup>155</sup>.

My mother would cry. My father grumbled to himself<sup>156</sup>: "You'd earn<sup>157</sup> more if you came to the woods".

I found myself studying like a worm.

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<sup>154</sup> *che mi venivano alla bocca*, literally 'that came to my mouth'.

<sup>155</sup> In this paragraph, though the verbs used are in the past continuous (*imperfetto*) tense, they do not convey a past meaning but they are used with a hypothetical connotation.

<sup>156</sup> An idiomatic expression is used, *tra i denti*, literally 'between the teeth'.

<sup>157</sup> *buschi*, second person singular, present tense of the verb *buscare* 'to get', used colloquially in order to mean 'to earn'.

Till then, for every thing, I would only consider how I would teach it to my children. If it seemed important to me, I would leave the textbook there and I'd try and go deeper into it from other books.

After your treatment, even the textbook seemed to be too much. I found myself underlining the most crucial things. Later my schoolmates advised me to look at little books which were even poorer<sup>158</sup> than the textbook. They were thought purposely<sup>159</sup> to satisfy your little heads<sup>160</sup>.

### *The doubt*

I actually got to the point when I thought that you were right. That yours was the true culture. That we, up there<sup>161</sup> in our solitude, had become big-headed, with a simplism that you had overcome centuries ago.

That our dream of a language that can be read by all, composed of words of everyday use, was nothing but an outdated labourism<sup>162</sup>.

I only missed out on becoming one of you by a whisker. Like the children of the poor who go to university and change race.

### *The outcast*<sup>163</sup>

But I did not have the time to corrupt myself as much as it was necessary to please you. In June you gave me a five in Italian and a four in Latin<sup>164</sup>.

I took the road through the woods again and returned to Barbiana. Day after day, from dawn to dark, just like when I was young.

But I did not take on full schooling<sup>165</sup>. Because of the urgency of those two exams, the Prior exempted me from newspaper reading and from teaching the little ones. I used to study in a room on my own in order to be in silence and to have the books that I do not have at home.

I used to return to the living only to read the post.

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<sup>158</sup> *più miseri*, literally 'more miserable'.

<sup>159</sup> *Studiati apposta*, literally 'studied purposely'.

<sup>160</sup> *testoline*, literally 'little heads'. The diminutive suffix *-ine* is used to create a negative connotation.

<sup>161</sup> Referring to Barbiana.

<sup>162</sup> *operaismo*, 'labourism': the tendency to give exclusive importance to the needs of workers.

<sup>163</sup> *tagliato fuori*, literally 'cut off'.

<sup>164</sup> Referring to the low marks obtained in these two subjects.

<sup>165</sup> *il ritmo della scuola*, literally 'the rhythm of the school'.

## THE POST

*Alms.* Francuccio from Algeria: "...in some parts the ground is completely red and there isn't even a blade of grass. Suddenly the train slows down. I look out of the window to see what there is. Three girls, with a variegated dress down to their shoes, appear out of nowhere<sup>166</sup>. They start walking by the train and do not ask for anything but people throw some things to them. They gather them quickly and they put it in their bosom. When they've got things even from the last wagon, the engine-driver regains speed at 30 an hour<sup>167</sup>. They told me that Ben Bella wanted to eliminate this custom of asking for alms and that Boumedien<sup>168</sup> just let them go ahead with it. I cannot understand who is right. What about you, Prior, what do you think?"

*The language of the poor*

Another one from Francuccio: "...I found a wooden hoop in the road and without thinking much I tossed it up in the air and caught it. About twenty children come towards me and they start laughing and holding their hands up for me to throw it to them. I throw it and we continue doing so for 5 minutes without a word. All of a sudden the oldest one makes a signal to stop. He had noticed that I had an Arab newspaper. So he asks me, in Arabic, what I was doing here and where I came from. We started talking on the stairs of a little mosque<sup>xxii</sup>. The muezzin came towards us and talked to me at great speed<sup>169</sup>. Since I could not understand his questions I had to admit<sup>170</sup> that I was not an Arab, but I told him that I could read Arabic. So he took me into the mosque to read the Koran. He was enthusiastic".

*Religion*

Sandro from France: "...he stops the car on a secondary road and he wants me

xxii *mosque* = Muslim temple.

*muezzin* = the guardian of the mosque whose job it is to start the prayers.

*Koran* = the sacred book of Muslims.

<sup>166</sup> *Eccoti spuntare*, literally 'Here come out'. A colloquial expression with the deictic element *eccoti* which conveys a sense of immediacy to the narrated episode.

<sup>167</sup> *30 l'ora*. It's not specified whether this refers to miles or kilometres.

<sup>168</sup> Mohamed Ahmed Ben Bella (1916-2012), first President of Algeria, and his successor Houari Boumediene, (1932-1978).

<sup>169</sup> *mi parlava di filato*, an idiomatic expression meaning 'to talk quickly'.

<sup>170</sup> *gli ho dovuto confessare*, literally 'I had to confess to him'.

*to pay for the lift he gave me*<sup>171</sup>. I tell him – Machin, je suis catholique<sup>xxiii</sup> – so he just stopped and left me there<sup>172</sup> and I had to walk for 4 kilometres to find the main road”.

### *Boiled sunflowers*

Franco from Wales<sup>xxiv</sup>: “... the priest has a little book purposely to take confession from foreigners. One tells him: – I have done two of number twenty-five and I said<sup>173</sup> three of the number twelve. – He made me listen to a sermon on number twenty-five!

I take care of the back garden of a little old lady. Today she made me strip sunflowers all day. She’s a vegetarian, but she wanted to buy meat just for me. I told her not to, even this is an experience. So she picked two sunflowers stalks and she boiled them for me”.

### *Apolitical*

Carlo from Marseilles<sup>xxv</sup>: “...there is a group of Italian students with a priest. They build huts for the Algerians and they do not ask to be paid. They do not care at all about learning French. They are not interested in politics<sup>174</sup>. They talk a lot about the Vatican Council and they work a little<sup>175</sup>. One of them is a little bit of an idiot. Tonight when I got to my room to write to you she came there too and she threw herself on the bed saying that she liked Florentines”.

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xxiii Friend, I am a Catholic (it’s pronounced Mascén ge sui catolic)

xxiv *Wales* = a region in Great Britain.

xxv *Marseilles* = a city in France.

171 Italics in the original.

172 *m’ha piantato*, third person *passato prossimo* (present perfect) of the verb *piantare*, ‘to abandon’, normally used in the informal register.

173 *ne ho mandate 3*, literally ‘I sent three of’.

174 *Di imparare il francese non glie ne importa nulla. Di politica non ne vogliono sapere*, literally ‘Of learning French they do not care about it. Of politics they do not want to know about it’. In both sentences the topicalised constituents *Di imparare il francese* and *di politica* are reprised by the pronoun *ne*.

175 In the original a metaphorical expression is used: *pochi colpi di piccone*, ‘a few hits with the pickaxe’.

*In praise of lies*

Edoardo from London: "... it's the parents' fault, they spoil them<sup>176</sup>. They do not teach them how to spend their money, they allow them to be bossy, they treat them too much like grown-ups<sup>177</sup>. Their parents gain their sincerity, but what is a lie if it keeps a child away from many sins? I do not know if I have explained myself well. Certainly, the English boys are extremely sincere. But what does it cost them if their mother never scolds them anyway? And what do parents gain from this? If I say a lie it's a sign that I know what's wrong and before doing something wrong again I'll think twice".

*Credit*

An old English trade-unionist writes to tell us of Paolo: "... he's a blessing from God for our factory and he's a great credit to your school. He's so intense and happy with life. I feel that God has arranged that I and you, who are so far away, think and speak in a similar way. Here many workers vote Conservative and read the newspaper of the master and I say: from Italy, someone who thinks like I do had to come here<sup>178</sup>. A young boy who is a Roman Catholic is teaching you"<sup>xxvi</sup>.

*Annibal Caro*

Having finished reading the post I shut myself once again in the Aeneid.  
I read an episode that you like.  
Two rogues disembowel people in their sleep. There's a list of all the

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<sup>xxvi</sup> An international agreement forbids that youths work abroad before they are eighteen years old. But the laws regarding work are not only broken in Italy. Children from Barbiana, between the ages of 14 and 16, have worked in the following countries: England, Germany, France, Austria, Algeria, Libya. For example, the authors of these letters were of the following ages: Francuccio 16, Sandro 15, Franco 14, Carlo 16, Edoardo 16, Paolo 16.

<sup>176</sup> *gli danno troppi vizi*, literally 'they give them too many vices'.

<sup>177</sup> *li credono troppo uomini*, literally 'they believe they are too grown-up'.

<sup>178</sup> *Dall'Italia doveva venire uno che la pensa come me*. The marked syntactic structure (with the anticipation of the complement *Dall'Italia*) gives it an exclamatory connotation, implying "From Italy, of all places, someone has come who thinks like I do!" This interpretation is also related to the following sentence, in which the Roman Catholic background of the boy is mentioned: *Vi fate insegnare da un ragazzo e romancattolico*, literally 'You are taught by a boy and one who is a Roman Catholic'.

disemboweled and of the stuff that was stolen and to whom they had given a belt as a gift and how much the belt weighed. Everything in a language born dead<sup>xxvii</sup>.

It was not necessary to insert the Aeneid in the course programme. You chose it. I cannot forgive you for it.

My schoolmates, on the other hand, forgive me. They know that the goal is to become a teacher. But I am almost as cut off as you are.

#### DISINFECTION

##### *Superficial*

In September you gave me a four and a four. You do not even know how to do your job as a chemist. The weighing scales do not work for you. I couldn't know less than I knew in June.

You turned off the switch. Switched off a child. And instead, without wanting to, you switched on the light again for me. I opened my eyes again to you and to your culture.

First of all I found the right insult to define you: you are just superficial. You are a society of mutual flattery which survives<sup>179</sup> because you are few.

##### *Revenge*

My father and my brother go to the woods for me. I can't repeat and I do not intend to carry wood on my shoulders, leaving the world as it is. You'd be too satisfied with this.

So I returned to Barbiana and in June I presented myself for the exam as a private candidate.

You cheated me<sup>180</sup> again, just like spitting on the ground. But I do not give up. I will be a teacher and I will teach better than you do.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> *Born dead* = in schools it is customary to read the translation of the Aeneid by Annibal Caro dated 1500.

<sup>179</sup> *regge*, third person singular, present tense of the verb *reggere* 'to bear, support, resist'.

<sup>180</sup> *Mi avete fregato*, literally 'you have robbed me'. A colloquial expression which also means 'to cheat somebody'.

*Second revenge*

The second revenge is this letter. We have worked on it all together.

Even<sup>181</sup> Gianni worked on it. His father is in hospital. If only last year he had had the manly appearance<sup>182</sup> he has today. At this stage it's too late for school, at home they need his pay as an apprentice. But when he got to know of this letter, he promised to come on some Sundays to help us.

Finally he came. He read it. He pointed out words and phrases which are too hard. He reminded us of some tasty bits of meanness<sup>183</sup>. He gave us permission to expose him publicly<sup>184</sup>. He is practically the main author.

But do not feel consoled by so little. You still have his soul<sup>185</sup>. He still cannot express himself.

*We're waiting for a letter*

Now we are here waiting for a reply. There surely will be someone from some *magistrale* institute who will write to us:

“Dear boys,

not all teachers are like that woman. Do not be racists yourselves.

Even though I do not agree with all you say, I know that our school has problems<sup>186</sup>. Only a perfect school can afford to<sup>187</sup> refuse new people and different cultures. And the perfect school does not exist. It's neither ours nor yours.

However, those of you who wish to become teachers can come and sit for their exams here. I have a group of colleagues who are ready to shut both their eyes for you.

In Pedagogy, we'll just ask you about Gianni. In Italian, to tell us how you've written this lovely letter. In Latin, some old word that your

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<sup>181</sup> *Perfino*. The choice of this adverb is very precise as it emphasises that even one of the boys who had problems in 'traditional' schooling collaborated.

<sup>182</sup> *sguardo*, literally 'look, glance'.

<sup>183</sup> *cattiveria saporita*, literally 'tasty cruelty'. The adjective *saporita* is used as a synonym for 'highly interesting, worth-mentioning'.

<sup>184</sup> *metterlo in berlina*, a metaphoric expression, literally 'put him on the pillory'.

<sup>185</sup> *all'anima ce l'avete voi*, literally 'to the soul you have it'. A colloquially marked syntactic structure, including the reprisal of the left-dislocated constituent *all'anima* with the pronoun *l'*.

<sup>186</sup> *non va*, literally 'does not go', implying 'is not getting on well'.

<sup>187</sup> *può permettersi*, literally 'can allow itself to'.

AT THE MAGISTRALI YOU ALSO FAIL, BUT...

grandfather says. In Geography, the life of English peasants. In History, the reasons why mountain-people go down to the plains. In Sciences, you will talk to us about plant-shoots<sup>188</sup> and you will tell us the name of the tree that yields cherries”.

We're waiting for this letter. We believe that it will come.

Our address is: Scuola di Barbiana, *Vicchio Mugello* (Florence).

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<sup>188</sup> *sormenti*, (cfr. footnote number 85).





## PART THREE

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# DOCUMENTATION

Here we include all the statistical tables which are not strictly necessary to comprehend the text. They are useful to those friends who wish to go further in-depth and to those who are less friendly<sup>1</sup> and do not trust us.

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<sup>1</sup> *ai meno-amici*, literally 'to the less-friends'.



Table A

nati nel 1948		nati nel 1949		nati nel 1950		nati nel 1951	
morti	sopravvivenuti	morti	sopravvivenuti	morti	sopravvivenuti	morti	sopravvivenuti
857000	1180000	940000	872000	908000	849000	865000	804000
235000b	595000	166000b	88000r	1050000	201000R	76000b	72000r
1e54-5	1053000	1056000	151000R	1e56-7	128000b	1e57-8	958000
851000p	155000b	835000p	86000r	809000p	113000r	810000p	68000r
1le56-7	143000R	1le57-8	118000R	1le57-8	1006000	1le58-9	968000
817000p	109000b	835000p	64000r	840000p	64000r	793000p	68000r
1le57-8	95000r	1le58-9	42000R	1le58-9	984000	1le59-60	875000
846000p	40000b	816000p	33000r	886000p	50000r	762000p	46000r
Ve58-9	34000R	Ve59-60	45000R	1Ve59-60	40000R	1Ve60-1	852000
790000p	50000b	768000p	30000r	814000p	69000b	725000p	45000r
1Im59-60	82000R	1Im60-1	89000R	Ve60-1	861000	Ve61-2	847000
398000p	156000b	408000p	31000r	726000p	98000b	695000p	89000b
1Im60-1	463000	1Im61-2	498000	1Im61-2	664000	1Im62-3	668000
394000p	55000R	365000p	67000R	433000p	193000b	452000p	176000b
1Im61-2	408000	1Im62-3	470000	1Im62-3	516000	1Im63-4	531000
359000p	310000b	389000p	56000b	396000p	106000b	408000p	11000R
					14000r		72000R
					35000R		408000p
					580000b		22000r
					580000b		456000
					36000R		36000R

Table A (cont.)

nati nel 1952	860000	nati nel 1953	864000	nati nel 1954	860000	nati nel 1955	869000
morti	50000	morti	49000	morti	45000	morti	43000
sopravvissenti	804000	sopravvissenti	815000	sopravvissenti	814000	sopravvissenti	825000
<b>Ie58-9</b>	897000	<b>Ie59-60</b>	874000	<b>Ie60-1</b>	890000	<b>Ie61-2</b>	906000
762000 p	750000b	746000 p	790000b	758000 p	910000 b	762000 p	1010000b
	60000r		49000r		41000r		43000r
<b>Ile59-60</b>	895000	<b>Ile60-1</b>	895000	<b>Ile61-2</b>	915000	<b>Ile62-3</b>	917000
755000 p	1040000b	740000 p	1010000b	722000 p	850000b	770000 p	1020000b
	36000r		54000r		40000r		45000r
<b>Ile60-1</b>	841000	<b>Ile61-2</b>	847000	<b>Ile62-3</b>	862000	<b>Ile63-4</b>	879000
722000 p	810000b	722000 p	850000b	743000 p	890000b	756000 p	950000b
	38000r		40000r		30000r		28000r
<b>Ive51-2</b>	839000	<b>Ive62-3</b>	826000	<b>Ive63-4</b>	844000	<b>Ive64-5</b>	859000
703000 p	870000b	705000 p	910000b	722000 p	960000b	756000 p	950000b
	49000r		30000r		36000r		28000r
<b>Ve62-3</b>	800000	<b>Ve63-4</b>	793000	<b>Ve64-5</b>	809000		
680000 p	900000b	685000 p	880000b				
	30000r		20000r				
<b>Im63-4</b>	716000	<b>Im64-5</b>	683000				
514000 p	1150000b		980000R				
	47000r						
<b>IIm64-5</b>	590000						
	630000R						
<b>IIm65-6</b>	472000						
	260000R						

NOTES TO TABLE A

The figure in black in the rectangles represents the number of enrolled students. The figure in red with “R” are the repeaters.

Under the rectangles the figure in black with “p” represents those who are promoted. The figure in red with “b” are the failures and those with “r” are those who left school<sup>2</sup>.

In this table (differently to what is represented in Table C) the figure of the repeaters is an official one.

The births and deaths are taken from the *Annuari Statistici Italiani*<sup>3</sup> 1949-57. The scholastic data till 1963-64 are those of the *Annuari Statistici dell'Istruzione*<sup>4</sup> 1956-65.

Some data of '64-'65 pertains to the *Compendio Statistico Italiano*<sup>5</sup> 1966.

At the moment in which we hand in the manuscript for printing (March '67) the *Annuario dell'Istruzione Italiana* 1966 has not yet been published. However, we have managed to have a look at the data included in it before it was printed thanks to the help of friends.

The *Annuari Statistici dell'Istruzione* are issued every year. However, the volume of 1963 was not published. The year after, a single volume '63-'64 was issued. In this volume some important data (I and II *media* 1960-61, 1961-62) are missing.

Thanks to the courtesy of the Director General of ISTAT<sup>6</sup> we however have the honour also to publish this data, which till now were unpublished.

Official data regarding schools are published with great delay. For example the *Annuario* 1965, that was published in March '66, only provides data regarding those enrolled at school and for repeaters in '63-'64 and data regarding those assessed<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *i ritirati* literally 'the retired ones'.

<sup>3</sup> Annual Statistics of Italy.

<sup>4</sup> Annual Statistics of Education.

<sup>5</sup> Compendium of Italian Statistics.

<sup>6</sup> ISTAT, *Istituto nazionale di statistica* (National Institute of Statistics).

<sup>7</sup> *scrutinati*. This refers to those students who were assessed by their teachers. On the basis of this assessment their promotion to the next class or their failure is determined. These students, therefore, would not have sat for exams.

and those who were examined in '62-'63. The same applies also for the previous years.

What is surprising is the amount of children who abandon school throughout the year (that is, the difference between the number of those enrolled and that regarding those who were assessed or sat for exams).

This explanation of the phenomenon was given<sup>8</sup> to us: some school-directors or heads boost artificially the number of enrolled children (in order to avoid the elimination of sections and to obtain a larger amount of teachers).

The intention of these officials may even be a good one, but because of them the official figure regarding enrolled children becomes rather unreliable.

A relative amount of damage is done for our calculation of those who are lost<sup>9</sup>. The figure of these lost children is still the one that we report. If anything, the date of when they are lost is to be anticipated.

The Minister of Education is the one who, in Parliament, presents the highest expenditure budget: 1773 billion in 1965 (more than 20% of the expenditure of the State). In this publication<sup>10</sup> we have seen how well-informed he is about the situation in schools. If a member of Parliament were to ask him how many children attend school, he would not be capable of answering.

In October newspapers normally publish figures of the number of children enrolled in school. In July they publish those of the children promoted and the failures of the same year! Then, on these figures, they elaborate<sup>11</sup> long articles.

It would be fun to know if they just plainly<sup>12</sup> invent the figures or if some employee of the Ministry invents them for them.

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<sup>8</sup> *ci è stata suggerita*, passive voice of the third person singular *passato prossimo* (present perfect) of the verb *suggerire*, 'to suggest, to hint'.

<sup>9</sup> *i persi*, literally 'the lost ones'.

<sup>10</sup> *in queste note*, literally 'in these notes'.

<sup>11</sup> *Poi ci ricamano sopra*, literally 'then they weave on them'. The verb *ricamare* is used to show that these articles are very elaborate, even though they may not be based on facts, as this paragraph implies.

<sup>12</sup> An idiomatic expression is used: *di sana pianta*.

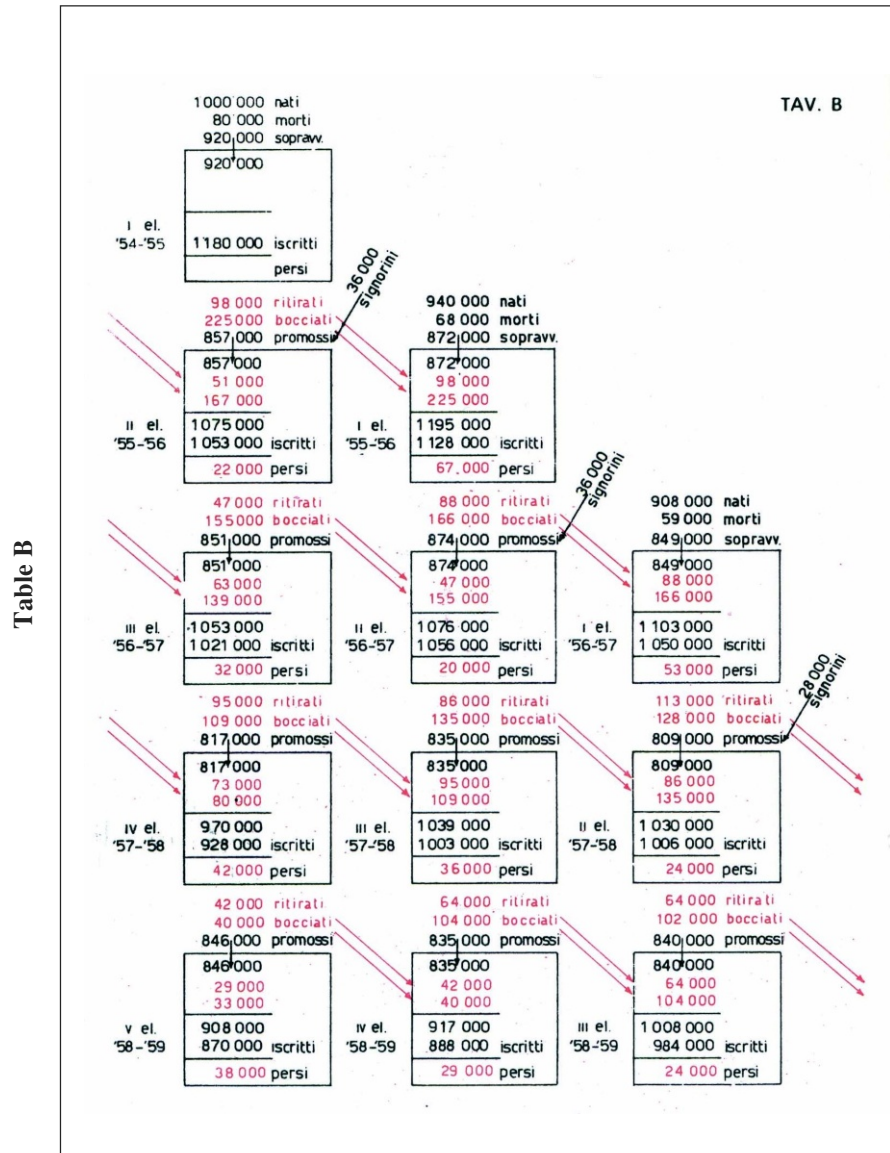


Table B (cont.)

TAV. B

	<p>30 000 ritirati 50 000 bocciati</p> <p>790 000 promossi</p> <p>790 000 17 000 138 000</p> <p>I media '59-60</p> <p>945 000 577 000 iscritti 368 000 persi</p>	<p>33 000 ritirati 39 000 bocciati</p> <p>816 000 promossi</p> <p>816 000 30 000 50 000</p> <p>v el. '59-60</p> <p>896 000 857 000 iscritti 39 000 persi</p>	<p>60 000 ritirati 48 000 bocciati</p> <p>886 000 promossi</p> <p>886 000 33 000 39 000</p> <p>iv el. '59-60</p> <p>958 000 923 000 iscritti 35 000 persi</p>
	<p>23 000 ritirati 156 000 bocciati</p> <p>398 000 promossi</p> <p>398 000 7 000 98 000</p> <p>II media 60-61</p> <p>503 000 463 000 iscritti 40 000 persi</p>	<p>30 000 ritirati 56 000 bocciati</p> <p>768 000 promossi</p> <p>768 000 23 000 156 000</p> <p>I media 60-61</p> <p>947 000 598 000 iscritti 349 000 persi</p>	<p>40 000 ritirati 69 000 bocciati</p> <p>814 000 promossi</p> <p>814 000 30 000 56 000</p> <p>v el. 60-61</p> <p>900 000 861 000 iscritti 39 000 persi</p>
	<p>8 000 ritirati</p> <p>394 000 promossi</p> <p>394 000 54 000</p> <p>III media '61-62</p> <p>448 000 388 000 iscritti 60 000 persi</p>	<p>31 000 ritirati 159 000 bocciati</p> <p>408 000 promossi</p> <p>408 000 8 000</p> <p>II media '61-62</p> <p>488 000 iscritti persi</p>	<p>37 000 ritirati 98 000 bocciati</p> <p>726 000 promossi</p> <p>726 000 31 000 159 000</p> <p>I media '61-62</p> <p>916 000 664 000 iscritti 252 000 persi</p>
	<p>14 000 ritirati 109 000 bocciati</p> <p>365 000 promossi</p> <p>365 000</p> <p>III media '62-63</p> <p>410 000 iscritti persi</p>	<p>48 000 ritirati 183 000 bocciati</p> <p>433 000 promossi</p> <p>433 000 14 000 109 000</p> <p>II media '62-63</p> <p>556 000 516 000 iscritti 40 000 persi</p>	
	<p>56 000 bocciati</p> <p>396 000 promossi</p> <p>396 000 56 000</p> <p>III media '63-64</p> <p>452 000 438 000 iscritti 14 000 persi</p>		

**NOTES TO TABLE B**

This table is necessary in order to understand the mechanism which regards the theoretical composition of classes and the calculations of those who leave. It would be nice to extend it at least to the 1952 levy<sup>13</sup> in order to compare the selection of the new and of the old *media*. As too much data are missing on the last scholastic years, we are forced to publish only three columns ('48-'49-'50 levies).

Every rectangle represents a class. The arrows indicate the place of origin of the child. The total of the children following the arrows leads to the theoretical composition of the class. If one subtracts the number of the enrolled students, one obtains the number of those who are lost<sup>14</sup>.

These lost children correspond (with respect to the rectangle in which they are written) to the children to whom reference is made on page 59 in the paragraph entitled "lost earnings". The teacher of that class doesn't know them and he is not responsible for having lost them. From the point of view of responsibility his lost ones, instead, are those children who are included in the rectangle which is exactly to the right of his class.

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. footnote number 115, Part 1.

<sup>14</sup> *persi alla scuola*, literally 'lost to the schools'.



Table C

		COMPOSIZIONE DELLA CLASSE		SCRUTINI O ESAMI			PERSI	
CLASSE	DATA	ISCRITTI	DI CUI RIPET	RITIRATI	BOCCIATI	PROMOSI	ALLA CLASSE	ALLA SCUOLA
I elementare	ottobre '56	105000	20100					
	giugno '57			147000	128000	809000		
II elementare	ottobre '57	1006000	197000				275000	121000
	giugno '58			64000	102000	840000		
III elementare	ottobre '58	984000	144000				186000	8000
	giugno '59			60000	48000	886000		
IV elementare	ottobre '59	923000	37000				98000	16000
	giugno '60			40000	69000	814000		
V elementare	ottobre '60	86000	47000				109000	19000
	giugno '61			37000	98000	726000		
I media	ottobre '61	664000	119000				316000	194000
	giugno '62			48000	183000	433000		
II media	ottobre '62	516000	83000				231000	132000
	giugno '63			14000	106000	396000		
III media	ottobre '63	438000	42000				120000	4000
	giugno '64			---	59000	415000		
TOTALE	ottobre '56 giugno '64						1315 000	531 000

Table C (cont.)

INSEGUIMENTO DELLA LEVA 1951										TAV. C
CLASSE	DATA	COMPOSIZIONE DELLA CLASSE		SCRUTINI O ESAMI			PERSI			
		ISCRITTI	DI CUI RIPET.	RITIRATI	BOCCIATI	PROMOSI	ALLA CLASSE	ALLA SCUOLA		
I elementare	ottobre '57	958000	154000							
	giugno '58			105000	76000	810000				
II elementare	ottobre '58	868000	158000				181000	88000		
	giugno '59			68000	107000	793000				
III elementare	ottobre '59	875000	82000				175000	42000		
	giugno '60			46000	67000	762000				
IV elementare	ottobre '60	852000	90000				113000	27000		
	giugno '61			45000	82000	725000				
V elementare	ottobre '61	847000	122000				127000	10000		
	giugno '62			63000	89000	695000				
I media	ottobre '62	668000	99000				278000	181000		
	giugno '63			38000	178000	452000				
II media	ottobre '63	531000	79000				216000	70000		
	giugno '64			22000	101000	408000				
III media	ottobre '64	459000	51000				123000	47000		
	giugno '65			42000	436000					
TOTALE	ottobre '57 giugno '65						1'213'000	465000		

Table C (cont.)

		COMPOSIZIONE DELLA CLASSE		SCRUTINI O ESAMI			PERSI	
CLASSE	DATA	ISCRITTI	DI CUI RIPET.	RITIRATI	BOCCIATI	PROMOSI	ALLA CLASSE	ALLA SCUOLA
I elementare	ottobre '57	958000	154000					
	giugno '58			105000	76000	810000		
II elementare	ottobre '58	968000	158000				181000	88000
	giugno '59			68000	107000	793000		
III elementare	ottobre '59	875000	82000				175000	42000
	giugno '60			46000	67000	762000		
IV elementare	ottobre '60	852000	90000				113000	27000
	giugno '61			45000	82000	725000		
V elementare	ottobre '61	847000	122000				127000	10000
	giugno '62			63000	89000	695000		
I media	ottobre '62	668000	99000				278000	181000
	giugno '63			38000	178000	452000		
II media	ottobre '63	531000	79000				216000	70000
	giugno '64			22000	101000	408000		
III media	ottobre '64	459000	51000				123000	47000
	giugno '65			42000	436000			
TOTALE	ottobre '57 giugno '65						1213000	465000

### NOTES TO TABLE C

Our text from pages 59 to 75 is the reduction to scale 1: 29,900 of Table C (1950 levy). The figures written in red are estimates.

The figures regarding those enrolled and the number of failures are copied from the ISTAT data. Those of the ones who leave, who fail and who are lost to the class are easily calculated through the ISTAT data.

On the other hand, the ISTAT data regarding repeaters were useless. The Ministry, in fact, considers as repeaters even children who have left school after the 15th March, but it does not state how much they tally with respect to the total. Therefore we prefer to base our calculation on the hypothesis (which is a very probable one) that all promoted students go ahead with their studies. It is obtained by subtracting the number of promoted students from the number of those who enroll in the following year.

If our hypothesis were not completely true, the number of children that the school loses would be even higher than the one we report.

This argument is not valid for the *V elementare*<sup>15</sup>. In this class the number of students the school loses is much higher than the number of failures. That is, there are many promoted students from this class who do not go ahead.

In this table the lost children are the ones for whom the teacher is directly responsible. A good teacher should, however, also have at heart the lost children to whom we refer to in Table B. That is, those who were meant to repeat in his class and about whom, maybe, the colleague who failed them has already spoken to him.

If, therefore, we were to add the lost students in Table B to those of Table C, and we were to remind the same teacher about them all, we would have done nothing absurd. We have not done so only to keep the parallelism between the text and the tables. In fact, in the statistical tables, a child must only be counted once even though he was lost by two teachers.

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<sup>15</sup> The fifth class (*quinta classe*) at the *elementare* school.

Table D

PRIMA ELEMENTARE		TAV. D	
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32			
1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 6	A RIPETERE PRIMA 27 28 29 30	A LAVORARE 31 32
2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 6	SECONDA 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 31 32
3 4 5 7 8 9	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 6	TERZA 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 31 32
4 5 7 8 9 10 11 12	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 6	QUARTA 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 3 31 32
9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 6	QUINTA 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 3 7 31 32
14 15 16 17 18 19	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 6	QUINTA 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 3 7 10 11 12 13 16 17 31 32
18 19 20 21 22	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 6	PRIMA 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 3 7 10 11 12 13 15 16 17 16 17 31 32
21 22 23 24	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 6	SECONDA 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30	1 3 7 10 11 12 13 15 16 17 16 20 16 17 31 32

**NOTES TO TABLE D**

This table is based on the figure of page 74. Here, however, one may identify the individual children. For example, the red number 6 represents a child in Pierino's condition (see page 60).

The black figures from 1 to 32 represent the children that the teacher had under her responsibility in the *prima elementare* class (without considering whether they were repeaters or not).

The figures in red represent the children who came along later (repeaters and Pierino).

The number of children in each of the three columns corresponds to the data of Table C of 1951 on the 1: 29,900 scale.

Table E

TAV. E

ETÀ E ANNO DI CORSO														
ETÀ	ELEMENTARI					MEDIE			MEDIE SUPERIORI					TOTALE
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	5	
DATI ASSOLUTI														
5	14191	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	14191
6	713404	45718	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	759122
7	106699	613889	47282	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	767870
8	29909	161345	538985	43209	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	773448
9	12231	65547	171881	517438	43030	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	810127
10	4886	26569	75355	199689	454737	42791	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	804027
11	2532	12833	35528	102577	209748	325123	35850	—	—	—	—	—	—	724191
12	1144	5052	14675	43069	97775	182580	205408	30237	382	—	—	—	—	580322
13	525	1871	5534	15157	40162	82715	130350	153945	23453	382	—	—	—	454094
14	143	397	1039	2432	6497	18083	44784	74265	69923	15499	248	—	—	233310
15	—	—	—	—	—	4932	15266	38476	49398	54307	12918	242	—	175539
16	—	—	—	—	—	1849	4722	15444	29348	43719	44261	13062	162	152567
17	—	—	—	—	—	986	1474	5267	13398	26951	31993	35730	10572	126371
18	—	—	—	—	—	552	562	1747	5602	12978	19802	27124	25666	94033
19	—	—	—	—	—	547	281	841	2779	6500	11305	19376	21556	63188
20	—	—	—	—	—	380	163	578	1157	2511	4974	10237	14137	34137
21 e +	—	—	—	—	—	469	148	476	1560	2490	3987	9262	15337	33729
%ALUNNI DI CIASCUN ANNO DI CORSO														
5	1,7	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0,2
6	79,5	5,1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	11,5
7	12,5	63,7	5,3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	11,6
8	3,6	17,9	60,5	4,7	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	11,7
9	1,5	7,6	19,3	56,0	5,0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	12,3
10	0,6	3,2	8,5	21,6	53,4	6,5	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	12,2
11	0,3	1,6	4,0	11,1	24,6	49,2	8,2	—	—	—	—	—	—	11,0
12	0,2	0,6	1,7	4,7	11,5	27,6	46,8	9,4	0,2	—	—	—	—	8,8
13	0,1	0,3	0,6	1,6	4,7	12,5	29,7	47,9	11,9	0,2	—	—	—	6,9
14	—	—	0,1	0,3	0,8	2,7	10,2	23,1	35,5	9,4	0,2	—	—	3,5
15	—	—	—	—	—	0,7	3,5	12,0	25,1	32,9	10,0	0,2	—	2,7
16	—	—	—	—	—	0,3	1,1	4,8	14,9	26,4	34,2	11,4	0,2	2,3
17	—	—	—	—	—	0,1	0,3	1,6	6,8	16,3	24,7	31,1	12,1	1,9
18	—	—	—	—	—	0,1	0,1	0,5	2,8	7,9	15,3	23,6	29,4	1,4
19	—	—	—	—	—	0,1	0,1	0,3	1,4	3,9	8,7	16,8	24,6	1,0
20	—	—	—	—	—	0,1	—	0,2	0,6	1,5	3,8	8,9	16,2	0,5
21 e +	—	—	—	—	—	0,1	—	0,2	0,8	1,5	3,1	8,0	17,5	0,5

**NOTES TO TABLE E**

The data of this table are taken from the Table 5A and B of the book “*Distribuzione per età degli alunni delle scuole elementari e medie* [Classification by age of the pupils of the *elementari* and *medie* schools]” ISTAT 1963.

Their age regards how old the children were on the 31st December 1959.

We did not manage to get to know who were the 14,191 children who on the 31st December were not yet 6 years old.

Legally, those enrolled in these conditions could only be those born on the 1st of January (about 2000 children).

The number of Pierinos is obtained by subtracting these mysterious 14,191 children from the total of 45,718 who started the *seconda elementare* class before they should have.



Table F

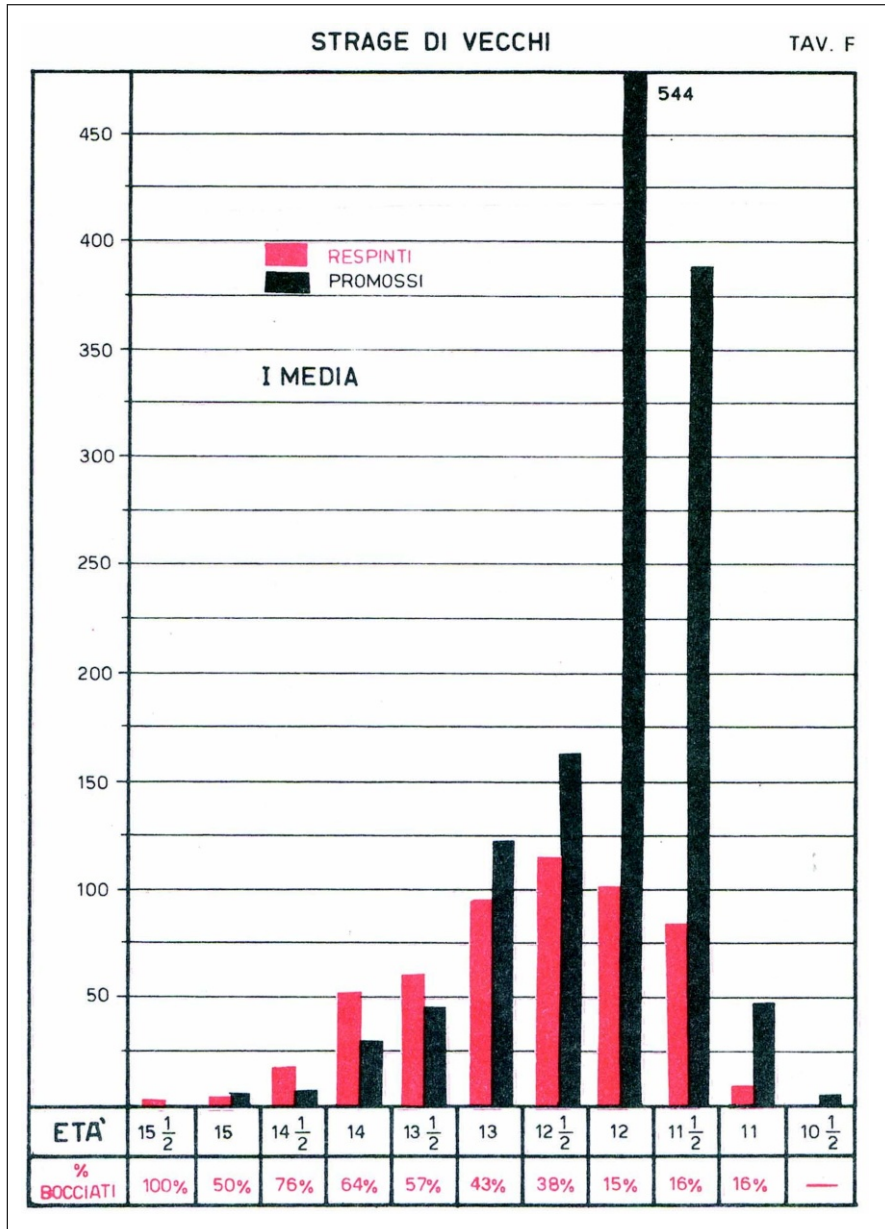
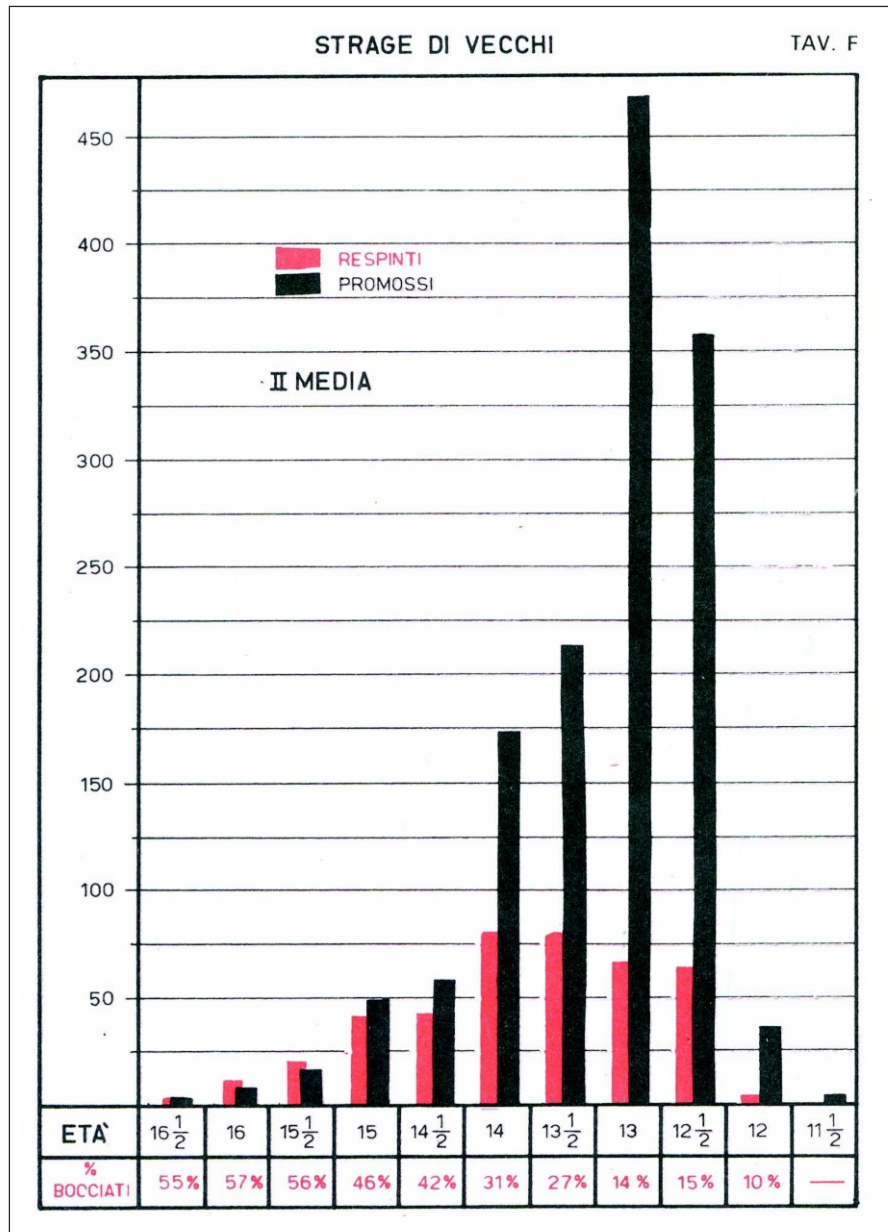


Table F (cont.)



**NOTES TO TABLE F**

This table is the outcome of a finding of ours. So were the tables on pages 63, 70, 72, footnote number xxxvii on page 66 and the comments on the written tasks of page 129.

We would have liked to list the schools in which we made our findings here. There are many of them in different provinces and regions.

However, we decided to leave them all anonymous. The fact is that some heads, directors and teachers barricaded themselves behind regulations as if we had asked them to reveal military secrets.

Others gave us permission to look into the result sheets as long as we did not reveal the name of the school.

On the other hand, others did not even present us with this difficulty, they themselves worked for us and they gave us precious advice.

We did not manage to know whether these regulations of secrecy exist or not. It seems impossible to us because they regard data which were divulged publicly. In our uncertainty we did not wish to create problems to our friends.

## NOTES AND COMMENTARY

### PART ONE P.31

Architect Michelucci was commissioned by Lorenzo Milani to write a preface to *Lettera a una professoressa*. However, in the original publication this preface was not included. It was eventually published in a 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary publication of the Letter in 2007 edited by Michele Gesualdi and published by the same publication house, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina (Battelli: 451. Gesualdi 2007: pp.XIV-XIX).

### INTRODUCTION P.34

In this introduction, the authors of Letter to a Teacher thank all those who had come to Barbiana and had in some way or another collaborated in the long process of drafting and re-drafting of the manuscript. Adele Corradi, a close collaborator of Don Milani at the school of Barbiana at the time the Letter was being written, writes, 'The *Letter* was almost ready and don Lorenzo gave it to his friends to read it. "We've made it!" he said to me on that day, "we've made it, because Mario and Daniele like it. They like everything about it, they like it very much, both of them."' Mario Becchi had been mayor of Vicchio, but was born a peasant. Daniele Njair had become a doctor, but was born in a hut in a village in Kenya. Both of them remembered well the days of their childhood when, for a peasant's son, the alternative to schooling was the cow shit in the barn' (Corradi: 106).

### COMPULSORY SCHOOLING CANNOT FAIL ITS STUDENT'S P.35

Enrico Zagli explains how Lorenzo Milani and the boys of Barbiana decided to write the *Letter to a Teacher* after the negative experience some of them had at the *Magistrale*, or the teacher training college. 'The idea of writing it came when some of us had decided to become primary school teachers and so they had first to obtain the *Media* school certificate together with Latin, and then went to the *Magistrale* at Florence. They did not feel at ease there and at the end of the year they were failed. This is how *Letter to a Teacher* originated, a letter against the state school. It was a very long and laborious process which kept many of us busy, for many months. Without the help of the Prior we could not write this masterpiece. It was he who managed everything' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). From Zagli's words, it is very evident that the boys were deeply involved in the writing of the letter and their negative experience in state schools was the central theme throughout the whole work. However, it is also very clear that Milani was the person who gave a sense of

#### LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

direction to the whole enterprise, leaving an indelible and clearly visible mark on the book. Enrico's negative experience at the *Magistrale* school was one of the main reasons why the school of Barbiana undertook the task to write this letter. As Milani himself explains in a letter to Edoardo Martinelli, a student of Barbiana who was abroad at the time, 'We are working on a great letter similar to that of the judges. This one is against the (female) teachers of the *Medie*. Enrico has got deeply involved and is passionate about writing it' (7th July 1966. Battelli: 461).

#### SHYNESS P.35

Don Lorenzo illustrates this timidity in a letter to Francuccio, an orphan adopted by Don Milani together with his brother Michele. Writing to Francuccio (28.2.1966) about another student of Barbiana and eventually one of the authors of *Letter to a Teacher*, Don Milani describes how Nevio went to the hospital to donate blood needed by Don Milani during his cures for cancer. 'On Saturday Carlo, Mileno and Aldo have gone to give me blood. At first they were a little afraid, but then they were very happy about their adventure. I don't think I'll need all this blood for the time being. But in so doing, they have learned to find their way; they have their donor card with their blood group written on it. On Saturday Nevio came to donate his blood, but his hair was so neglected that it seemed like a fleece. I treated him like a tanner and told him that it's not by donating blood to me that he shows he cares for me, but by going about like a civilised child. He has a farmer's fragility that would send shivers down one's spine. For example, if he is attending mass at Barbiana, he receives Holy Communion with a sincere faith and there's no need for anyone to make him do it. If he attends mass at San Martino he remains standing at the back of the church, does not respond, does not kneel down, does not receive Holy Communion, not even if he is in grace of God' (Gesualdi 2006: 254-255).

#### THE MULTICLASS P.36

According to Michele Gesualdi, at Barbiana there was an elementary school consisting of one classroom with five different classes inside. This classroom was managed by one teacher, a young lady who had to travel all the way uphill from Florence every day. 'There were more days in which she was absent on sick leave than days in which she did come to school. Sometimes a supply teacher was sent, but this one never arrived before 9.30-10.00. For some time the children waited, then, under the guidance of the elder ones, they went on strike, deserting the municipal school. Don Lorenzo, who had a technical school, organised also an elementary school for those days' (Gesualdi 2006: 141). Lorenzo Milani himself, in the *Letter to the Judges*, comments on the situation at Barbiana before his arrival, a situation which led him to open his own school in the mountainous hamlet: 'Mine is a

mountain parish. When I arrived there, there was only an elementary school. Five classes in one single classroom. The children came out of the fifth class semi illiterate and went to work. Shy and despised. It was then that I decided that I would spend my life as a parish priest for their civil, and not only their religious, elevation. And so, these last eleven years, the main part of my ministry consists of a school. Those who live in the city are usually amazed at its timetable. Twelve hours a day. 365 days a year. Before I arrived, the children used to spend the same amount of time (together with a lot of hard work) to produce wool and cheese for those who live in the city. Nobody had anything to say then. Now that I make them spend the same amount of time at school, they say that I'm sacrificing them' (Milani n.d.: 31).

## COMPULSORY SCHOOLING P.36

It is very evident that the school of Barbiana was addressing a very pressing need in the mountainous region around Vicchio. It was in fact the only *scuola media* that could help boys and girls in the neighbourhood to make it to higher academic and vocational institutions and thus to a good job and a higher standard of living. Nevio, one of the boys at Barbiana during the time the *Letter* was being compiled, describes his personal experience in these words: 'When I finished the elementary school, Barbiana was the only scholastic solution for those who lived in the mountain hamlets around Barbiana. There was no *Scuola Media* in my municipality, Vicchio. There was one at Borgo San Lorenzo, but this was fifteen kilometres away from home. In those days there were no school buses. The only option remaining was that of walking for an hour outward and another hour inward for three hundred and sixty five days a year, destination Barbiana' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008).

## BARBIANA P.36

One of the boys from San Martino was Nevio Santini, one of the authors of *Letter to a Teacher*. The 'priest's school' was don Milani's third school. When he became priest in 1947 he was sent to Montespertoli, near the family's county villa of Gigliola where the Milani's possessed 24 agricultural holdings leased out to farmers. Here he set up his first school. One of the students tells how Milani used to teach the sons of the tenant farmers on his family's farms. 'The first to go to school were me [Franco Bini] and Renato Capezzuoli. We had a room each on the first floor of the villa where there were the guest rooms. Then I found different boys from Gigliola, among whom there was Adolfo Cirri who later came with me to the seminary where don Lorenzo had made us enter with the aim, above anything else, of getting a good instruction. I entered the Minor Seminary in August of 1949, where there was no elementary school. And don Milani made me do two years in one, the fourth and fifth, in order to be able to enter the first *Media* class. He had a lot of culture and knew everything

#### LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

from languages onwards. He taught us geography, history and Italian. And when we increased in number we used to do like he would have done later at Barbiana: we sat, in the garden or in the house, all in a circle around him. For Lorenzo books, and therefore knowledge, were everything. He got interested in everything so that later he would transmit it to us boys. He knew a lot of books and about every topic' (Borghini: 26). After a few months, however, don Lorenzo got a permanent post as *cappellano* at San Donato to help the ailing parish priest there. Here Milani set up a night school which took up most of his pastoral ministry among San Donato's working class youth. In 1954 he was removed out of the way, literally kicked upstairs, promoted to parish priest of the depopulated mountain parish of Barbiana. Here he set up his third school, a full-time school for the children of Barbiana and the surrounding mountain villages.

#### THE WOODS P.37

Enrico Zagli, one of the students of Barbiana, writes his personal experience in very similar words. 'I came from a parish near Barbiana where I had been to the *multiclass*. When I finished it, I had no other choice but to follow my father into the woods. It would have been a feat to go to Borgo San Lorenzo; we did not have the money and the means. So one evening I saw dad returning home with a small pan, a battery and a pair of boots. He said that he had gone to speak to Don Lorenzo and that the latter had admitted us to the school of Barbiana. I was eleven years old. And so began my life on that mountain, an hour on foot away from home' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). The multiclass was a classroom which catered for pupils of all ages.

#### THE TABLES P.37

Don Cesare Mazzoni, a personal friend of Lorenzo Milani, one of the few priests from the neighbouring villages around Barbiana who had a good relationship with Don Lorenzo, comments about the austerity of Barbiana: 'I am convinced that at the school of Barbiana there aren't five chairs equal to each other, there aren't three tables equal to each other and you can go on; it is undoubtedly the poorest school there is, you only have to have eyes to see. The implements, the working tools, the shelves etc. everything has been manufactured by the children with the minimum of expenditure' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 1997: 86).

Adele Corradi comments that 'In my school, after four or five hours, my students and I felt completely worn out. At Barbiana, they stayed at school for a whole day, and in the evening, they did not feel tired. Many times I asked myself why.' In her opinion, one of the reasons was that 'Certainly, the fact that there were no benches did help. Around the tables, each student could change his position at

will. This helped as well' (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009: 248). Milani himself explains the austerity at Barbiana to a group of students from Pisa who had asked permission to visit his school. 'The problem is that at first sight Barbiana does not look very much like a school. The unwary visitor will see a pergola, some tables, some children scattered here and there with books, or at other times all gathered around a priest sprawling on an armchair and so the visitor who is of a city-bourgeois-intellectual-student education will be infused with the sitting room complex rather than with the school complex [...] If only I had some symbols (a wooden platform, a blackboard, a desk with an open register etc.) the visitor would approach us on the tip of his toes, and would feel highly honoured in being admitted as an auditor in a school to which he does not belong and will behave himself in the correct way right from the start. I don't have any wish to display such symbols of power, but I have been kind enough to forewarn you. You should therefore come with that attitude' (Battelli: 434).

## THE FAVOURITE ONE P.37

Life in Barbiana was austere but at the same time infused with a sense of care by Milani towards his students. The latter expected his students to follow some basic rules. Sometimes his enforcement of certain ground rules might have seemed too much for certain students. Nello, one of the students, describes this aura of austerity and tender care thus: 'On a typical day, we would arrive at seven forty-five, fifteen minutes to give everyone of us the medicine which was necessary for our well-being which for him was very important. At eight we started school; if by pure chance you arrived at five past eight he would send you back home and you had to come back accompanied by one of your parents' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). One of his closest collaborators, Adele Corradi, describes her relationship with Milani as 'friendly but not too much. We addressed each other with courtesy. [*Ci si dava del "lei"!*]' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). This is to be considered in the light of the fact that Corradi spent about three years at Barbiana, helping the pupils on a voluntary basis.

## BREAK P.38

Enrico Zagli gives us a brief description of a typical day at Barbiana. 'In the morning the school began at 8. The older pupils taught the younger ones till 12.30pm. The Prior taught Italian. After lunch there were various works to see to: cutting the wood, doing maintenance on the road. At a later stage we built a swimming pool and he taught us how to swim. In Winter sometimes we went skiing. Then at about 2.00pm there was the reading of the correspondence and of the newspaper. Then everybody went to study on his own. Days were not always the same. Sometimes somebody would turn



up and if the Prior would think that this person had something to teach us, he would interrupt everything and we would speak with our guest. The meetings were led by the Prior and depending on each case they either turned into simple interviews or into passionate discussions, but everything could be an occasion for growth for all of us.’ As the *Letter to a Teacher* explains, Sunday was business as usual. Zagli goes on to explain a typical Sunday. ‘Sunday morning was usually dedicated to the reading of the Gospels, done in a very methodical way. We approached it from a historical, linguistic and anthropological point of view, with a meticulousness that saw no end. Sometimes we focused on the Parables. The one on The Prodigal Son took us six months. At 11 everybody went to Mass, very short without a sermon. Then we had lunch. The afternoon was dedicated to the reading of some book of our choice (Ghandi, Socrates etc.). Sometimes, former students of Calenzano or other friends came to visit us. And we had a chat or discussions with them. We discussed various arguments with them’ (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). All this is to be viewed in connection with the life the Barbiana students had back home, a life characterised by hard work in the fields, in the woods or in the animal farms. In a letter to Edoardo Martinelli, a student of Barbiana, Milani writes with enthusiasm about the initial work on the first drafts of the *Letter*. ‘I will reveal to you only one phrase, very expressive: “School will always be better than cow shit”. A boy says it to signify that before coming here he had to clean a shed of 36 cows’ (18th July 1966. Battelli: 461, Gesualdi 2006: 262). In another letter to Elena Brambilla (28.9.1960) he states, ‘My heroic little monks who, without any complaints and without pretences, put up with 12 hours of unbearable daily school, on weekdays and on holidays, and who come here happily, are no heroes at all. Rather, they are little listless lazybones who have come to the conclusion (and rightly so) that 14 or 16 hours in the woods looking after the sheep are worse than 12 hours at Barbiana where I kick them and shout at them’ (Gesualdi 2006: 137).

With regards to Milani’s attitude towards sports in general, it is interesting to note what a student from Milani’s former night school at San Donato, Mario Rosi, had to say. ‘...first, an after school programme was instituted, then a night school. At this point the recreation equipment, which was at first tolerated, became incompatible with the rhythms and the realities of the school. One evening we decided not to use it anymore and we threw all the recreation equipment in the water well inside the courtyard. It was a collective decision even though it was he who led us to it: he never imposed his decisions upon us but put them to discussion even though at the end, he always managed to convince us’ (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 1997: 158).

With regards to the professor visiting Barbiana, it was customary for Don Milani to accept visitors at the school on condition that either the visitors kept silent and did not interfere or else, if they had something to contribute, then the engagement between them and Don Milani had to happen in front of the pupils. This was done in order to help his students learn from visitors who came from different life experiences, including students from other schools, teachers,

journalists, priests, adult educators, lawyers, jurists and politicians. In a letter to Elena Brambilla (20.06.1961) he argues 'All I know is that the tragedy of the farmers lies all in their solitude, that all their ills originate from the limited number of their human encounters, and so if a person from the city comes to visit I treat him as if he were a piece of flesh in an anatomical laboratory. I wish him well only in gratitude for having been of good use to the formation of my children' (Gesualdi 2006: 147).

## PEASANTS OF THE WORLD P.38

The statistical information presented here was probably given to the authors of the *Letter* by Mario Cartoni. Don Milani wrote to Cartoni in Rome (11.10.1966) to ask for his cooperation in finding data related to various themes that would emerge in *Letter to a Teacher*. 'I now beg you to use your journalist credentials to ask anybody you like, for ex. at the FAO, what part of humanity lives on agriculture, hunting, fishing, animal-husbandry (one heading), and what part lives off other activities. We have not managed to get this information from the books we have at our disposal.' In the same way, he asked Cartoni to find out how the various political parties had voted in parliament with regards to the new *Media* school, voted in the Italian Parliament on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1962. And on such matters as 'infant school... Latin... 8 years of compulsory school... scholarships... school buildings... the Education budget.' 'The problem is this. In various points of our letter an infinite number of things about the school which are *as a matter of fact* at the advantage of the rich seem to us to be attributable to the conscious malice of somebody who from his towering position has anticipated everything' (Gesualdi 2006: 271, 272).

On the farmers' opinion about schooling and education, Milani writes in his book *Esperienze Patorali*: 'You cannot tell a group of people who do not know how to read and write, but who desperately want their children to learn how to read and write, to leave the mountain in exchange for a television set. And yet, there are still those who say these things and who sacrifice themselves in order to get them one in the hope that the people will be taken in and stop by. Even the parish priest of San Cassiano has brought one and is very happy to see it surrounded by a lot of imbeciles who waste their time away. But if he keeps it on in the afternoon, would the farmers send their children to him as they send them here? No, for sure. And so there is no need of other proof and it is high time we put an end to certain unfounded clichés. To think of it, I don't even know how certain ideas have originated. Oh! I only have to look out of the window at school to look into the woods, on the hillock facing mine, a man looking after pigs. A man, adult and in good health, wasting away in the most stupid and unskilled of jobs for the sole reason of wanting to make it possible for his two sons to come here to me to learn how to read and write, something which he only barely knows and which they, on the other hand, learn even in the morning!' (Milani 1997: 309).

## CHILD TEACHERS P.38

It became customary in Barbiana for the older boys to teach their younger peers, organised in learning groups. In a letter to Elena Brambilla (25.3.1961), Lorenzo Milani describes how the system worked in his “industrial” school and showers praises on his young students, highlighting their great generosity towards each other. He also hints at the terminal illness that had struck him and that was to terminate his life just a few weeks after the publication of *Letter to a Teacher*: ‘...I have organised things in this way: the six older boys have shared the subjects among themselves and they do two subjects each to the younger ones. The younger students are in the first and second class of the technical school. Each older student teaches a subject to the first class and a subject to the second class. This takes place in the morning. The four older students who do not teach during that morning occupy themselves with design or with the study of German on their own. In the afternoon all the younger ones (thirteen in all) study on their own while the six older students come to my room to receive lessons in German and in technical design. The afternoon school compensates them for their sacrifice in providing schooling for the younger ones (it’s not just a question of the two mornings they lose every week, but being extremely conscientious they lose more time in preparing themselves for the lessons they have to impart). Everything proceeded well until I got sick. In consequence, their sacrifice for the young ones has doubled and the lessons they used to get from me (continuously absent for X-rays, tests, visits, biopsies etc.) was halved. As was natural, nobody complained. They have been marvellous beyond imagination, but I have thought they deserve a big reward. The big reward would be that as soon as the schooling of the young ones is brought to a conclusion (that is, as soon as the June examinations are over), *if my legs permit* I would like to take the six older ones to Germany’ (Gesualdi 2006: 144).

## POLITICS OR AVARICE P.39

In *Esperienze Pastorali*, Milani stresses the point that the poor have to reclaim their own place in the political sphere, by creating a united front in order to address their own problems, in a world where everybody feels responsible for the wellbeing of others. He sums up this concept in his *Letter to the Judges* when he writes, ‘On one of the walls of our school there’s written, big enough, “I care” [*in English*]. It’s the untranslatable motto of the best American youths. “It matters to me; I have the matter at heart”. It’s the direct opposite of the Fascist motto “I don’t give a damn”’ (Milani n.d.: 34). However, to be in a position to do this, they have to acquire the necessary tools one can only acquire by going to school. Using a language very reminiscent of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Milani writes: ‘But it is possible to teach poor girls and boys, exposing them to sounder ideas, making them understand that the pride of a poor person does not lie in mimicking the anti-social parades of the

oppressors for one day and then the following day returning back to the anonymous ranks of the oppressed in order to grumble uselessly against the unjust world. The unjust world must be reformed by the poor. And they will only rectify it when they would have been able to judge it and condemn it with an open and alert mind which can only be found in a poor person who has been to school' (Milani 1997: 105).

## THE GIRLS P.40

It was a fact that the girls at Barbiana were in a minority. But girls were actually present in Barbiana. In a circular letter sent to Barbiana students who were residing abroad during the Summer of 1965 (7.7.1965), Don Milani writes, 'Yesterday Fulvio and his little sister have started coming to school, and also Fabio has brought his little sister, with her hair braids cut off' (Gesualdi 2006: 213).

When asked to explain why girls were much fewer than boys, Adele Corradi says, 'At Barbiana, the girls were less in number than the boys because at Barbiana less girls than boys had been born. You could not insist with the parents to send an 11 or 12 year old daughter for a one-hour long walk through the woods (see p.37 of *Letter to a Teacher*, paragraph: The woods) (Personal letter to the authors. 2008).

## THE RULES OF WRITING P.44

Here is the first reference in the book to the fact that the students of Barbiana used to present themselves for official exams as external students at state schools in Florence. At first they used to travel to and from Florence every day, having to wake up very early in the morning, taking a private car to Vicchio, the nearest town, and then taking the train to the centre of Florence. Don Milani describes the scene to his friend Francesca Ichino (23.6.1959). 'Today they have technical design, their last written and practical test, and tomorrow they start with the oral tests. They leave home at five in the morning and return back at about three or four. Their return is a very poetic thing! Women, old people, children, the priest, have already been scanning the bottom of the valley for an hour until some smoke appears which is the train. That's the time when we all leave our homes, always keeping our eyes fixed on a white ribbon, which is the road, and we head towards the place where the car arrives. At last there appears a black spot, which only those who live up here know to be a car. A quarter of an hour later the car arrives, full of news for the illiterate parents who listen with veneration in the same way one would listen to the mysterious breath of the sorcerer' (Gesualdi 2006: 115).

Later, Don Milani tried to make his students' participation as external students in the exams at the schools of Florence easier by finding lodging for them at a home for orphans known as Madonnina del Grappa in the city centre where they stayed for the whole duration of the examination session. This would have enabled the Barbiana

children to wake up at a decent hour in the morning and to have ample time to do some studying in the evening.

Writing to the eminent Italian adult educator Aldo Capitini (8.6.1960), Lorenzo Milani describes life at Barbiana while the students were away at the city undergoing their examinations.

‘Dear professor, I had received your invitation in time for me to come and visit you in Florence, but I didn’t do anything because I was all taken up by the examinations of my twelve little external students. The examinations have now started and the twelve of them are lodged in Florence for the whole week at the orphanage “Madonnina del Grappa” (which, I hope, you may have heard of) and Barbiana has remained unusually silent and in suspense with all its sons engaged in this titanic battle against the city. If the examinations are honest Florence will have to give in, but I’m not so sure (about this) [that is that “the examinations are honest”] as to be able to enjoy the silence of the Mugello and my intestines will be upset for the next ten days that is until the 18<sup>th</sup>. From then onwards, perfectly recovered from this paternal seasonal illness and surrounded again by my children, I will be again at your disposal and I will patiently await your promised visit’ (Gesualdi 2006: 136).

Don Milani considered his students’ stunt at the exams in the schools of Florence as a veritable ‘Clash of the Titans’, the contenders being the rustic children of Barbiana on one side and the examiners from the city and the hegemonic institutions they stood for on the other. Speaking in terms reminiscent of Italian fanatic football fans, Don Milani writes to his friend Francesca Ichino (23.6.1959) describing his students’ experience during the exams.

‘In conclusion I think that it will not be so farfetched to say that the professor who failed these students has been corrupted by the *Confindustria* [union of Italian industrialists] and by the ecclesiastical free masonry, and that it’s quite unlikely that things will be easy for him and his nephews for the next five or six generations... Yesterday I accompanied the children to Florence for the practical workshop test and walking along the streets with six students in blue overalls made everyone stare at us. The little students of the *Medie* couldn’t take their eyes off them. It’s the *toga virilis* of our century. And on cheating these students one will have to pay with neurosis!’ (Gesualdi 2006: 115, 116).

In a personal letter to the journalist Giorgio Pecorini (8.10.1959) he sums up the successful examination result of six Barbiana students as follows: ‘Thus the examinations have proceeded as they should have (in all modesty: it’s not a question of the worthiness of my school, but even a question of school hours). It would sound funny that these poor martyrs obtained the same results as your dandy city students... Barbiana beats Florence 6 – 0’ (Gesualdi 2006: 131).

Don Milani’s frame of mind was very much influenced by the fact that the oral and written exams were made to measure for children from the city and wholly ignored other cultures such as the rural culture of the children of Barbiana, coming as they did from the hills outside the city of Florence. Even the very aims of writing were alien to the Barbiana students. At Barbiana, the students were accustomed to

write about themes that affected their everyday lives and that, therefore, were very stimulating. The *Letter to a Teacher* is in itself a very clear example of this. On the other hand, during the exams they found themselves baffled by uninspiring and insipid themes. He sums up the situation alluded to in this paragraph in a letter to Elena Brambilla (20.6.1961): ‘As from Saturday I have my younger thirteen children at Florence for their examinations. I have lodged them at the “Madonnina del Grappa” orphanage so that I won’t have to wake them up at 4 every morning. Every evening I go to Vicchio on a Vespa to call. For now the news are dreadful. Composition title: In front of a bookstall. Nobody knew what a bookstall is. And after a teacher had tried to describe one to them they did their composition relying on their imagination! These are the occupational hazards of the mountain people and give an idea of how much the “city people” live in a world of their own. The problem is that they think that they are the world, while they aren’t but a small despicable fraction of it’ (Gesualdi 2006: 145-146).

## THE TRAP COMPLEX P.45

In these two paragraphs the authors of the *Letter* use negative metaphors to describe the examination system. The allusions to knives and traps here is reminiscent of other writings by Lorenzo Milani where the teachers who set the written exams, and who conducted the oral tests, are described as judges presiding over a court of law, as executioners. An illustration of this can be found in a letter which Don Milani wrote to his former defence lawyer, Adolfo Gatti, who had defended him in a law suit instituted by the state against him, accusing him of inciting young people to evade conscription (11.10.1966). ‘For three months we have been working in order to get us back into trouble. A great work, which we are much more passionate about and which is more elaborate than the letter to the judges. This is a letter to a teacher (who had the failed vocation of becoming a judge and an executioner like many of her colleagues) who failed two of my children last year. I think it should be ready by next January’ (Gesualdi 2006: 271).

## THE OBJECTIVE P.46

In a letter which the students of Barbiana wrote to a group of students from Piadena, Cremona (1.11.1963), in a language that precedes but at the same time very reminiscent of Paulo Freire, they outline the ideological paradigm underlying the teaching and learning that went on at Barbiana. ‘The Prior has proposed to us a higher aim: go in search of knowledge only to be able to use it at the service of our neighbour, for ex. by dedicating ourselves, as adults, to teaching, to politics, to trade unionism, to apostleship, or similar. For this reason here we often speak of and we take sides with the weak: Africans, Asians, Southerners, Italians, workers, farmers,

mountain dwellers. But the Prior tells us that we cannot do anything for our neighbour, in any field, until we know how to communicate. For this reason, languages are the main subject here as to number of hours. First Italian, otherwise we would not even manage to learn foreign languages. Then, as many languages as possible because we are not alone in this world. We would like all the poor of the world to study languages in order to be able to understand each other and organise themselves. In that way there will be no more oppressors, nor fatherlands, nor wars' (Gesualdi 2006: 178-179).

Gino Carotti, father of Carla Carotti, a student at the school of Barbiana, recounts his personal experience regarding the students' placements abroad and their return back to Barbiana: 'In the evening I often dined with Don Lorenzo and at table our discussion turned to the fact that he wanted to send the children abroad, even Carla (my daughter). He used to say: "They have to learn at least three languages because barriers will vanish and we will live in contact with persons who speak different languages." They could choose which country to go to but they had to maintain themselves by working and studying. Before leaving he would explain to them the things they could come across. When they came back he would say: "Here are my children!" And he made them ring the bells like when the Bishop came. He wanted them to write to him every day, and all the letters were read at school. He read and wrote continuously' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano 1997: 119).

#### THE MEANS P.46

The method adopted by Lorenzo Milani in Barbiana for the teaching and learning of foreign languages was that of using vinyl records. Since these cost a good sum of money to obtain, he wrote to his great benefactor, Elena Brambilla (28.9.1960), explaining to her the importance these records had for his students. 'The day before yesterday we have started studying German with some boring records called X. They would have been excellent had they not the defect of being on loan and the other despicable defect that one cannot obtain many copies of the text, because that hag of a company is afraid that people will copy the discs and will not buy them anymore. And so I would like to try out records of another label. I have been told that other records similar to the French ones you sent us last year and which have been invaluable (the younger ones are using them this year) are more lively. They are called Y and are published under label T. One can have them in longplay or single version. But I prefer the singles because it's good to repeat over and over again a phrase or a short lesson. They are sold in two batches (first and second course) and so you will have the advantage of making us happy today with the first course and at Christmas with the second course' (Gesualdi 2006: 138). He even wrote to Ettore Bernabei, Director of RAI-TV, in Rome (18.10.1962), suggesting to him to include as much as possible programmes for the learning of foreign languages (Gesualdi 2006: 165).

## MONTI P.50

Lorenzo Milani highlights the difficulties encountered by the pupils when having to come to terms with the Italian classics which might have been worth reading and studying but which were written in a very difficult language. In *Letter to a Teacher* various authors are mentioned, including the poets Vincenzo Monti, author of an Italian version of Homer's *Iliad* (p.50), Ugo Foscolo (p.135), author of *I Sepolchri*, and Annibal Caro, author of an archaic Italian translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (p.140). In a letter intended for the journalist Giorgio Pecorini (23.1.1964) but which was eventually set aside, Milani suggests the publication of a cured edition of another Italian classic, Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*. He argues in favour of this project depicting it as an act of justice towards those who have always been denied access to high culture as represented by the classics. 'I have aged in teaching and in a very particular kind of teaching, namely limited to workers from 16 to 25 years of age and mountain children from 11 to 16 years of age. The first represents an immense future and virgin clientele. The second, an immense clientele that is by now within reach with the setting up of the *Media unificata*. Both one and the other will willingly read, and with a great benefit, *I Promessi Sposi*, if we could offer them an edition of it with appropriate slight alterations... They say that the great authors are immortal, and the thing, as usual, is true only for the privileged categories. The truth is that after 100 years they are already dead for the more humble categories (precisely, adult workers and children who do not proceed with their studies). After 200 years they are also dead for the grammar school students (*ginnasiali*). After 600 years, if they are called Dante, they survive with difficulty (with more notes than text) for the daddy's boys at the *Liceo*. And so on. But here we're talking of very willing people. Let alone if we speak of those I love, that immense mass of children and youths who have no willingness or who believe they don't have any or who will be discouraged at the first hurdle if we do not try to give them a helping hand. We cannot deprive them of an important book such as that one. If any teacher will turn up his nose we will tell him that he loved the few refined young gentlemen of yesterday's *Media* school. That he loves the culture of the privileged few. We will tell him that he would better be careful because when we are in power, people like him will be sent to Siberia. And here is the proposal. I will draw up a preface that will explain the above mentioned aims; I will equip it with high-ranking endorsements from the fields of teaching, of trade unionism, of art, of politics. Or else you and your colleagues provide this supporting structure, orchestrating endorsements from magazines with a high circulation, pedagogical ones, and the newspapers of the left and of the more enlightened Christian-democrats. A teacher at the *Medie* whom I know would take care of the "translation". This would amount to very little or nothing. The text will remain as a whole. Only a different typographical character will indicate those parts which a more humble or more timid or more unprepared or more unwilling reader can leave out without any harm, that is, without losing trace of the story line or his patience. Then, at home he will have the integral book... The lexical modifications will be few. And will have a double aim. Firstly, to make reading easier and more



entertaining. Secondly: given that a starter will not read many books, given that he might read only that one, that besides all the educational advantages etc. it will transmit to him a *living language* which is much more essential and urgent to the poor person rather than a dead language... this work will not be guided by any polemics, but only by the love for the emarginated, by the desire to break down the citadel of privilege' (Gesualdi 2006: 185-186, 187).

UNFORTUNATE CHILDREN P.51

Don Milani had a very negative opinion of sports, first of all because he considered sports as an alienating activity. When he was sent to the parish of San Donato di Calenzano he managed to convince his students there to throw sports equipment into a well. He wanted to be different from the leaders of the local *Azione Cattolica* who organised sports activities, not to make better Christians out of them but simply to lure the village youths away from the local *Casa del Popolo* (the Communist Party club). For their part the Communists also lured youths by organising sports and dancing, wasting the young people's time rather than providing them with an effective political and citizenship education. Lorenzo Milani did not want to get entangled in this struggle for political control over young voters. Reflecting upon his call to the priesthood, Don Lorenzo deems sports as demeaning. His true call is not to become popular with youths by enticing them to waste their time away, but rather to educate them, helping them to aim as high as possible in their lives. Writing to Don Ezio Palombo (25.3.1955) about the use of table tennis in the parish youth centre, Don Milani states unequivocally: 'I don't know what to tell you about table tennis. I'm sure that if you break it in two and if in consequence you won't have any more children around you, nobody will die. You will have more time to think, more silence, and what's more, little by little you will start building that image of a priest which is closer to the truth and worthy of you which, as time goes by, will attract with its intrinsic value many more children than the table tennis. The image of the true priest you already are and which you do not have to disguise as a juggler in order to approach those who are far down. Those who are far down (that is those who desperately look for ways in which to waste their time away) must see you far up, maybe hate you and despise you and run away from you for a year or so and then, if God grants them grace, they will start envying you, imitating you, outdoing you. "Put your heart in high and see that it is like a burning torch". I think you should have no mercy on this point, of no one. The highest aim, almost inhuman (perfect like the Father!) and [have] mercy, docility, paternal compromises, unlimited tolerance only for him who is far down and becomes aware of it and asks forgiveness and wants to start again in setting the highest aim. But a table-tennis table is an ever present monument of a modest *aim* which disqualifies your dignity of priest of God the Most High... And thus here's the only remaining thing to do: remaining high up (that is in the grace of God), aiming high (for us and for others) and tease cruelly not those who are far down but those who aim low. Making him see every day his own emptiness, his

misery, his uselessness, his incoherence' (Gesualdi 2006: 46, 47). He reiterates in another letter to his priest friend (12.05.1955): 'I do not accept to be put at par with a little youth club or television priest... Does he have all the Grace he can receive, a priest who lowers himself so much as to look for pastimes (both for the children and for himself, it's the same)? (Gesualdi 2006: 50-51).

Secondly, Don Milani considered sports education in the schools as reminiscent of military drills. In a letter to Francesca Ichino (23.6.59) he writes about his students' failure in the sports test. 'Dear Francesca, forgive me for the delay caused by the usual tests. Yesterday all the six of them were failed in P.E.! Apparently, their encyclopaedic culture had a gap: that of military art. I can't do anything but beat my chest and hope that things will turn out differently in the other subjects' (Gesualdi 2006: 115).

Thirdly, the Master of Barbiana thought that even in sports, the examination totally ignored the children's abilities in the area, examining them only in drills in which the city students were trained, such as basketball. He praises the head teacher for ignoring the result obtained by his students in physical education. In a letter to the journalist Giorgio Pecorini (08.10.1959), he explains: 'Even the P.E. teacher had to give in, in front of the head of school who did not want to dishonour his school by failing in P.E. these mines of learning, who besides being a mine of learning are also able to cut down an oak tree and run down along the woods without breaking their head' (Gesualdi 2006: 131).

#### LATIN IN MUGELLO P.52

To teach Latin to his students, Don Milani was helped out by a teacher from the *Media school* of Borgo San Lorenzo, Adele Corradi. Corradi had her own reasons for going to Barbiana, spending most of her free time and her holidays there. 'Teaching did not seem easy to me. We left university without ever having done one single day of teaching practice. I had many problems. I was appointed as a supply teacher at the *Media school* at Borgo San Lorenzo. There I came to know a friend of Don Milani. She spoke to me about the school of Barbiana, and told me that the results obtained by that school were exceptional. Naturally, I wanted to know in person about the methods with which those results were obtained.' She fulfilled many different roles at Barbiana. Among them 'I taught Latin to the two who wanted to become primary school teachers and whose failure had instigated Don Lorenzo to write the "Letter to a Teacher"' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008).

#### UNSUITABLE FOR STUDIES P.55

By the 30<sup>th</sup> of September Giancarlo Pessina, called Tranquillo, a student of Barbiana, was in fact in Rome to collect statistical information for the *Lettera*. He was back at Barbiana by the 6<sup>th</sup> of October. In the meantime, other students were sent to other schools to collect other statistics (Battelli: 466, 467).

Eventually, Giancarlo returned from Rome with the necessary statistics. Apparently, Don Lorenzo asked two teachers of statistics to help out Giancarlo in sorting out the data. Giancarlo not only managed to engage with the teachers but also increased his self esteem in the process, turning the collective writing process leading to the *Letter to a Teacher* into a veritable learning experience. In a letter to Edoardo and Mauro (29.11.1966) who were in London at the time, Don Lorenzo writes, ‘On Sunday, the two professors of statistics came again (I don’t know if I have told you that I have sought their advice long ago. It’s the third time they’ve come). They sat at table in front of me together with Giancarlo and Giancarlo explained our last difficulties. And all evening I lay down to enjoy the show. At a certain point I wrote a short note to Adele: “Come and enjoy the show of Tranquillo who is devouring statistics like buns.” And so Adele too came into the room. Carlo and Carla had to leave after two minutes because they couldn’t help laughing. Tranquillo, tranquil as ever, gave lesson with a humble, serene tone, without noticing that we were looking at him, to those two poor professors who lavished excuses: “but we are wasting your time. We haven’t been able to help you. Could it be that things stand this way or that way?” And he, tranquil as ever, made them understand that it was the umpteenth foolish thing they had said. Four months ago Giancarlo was timid and a cry-baby who considered himself to be inferior and a loser. I couldn’t care less about the totals that did not tally. I was so happy for him. Then, the following day he took the situation back in hand and resolved the whole problem. In any way, he is a great man and I hope you’re not envious. You too have performed your own feats, especially Mauro, with the very little willingness he had of going abroad’ (Gesualdi 2006: 278-279).

## PIERINO P.60

Neera Fallaci explains in a certain detail the true origins of Pierino. ‘Whom does “Pierino, the son of the doctor” represent in the *Letter*? He represents the “daddy’s boy” who starts off at a sensational lead; who even skips a class, who passes his exams almost always without studying, and has time also for sports and student politics. “Pierino” is born of a different race? No, says Milani. He has become what he is “because of the environment in which he lives after school”. It’s this that has given him the “trademark of the vintage race”. Anything they teach him at school “he has already heard it at home”.

Who was the Prior thinking about when he wrote about “Pierino”? Above all else he thought of his nephew: Andrea Milani Comparetti, son of Professor Adriano. He came into the limelight for a very specific reason. In the Summer of 1966, while Luciano and Enrico suffered another failure at the *Magistrali*, notwithstanding their efforts and sacrifices, Andrea had passed his school leaving exams in a “vintage” school like the *Liceo Classico* with six “10s” and two “8s” (Greek and P.E.); an average of 9.44. A journalist wrote about him, “A genius in the scientific subjects,

together with philosophy, with many weak points in the humanities which however do not affect him too much negatively, since he makes up for them with his intelligence and with his delivery.”

The journalist was Pier Maria Paoletti, “special envoy” of *Il Giorno*. In order to meet what he called “the super student” (of whom even the TV got interested at a later stage), Paoletti went up to Courmayeur where Andrea Milani Comparetti was on holiday with his mother: Maria Teresa Buraggi Arena, “a first class university degree”. And so, skimming through *Il Giorno* of August, Don Milani had found almost an entire page dedicated to the interview with photos of “Andrea Milani Comparetti, the Milanese young man who was on the verge of getting an average of 10 [full marks] at the school leaving exam.” Title: “His worries are that he will be considered a swot.” The Prior read with a bright eye marked by a crafty and amused irony. You can understand why as you go through some of the answers of his nephew, which later will surface in the *Letter*, definitely just as the rest of the article does.

“Are you a monster of intelligence or a huge bucket?”

A: “Had the school leaving exams been a serious thing, I would not have obtained those marks. The 10 in History must have made my teacher laugh himself to death. I have never studied it and I have never had an interest in it. Just think that on the previous evening, poor soul, a very intelligent and exceptional friend of mine came to explain to me all the fifteenth and the sixteenth century. Well, he got 6 and I got 10. As you can see, it’s not something serious. It’s a matter of three or four questions and luck plays a major role. What matters during the school leaving exam is the chatter, talking, talking on end. If you’re not afraid and feel safe enough and study your opponent, that is the teacher, in a way that you will have all the time to think in order to explain better, you are at an advantage. Throughout the *Liceo Classico*, a great importance is given to knowing how to sell.”

“And do you know how to sell?”

A: “Very much so, like an Arab merchant. And then I have been able to speak quite well since I was young, and then I got involved in student politics and the experience one gets when speaking in public gives a spontaneity of reflexes and self assurance which are out of this world (Fallaci: 487-488).

Michele Gesualdi tends to differ from Fallaci’s interpretation. Speaking of Don Milani, Gesualdi says: ‘He equally annihilated his own self with vigour, stretching himself into a paradox, in order to respond to a teaching need of his, by asserting that the *Letter to a Teacher* was the work of the students. It is not so, because if you substitute Pierino of the doctor, protagonist of the book, with Lorenzino of the doctor, that book will transform itself into a splendid autobiography’ (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 2000: 54). Franco Bini, an inhabitant of Montespertoli where the Milanis had their country house, seems to corroborate Gesualdi’s thesis. Bini writes: ‘The Milanis lived in their villa at Gigliola only for some weeks during the year, in Summer. With the people of the village they were gentle but reserved and made them feel uneasy. When they all went out together, for walks, many hid themselves and observed them from a distance. Only the more daring remained in the street and

#### LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

greeted the group with bows and with the raising of their hats. As a child I lived some tens of metres away from the villa and very often I saw the young Lorenzo (the people called him the “little lord”) in the park in front of the easel, painting. In Autumn of 1943, among the general amazement, the news arrived that “the little lord” had entered the seminary and the following Summer, when he returned to the villa for the holidays, he had completely changed his attitude towards us children. Formerly he used to ignore us. Now he showed interest in us. And never dare call him “little lord” (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 1997: 171). Similarly, Vittorio Guerri, also from Montespertoli, testifies, ‘I was born in 1936 in Montespertoli and when I was eleven years old I joined a group of children from Gigliola (Cirri, Capezzuoli, Bini) to take part in a sort of after-school which Lorenzo Milani set up soon after becoming priest. For everybody in the village he was the little lord. We used to call little lord only the heirs of the great families that lived in Montespertoli, such as the Sonnino, Frescobaldi and Guiccardini families...’ (Borghini: 36-37).

#### THE TRAGEDY OF THE OLDER ONES P.68

Don Milani had assumed that the older the pupils were with respect to their peers, being habitual repeaters, the less chance they had of making it through the tests. To confirm this point he asked a friend of his, Clara Domenici (22.11.1966) to help the school of Barbiara in finding factual documentation that would prove this point. ‘We turn to you for collaboration in a study we’re conducting about selection in the compulsory school. We have the impression that the failures in the first and second class of the *Media* affect mostly the older pupils. We would like to show this statistically. In our neighbourhood we are in difficulty. The good headmasters have schools which do not fail pupils. They would put the archives at our disposal but it’s useless. The bad headmasters don’t give us access to the archives. If you can spend an afternoon in an office of a *Media* school and would like to do some work for us I would ask you to fill some pages with dates of birth, class by class, with an indication of who had been failed or not. It would be good if you could write down the name of the school; if not, it doesn’t matter. The name and surname of the students are not important’ (Gesualdi 2006: 272-273).

#### REMOVING OBSTACLES P.77

According to Don Milani, the greatest hurdle the poor had to overcome in order to become equal citizens was the acquisition of the word. People in power have a command over the word, a hegemonic dominance over the way language is used in a sophisticated way in order to exclude those who, albeit citizens of supposedly equal status in front of the law, are actually second class citizens because they do not have the language skills, oral and written, in order to participate and impinge upon the

politics of society. Writing to his friend and magistrate Giampaolo Meucci (02.03.1955), Don Milani states that ‘instead, I spend most of the day making some illiterate people speak, in order to do some good to them and to enrich myself with lots of things I can learn from them. And so it happens that when I write, you have the impression that it’s an illiterate who is writing because you will never see a trace of the many readings, as one would find in your writings. You make use of words and quotations and proper names which bring to the mind of your learned readers millions of facts already known. Instead, I use every word as if it were being used for the first time in history, as is customary with illiterate people and those who want to speak to them effectively... Do you want that the poor rule immediately? Do you want that they rule well? Then write a book for them, or a newspaper for them or else become an apostle among your Catholic, university graduate friends in order to set up a grandiose popular school in Florence. Not as a gift to be given to the poor, but as a debt to be settled and a gift to be received. Not to teach, but only to give the necessary technical means (that is the language) to the poor so that they can teach you the inexhaustible riches of equilibrium, of wisdom, of concreteness, of potential religiosity which God has hidden in their hearts almost to compensate them for the cultural inequality of which they are victims... We will not, therefore, give them the things we have constructed and which are falling apart, but only the tools of the trade (that is, more than anything else, the language, the languages etc.) so that they will build wholly different things from ours and not under our high patronage, or our paternal complacency’ (Gesualdi 2006: 44, 45).

#### GIANNI’S FATHER P.77

Lorenzo Milani had learnt well enough through experience that his students, labelled as failures in the state schools, were eventually the sons and daughters of parents who were ready to do anything to see their children make a head way in life. Writing to his friend Elena Brambilla (25.3.1961) he recounts how ‘last year the six older children have successfully completed the Technical school. Notwithstanding this, their families have heroically remained in Barbiana. Some have done it for that boy so that he will further his studies, others have done it for that boy and also for his little brother or sister so that he too will do the Technical school. The fact is that all six of them (these families) have renounced to continuous exceptional offers of farms or much better jobs in the plain, or even in the city’ (Gesualdi 2006: 144).

#### PRIESTS ARE BETTER P.80

This paragraph is very ironic in that it considers those church schools who ask for hefty fees as more sincere than the state schools; their fees are a public statement: we are at the service of the rich. With regards to the Italian Church’s ambivalent position, in

relation to Don Lorenzo Milani's choice of the poor, Michele Gesualdi states: 'At Barbiana we had very few books, especially when he [Don Milani] came up with the post-elementary school in order not to die; but he had an extraordinary ability to teach and to read from the book of life experience. And it is actually observing reality that he sensed, probably even before entering the seminary, that social injustices and the position of the Church, which was only apparently neutral between the poor and the rich, were an obstacle to evangelisation and the development of Christian life. I have said that the Church was only apparently neutral, but there is no doubt that standing between the powerful and the weak, when you do not take sides you pass automatically on the side of the powerful' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 2000: 49).

## FREEDOM P.80

Here again, Milani writes about a culture which eulogises sports in a way that it becomes a cause of alienation, an altered state of consciousness which the poor cannot afford, given their plight. According to Milani, the rich may afford to spend time at the football stadium to entertain themselves, but the poor cannot afford to lose precious time in alienating activities. They have to use their time well in order to catch up with those who already have a privileged background within the home. He denounces both the local churches and the Communist Party clubs (*La Casa del Popolo*) which both offered only alienating activities to the village poor, such as television, card games, pool tables and bars. In *Esperienze Pastorali* Milani draws a net distinction between his way of dealing with young people in San Donato and later in Barbiana, and the situation in nearby villages where every Sunday youths rushed to the village sports ground to take part in games organised by the local priest or by the local *Casa del Popolo*. Milani writes: 'I have not led these youths with any special talents. I have only been shrewd. I have known how to touch the key that has sparked off their innermost talents. I have not had any riches. It was they who abounded in riches without anyone knowing it. I have touched their self-respect, their innate generosity, the social anxiety which is in the air of our century and therefore also at the bottom of their hearts, the instinct of rebelliousness towards other men, of the affirmation of man's dignity as a servant of God and of no one else. It was not at all true that our youths enjoyed themselves when they tortured themselves with mud at the sports ground. It was all an immense fraud. Is it possible that a whole community interests itself in that way, all of it, in the same thing? Weren't there, therefore, any differences of character or of taste? It is that most of them were there only not to remain isolated. That is the terror of the uneducated person, and because of that he renounces to his personality. You see that it is not a question of methods, but only a way of being and of thinking' (Milani 1997: 242).

Milani's different way of attracting youth aroused the curiosity of his fellow priests in the surrounding parishes. These often asked him how he managed to attract young people to his school even if he never organised football matches and did not

have a TV at home. Milani comments that: ‘Very often my friends ask me how I manage to teach and how I manage to always have a full school. They insist that I should write down a teaching method for them, that I should give a precise indication of the syllabus, the subjects, the teaching technique. They ask the wrong question. They should not preoccupy themselves with *what should one do in order to teach*, but only with *how should one be* in order to be able to teach. One must be... I cannot explain in a couple of words how one should be, but finish off reading this entire book and then you might perhaps understand how one should be in order to provide popular education. One must have a clear idea about social and political problems. One must not remain neutral in relation to social classes but must take sides. One must glow in his anxiousness to elevate the poor to a superior level. I do not mean to a level which is equal to that of the present ruling class. But superior: more human, more spiritual, more Christian, more of everything. And then you will see that the workers will come, that they will abandon all the recreations of the world, and that they will surrender at the hands of their priest in order to be built by him. They are disposed to accept everything from such a priest: division sums with three digit numbers, verbs, dictation, history, politics, theology, arguments, bad moods. All subjects are appropriate and all the teaching methods are good’ (Milani 1997: 239-240).

## FASHION P.81

Adele Corradi was asked whether Milani’s option of giving his students a different alternative to state education following a rationale of his own, had eventually led his pupils into a *cul de sac*, as evinced by the fact that all three students who had wanted to become teachers had failed to make it through the *Magistrale*. Corradi rebuts the argument by saying that the school of Barbiana had been all an effort to save pupils from following Gianni’s fate as cynically described in this paragraph. In her own words, ‘The school of Barbiana was a preparation for life, trying to make free and responsible persons out of the children. How can one speak of a dead end? Or is it rather a dead end a school which produces children who are enslaved by fashion, by conformism, by indifference, by individualism?’ (Personal letter to the authors. 2008).

## LET’S ALL HUG EACH OTHER P.81

The dance party mentioned here had probably been the subject of a very interesting debate in Barbiana. As Milani states in a letter to his mum (16.02.1965) ‘Here we’ve had all Adele [Corradi]’s female students to discuss with us about the worthiness of dancing because in a week’s time they are invited at the school hall to dance with their mates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> male class. It has been a very enjoyable evening’ (Battelli: 426).

In this paragraph Milani puts himself in direct juxtaposition in relation to the Salesian priests who succumbed to the culture of alienation. Speaking of the craze



about cycling races that were very popular in Italy at the time, Milani writes, ‘Why do they shout the name and the victories of their favourite cyclist with the same desperate passion with which they should rather shout at their wife: “Do not betray me”, or at their son: “Study, work, be in good health”, at their employer or at the government: “Do not ride roughshod over me”?’ Because man is made like that: he is subject to his passions up to the most unexpected absurdities. Yes, in fact, if the cyclists were women, coming to blows for their sake would be disgraceful, but excusable. But for males to get so excited about other males with whom they have nothing in common and who do not even work for them, this I cannot understand, and I am sure that the reason is not intrinsic but extrinsic. That is, the fear of being left out, of not being equal to others, of not being engaged in conversation with other people, protected by the conversation of others, by the equality of others. The despair of desperate people who do not have any inner riches!’ (Milani 1997: 143). He then outlines the ways in which his pastoral and educational activity differed from that of the Salesians of Borgo San Lorenzo, an activity that was all but alienating: ‘I have taken peace away from my people. I have not sown anything but conflicts, discussions, opposing schools of thought. I have always faced souls and situations with the firmness that is typical of the teacher. I have never resorted to courtesy, respect or tact. I have attracted towards me a heap of hatred. But no one can deny the fact that all this has elevated the level of the arguments of the discussions and of the passions of my people’ (Milani 1997: 146).

In particular reference to the *Gazzetta dello Sport*, Milani had this to say to a group of lecturers and students from a school for journalists of Florence in an interview they had with him at Barbiana on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1965: ‘In statistics it is usual to consider as illiterate those who have not done the third elementary class; semi-illiterate those who have done the third elementary class, and literate those who have done the fifth elementary class. But these are only statistical distinctions, with very little correlation in the real world, because as I said in my book [*Esperienze Pastorali*], I do not consider a person who can read “La Gazzetta dello Sport” as one who can read. “La Gazzetta” has its own vocabulary, made up of not more than two hundred words, and one can manage quite easily to read “La Gazzetta dello Sport” and understand all the fine details; two hundred words are even too many, they are always the same words that are repeated, and... knowing how to read the “Gazzetta dello Sport” does not mean knowing how to read’ (Pecorini: 347).

#### DESTINY OR PLAN? P.82

The *Enciclopedia Treccani* was a gift from his maternal aunt Silvia Just. As Milani himself explains in a letter to Francuccio Gesualdi, ‘Aunt Silvia said to me without giving much thought to it, “In my will I have left the Treccani encyclopaedia to you.” And I immediately told her, “Then you should die as soon as possible.” And

since she is superstitious and generous, she gave it to me there and then' (Battelli: 456). This encyclopaedia fitted in very well with the way teaching and learning proceeded at Barbiana, usually revolving around specific unifying themes. Milani writes to Aunt Silvia and explains that, 'We use the Treccani something like ten times a day. I cannot recall how we managed at school without it. Yesterday, for ex. we projected the Battleship Potemkin. First we studied using the Treccani: Odessa, Eisenstein, sound film, and the history of the period' (Battelli: 455). This was typical of the way teaching and learning occurred at Barbiana. Milani had just returned to Barbiana after spending some time at Careggi hospital in Florence and then in his mother's house in Via Masaccio in Florence where he continued curing himself from leukaemia. To celebrate his return to Barbiana he took with him a copy of the 1925 Russian silent film *The Battleship Potemkin*, which was the starting point for a spate of research concerning cinematography as well as history. The film itself was then projected several times, analysed and critiqued by the students of Barbiana. In the same way, the *Treccani* seems to have been utilised during the writing process of the *Letter*. Here the students are making use of it to research the term *Examinations*.

## PIERINO'S MOTHER P.86

In *Esperienze Pastorali*, Don Milani summarizes this paragraph in one very simple question: 'how is it that there are women who are always in need of being served, others who always need to serve and to be away from their home?' (Milani 1997: p.206).

## THE LION'S SHARE P.87

In view of Milani's scathing criticism of the established law in this paragraph and in others throughout this book (see for example 'Men before their time', p.62, or 'It never rains but it pours', p.85), it might be interesting here to comment on his relationship with the law. A couple of years before the publication of *Letter to a Teacher*, Milani had been brought to trial for publicly defending a number of youths who, being convinced pacifists, had refused to participate in the conscription exercise, thus breaking the Italian law, and who were jailed in consequence. Being very weak due to Hodgkin's disease, he did not turn up to defend himself at the law courts of Rome. Instead he sent a *Letter to the Judges* to explain his reasons for defending youths who had dared challenge the law of conscription. Addressing the judges he writes: 'School is different from a court of law. For you magistrates the only thing that counts is the established law. But the school lies between the past and the future and must keep an eye on both of them. It's the delicate art of leading the children on a razor's edge: on the one hand

inculcating in them a sense of legality (and in this it is very similar to your function), on the other hand a longing for better laws, that is, a sense of the political (and in this it differs from your function)... In so far as being tomorrow's leaders, I can't say to my students that the only way to love the law is to obey it. I can only tell them to uphold those man-made laws which they deem just (that is, when they defend the weak). When, on the other hand, they think that they are unjust (that is, when they sanction abuse by those in power) they should struggle to have them changed... I have learned this technique of constructive love for the law together with my students while we read *Crito*, *The Defence of Socrates*, the life of the Lord in the Four Gospels, the autobiography of Gandhi, the letters of the pilot of Hiroshima. Lives of men who have tragically come into direct conflict with the world order of their time, not because they wanted to dislodge it but because they wanted to make it better. I have used it, for my part, also throughout my whole life as a Christian, with regards to the laws and the authorities of the Church. Absolutely orthodox and disciplined, and at the same time passionately alert to the present and the future. Nobody can accuse me of heresy or indiscipline. Nobody can accuse me of having made a career for myself. I am 42 years old and I am a parish priest of 42 souls. For the rest, I have already raised some admirable youngsters. Excellent citizens and excellent Christians. Not one of them has become an anarchist. Not one of them has become a conformist. Inform yourselves about them. They will testify in my favour' (Milani L. and the School of Barbiana n.d.: 36, 37, 38-39). Finally, his most famous saying with regards to his students' relationship with the law is found in p.51 where he states categorically: 'One must have the courage to tell young people that they all are sovereign people, and thus, obedience is not a virtue anymore, but the most subtle of temptations; that they should never believe they can use it in order to shield themselves before men or God. On the contrary every one of them should feel solely responsible for all' (Milani L. and the School of Barbiana n.d.: 51).

IN THE PARTIES P.88

Notwithstanding Milani's deconstruction of the Italian parliamentary system in this paragraph and in those which immediately follow, Milani was a strong believer in democracy and in democratic Socialism. He also believed that Fascism was the anti-thesis of both. As he explains in Reply to the military chaplains of Tuscany: 'The [Fascist] War was being fought in Italy on two fronts. One front against the democratic system. The other front against the Socialist system. They were, and still are, the noblest political systems which humanity has ever given itself. One represents the highest attempt made by humanity to give, even upon this earth, freedom and human dignity to the poor. The other is the highest attempt made by humanity to provide, even upon this earth, justice and equality to the poor' (Milani L. and the School of Barbiana n.d.: 18).

## BLACK POWER P.88

Giuseppe Battelli recounts how Milani had come across the story of Carmichael in the Italian newspaper *Il Giorno* during the previous Summer. While writing the *Letter*, he remembered about the story and asked his friend and journalist Giorgio Pecorini to help him find the story again: 'I need to find an article published in "Il Giornale" sometime in August or thereabouts. It spoke of a leader of Black Power called Stookey, if I'm not mistaken... I would like to quote the incident referred to in that article in a small book about the school which we are presently preparing' (L.Milani to G.Pecorini 29.11.1966 in Battelli: p.460).

## EQUALITY P.91

Equality among humans was a very pressing topic in Milani's mind. He felt it as a priest in the villages outside Florence where he had worked. Once ordained a priest, he was shocked by the cultural abyss that separated him from his flock. On a Sunday morning he would find himself on a pulpit preaching in a language that was comprehensible only to himself. He felt that he was part of a privileged group and that those outside that group had a claim on him. He felt bound to help them ooze out of their isolation. He describes this frame of mind in *Esperienze Pastorali*: 'Lately I was giving assistance to a dying man. Well, I only did so in a certain way. In a way which is very common in these parts, and which every parish priest knows so well. At 84 years from his baptism he had not yet acquired that minimum amount of language which he could share with his priest and which would enable him to understand the Sacraments he receives and the words on the afterlife. A stranger to our faith and to our language! At times he became delirious and thought he was still looking after his sheep. He got angry with the one who got into a cultivated field and with the other one which had escaped into a ditch: "Ussa su, ussa giù, por..." [Get up here; get down here, bast...] This is his language; its main characteristic: the soliloquy with the sheep, the only use he has made of the Gift of the Word in 84 years of his life. He has learned their language, not mine. He is more of their brother than mine. And I put on wool clothes and eat cheese without any remorse. Nobody should do that kind of work anymore. Or at least: nobody who doesn't already know how to pray, think and read. Nobody, that is, for whom solitude and the company of beasts is not a source of Grace and of self elevation, and not, as is the case with today's herdsmen, an occasion to transform oneself into beasts, meditating the most repulsive things, and ending up being men with a withered heart and intellect' (Milani 1997: 314). The language used here is very reminiscent of Kierkegaard when he writes, 'And what an infinite reality this self acquires by being before God, becoming aware of existing before God, becoming a human self, whose measure is God! A herdsman who (if it were possible) is a self before the cows, is a very low self... he lacks a measure... but

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what an infinite accent falls upon the self by getting God as a measure!’ (Kierkegaard: 93).

#### LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR P.92

Don Lorenzo Milani had a strong belief in the role schools could play to help every person achieve equality, that is, achieve the necessary tools to become a free citizen. In *Esperienze Pastorali* he argues: ‘In modern times, life requires an increasing number of “intellectual” performances from every citizen (politics, trade unionism, bureaucracy etc.) which were not required from the labourer of the past century. Today, in the world of work, the position of unqualified workers has already become untenable. In the not too distant future one can foresee the need for a total technicalisation of the workers, and this is becoming a reality not at a human pace, but at an inhumanly dizzy speed, that is at the speed of the machines which are provoking it. It is thus no exaggeration to argue that today’s worker with his school leaving certificate obtained at the end of the fifth elementary class is far more socially handicapped than the illiterate labourer of 1841’ (Milani 1997: 169).

#### YOU ARE MEDIEVAL P.93

Evidence is very much conflicting on this matter. In the *Letter* the authors state that sometimes the whip (*frusta*) was used to discipline the students. For his part, Lorenzo Milani writes to his mother with a certain apparent degree of pride saying, ‘I have taken advantage of your departure to give some beneficial lashes. Eda had foreseen it and it was for this reason that she did not want you to leave. I would have made you see the great devotion with which they receive the lashes, even for the slightest thing.’ And again, ‘Meanwhile, the children caused me a lot of trouble... so I flogged them to death’ (Battelli: 436). However, Nevio, one of the pupils who participated in the collective writing process of the *Letter*, explains that ‘There were no such things as lashes. His slaps, if you want to call them such, or some kick in the shin when we were seated around a table with him, were only affectionate demonstrations of his Fatherly care and love. On my first day at school, he said to my father: “From now on your son will be my son. If there is need for me to rebuke him or to give him some slap [*scappellotto*], I will do it.” Father answered: “I send him to you in order to learn. Do all that you deem necessary.” (*Scappellotto* means a slight slap on the back of the head, on the neck, usually given in a friendly sort of way)’ (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). It is difficult to arrive at the real facts from this conflicting evidence. Within the framework of the *Letter*, however, it seems that the reference to the *whip* is only meant to juxtapose the cruelty of the *pen* that, when used by the teacher to write the ominous word – *failed!* – it sentences a student to a lifetime of mediocrity.

## ANTI-CLASSISM P.94

Lorenzo Milani, son of the Florentine high class, had very clear aims in his educational endeavours. He did not want his students to renounce to their culture in order to enter the privileged groups, but rather to evolve from their own culture towards a more fulfilled humanity where equality and not domination are the chief characteristics. His aims were not against the higher social classes but rather against the very idea of different social classes. In *Esperienze Pastorali*, he states very clearly and in no uncertain terms: 'Loving the poor, proposing to oneself to give the poor person the place he deserves, means not only giving him higher salaries, but above all giving him a better awareness of his own superiority, putting in his heart a repugnance for all that is bourgeoisie, making him understand that it is only by behaving exactly the opposite of the bourgeoisie that he can ever walk in front of them and eliminate them from the political and social scene' (Milani 1997: 105).

## CELIBACY P.95

At face value, it seems that Lorenzo Milani is against having married teachers, or that he does not give credit to the positive effects of married life on a teacher's performance at school. However, the crux of the argument here is not marriage but the ability of the teacher to dedicate himself or herself totally to his or her students. In Milani's opinion, this hardly happened in state and church schools. He considers smaller schools such as his own at Barbiana or a married couple who would dedicate as much time to other couple's children as much as they would dedicate to their own children, as the best options. The main characteristic of a true teacher is a dedication to his or her students that is infused with love. Writing to Giorgio Pecorini (10.11.1959), he recounts how he tried to explain to two priests that his small school on the hills could not be just another church school open only to Catholics and aiming only to make them love the Church. True Christian love embraces all humanity. 'And how could I explain to them, so pious and so neat, that I love my children, that I have gone mad about them, that I only live to make them grow, to make them open, to make them blossom, to make them bear fruit? How could I explain that I love my parishioners much more than the Church and the Pope? And that, if I am putting my soul at risk, it is surely not because I have loved very little, but rather because I have loved too much?

And whoever does not teach in this way does not truly teach; and it is useless to discuss the difference between the denominational and the non-denominational school; and it is useless for him to bother to fill his school with religious images and uplifting speeches, because people do not have faith in those who do not love; and it is useless to try and keep atheistic teachers away from the school because children will not believe them if they do not love them passionately. And who can ever love

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children right to the bone without going against the sixth commandment, if not a teacher who, together with them, also loves God and fears Hell and longs for Heaven?

And so this is what I think: the school cannot be anything but non-denominational, and cannot be given except by a Catholic, and cannot be given for anything but for love (that is, not by the state). In other words, school as I want it to be will never exist except in some small parish on the mountains or in the small circle of a family where father and mother give lessons to their children' (Gesualdi 2006: 134-135).

STRANGE PRIVILEGE P.97

Don Milani's criticism of the state schools is double edged. Firstly, its timetable is very much reduced, giving the teachers a very "strange privilege" over other professions and occupations. Secondly, Don Milani argues that this privilege works in favour of students from the middle and upper classes. Children from the upper social classes will find an extension of the school within the boundaries of their own home. Children from the lower classes are at a disadvantage because they will not be exposed to the kind of culture obtained at school when they return to their homes very early in the afternoon. A solution to sort out this source of injustice is to extend school hours and provide the students from working and farming classes with more time at school. As Milani argues in a letter to Nadia Neri (7.1.1966), 'Naturally one must do much more than the state school does, with its meagre 600 hours. And so, whoever could not do like me, should only provide an afterschool in the afternoon, on Sundays and during Summer and bring the children of the poor to a full-time school just like the children of the rich' (Gesualdi 2006: 245).

CAREFUL WITH WORDS P.98

The accusation of being a 'classist' was hurled at Don Milani by none other than Cardinal Ermenegildo Florit, Archbishop of Florence, in a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1966. The Cardinal writes: 'Maybe you can stir consciences, but it is also true that vinegar converts the few, while a drop of honey maybe would attract more souls towards God. Pope John is a master in this. Maybe the same things you say could be told with the same force and with another tone, in a way that even the rich and the so called powerful (who are really the poorest in faith and the most hard hearted) would feel that they come from a heart that loves them too. Sometimes I have the impression that you have an excessive awareness of how much you have suffered, and that this makes you feel that you have a right to judge. And from here originates that certain atmosphere, almost of class struggle, which is present in

your interventions: faced with your harsh and sometimes sarcastic prose, whoever is reading immediately takes sides with one part or with the other, even in matters where judgement is in itself free; is driven into the fray rather than driven towards interior reform, which is the true struggle of the Church and the Christians, the same one that made, for example, the inhuman injustice of slavery, disappear. St. Paul, who had the makings of the polemicist, does not affront it head on, but his note to Philemon is enough to wound it where it hurts. You, Don Milani, are by nature an absolutist, and risk of producing, especially among those most deprived of culture and of faith, true class-conscious persons, little matters if they are of the right or of the left. This is what I wanted to say in my announcement with regards to the conscientious objection against conscription, in which, speaking both of the military chaplains and of you, I mentioned the class-conscious and partial spirit which unknowingly surfaces in some assertions which are true at the level of principle, but lend themselves to misinterpretation due to the methods used to defend them' (Gesualdi 2006: 249). What is in question here is of a very fundamental nature: what is the ontological nature of the Catholic priest? Is he to be a peace-loving person who tries to work out his pastoral duties in a hush-hush way trying to befriend everybody in a soft approach? Or is he to be a person who challenges the status quo, social and economic structures which generate injustice? It seems that Don Milani chose the latter approach, not out of spite as seems to be the interpretation of the Archbishop, but out of self-respect. In a letter to a fellow priest he writes that the priest should set himself 'The highest aim, even inhuman (perfect like the Father!) and [have] mercy, docility, paternal compromises, unlimited tolerance only for him who is far down and becomes aware of it and asks forgiveness and wants to start again in setting the highest aim' (Gesualdi 2006: 46). It seems that for the bishop, using harsh tones for the powerful and the rich would have led Don Lorenzo to play in the hands of the communists, who in post-war Italy were using their *Casa del Popolo* in the villages to compete with the *Azione Cattolica*. But as he does in *Esperienze Pastorali*, Milani refuses to play the game ensuing between the Vatican and the Communist party. He reserves harsh criticism for both *Azione Cattolica* and the *Casa del Popolo*. He refuses to befriend everybody and decides that, in the face of social, economic and cultural injustices, one cannot stand on the middle line trying to appease everybody. In front of such a situation one has to choose. For Milani the choice was one: 'This is, thus, the only remaining thing to do: remaining high up (that is in the grace of God), aiming high (for us and for others) and tease cruelly not those who are far down but whoever aims low. Making him see every day his own emptiness, his misery, his uselessness, his incoherence. Staying on everybody's balls like all the prophets have done, before and after Christ. Making ourselves disagreeable, boring, unbearable to all those who do not want to open their eyes on the light. And bright and attractive to those who have enough grace to get a taste of other values which are not of the world' (Gesualdi 2006: 47). Milani's words here are very reminiscent of the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke when he says: 'I have come to bring



fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think that I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division' (Luke 12: 49-51). It is thus clear here that Milani is putting his scholars on the guard: make your choices and dedicate yourselves to those who need your help in society, and do not expect any pat on the back from those who have chosen to appease the rich and the powerful and who defend their position by arguing that they do not want to incite class hatred.

THE COMMUNISTS P.99

While noting the authors' cynic comments on the Communist party here, it is ironic to note that while in San Donato di Calenzano, where Milani had a night school, Milani fell in the line of fire of both Communists and anti-Communists. He was hated by Communist party officials for being a Catholic priest in the first place. Luigi Zerini, a pupil of the *Scuola Popolare* at San Donato, recounts an episode that took place 'at Settimello, a particularly "red" outlying hamlet of Calenzano. I remember that one day we were returning from Florence by bike, I, Sandro Poli and Don Lorenzo. We arrived at the place where there is that long terrace in Piazza Primo Maggio [First of May Square] and a lot of people started saying: "Look, there's a priest!" And someone started spitting at Don Lorenzo. I increased speed and ran away and he pointed out to me: "You've been afraid, haven't you?"' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano, 1997: 169). He was also hated by the local Communist party officials of Calenzano because of his particular dedication to the poorest in town, the popular voting base of the Communist Party. Fosca Gramigni, from San Donato, explains, 'it is interesting to recall the words of an old Communist from Calenzano who once said: "With the way he acts, being so close to the poor, Don Lorenzo is doing much more harm to the Communists than a hundred normal priests." This theory was subsequently proven right by the figures (carried in *Esperienze Pastorali*) which showed that in the parish of San Donato, after the arrival of Don Lorenzo, there was a decline in the voters for the PCI [Italian Communist Party].'" On the other hand he was in the line of fire of the Catholic anti-Communists, not only because he welcomed Communist students in his school at Calenzano, but also because he did not distinguish between Communists and non-Communists in his pastoral work. Gramigni recounts how 'my father was one of the earliest communists and when he got sick in the lungs he was visited almost daily by Don Milani, with whom he already had a relationship of reciprocal esteem and affection. Well, Don Lorenzo did not categorize people in Communists and Christian Democrats or in Catholics and non Catholics but in rich and poor, exploiters and exploited' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano 1997: 132). Gianfranco Baldassini, a pupil of Milani's school at San Donato, testifies: 'He was all taken up by his mission of a priest who must teach the Gospels and had no half measures;

but he had the greatest respect for all, even for us children. Unfortunately a number of people did not understand him and called him “the Communist priest” because he welcomed everybody, even in his Popular Education School, which he organized for us children and, in the evening, for youths and men of the community’ (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano 1997: 105).

## SOVEREIGN P.104

As stated elsewhere, the ability to use the word in an effective way was crucial to become effective citizens according to Don Milani. One could not become ‘sovereign’ if he could not understand the language of those who occupy positions of power in society. It’s not that farmers and factory workers are less intelligent than the professionals. It’s just that the professionals have made a headway in the world because they have mastered the word. Farmers and factory workers are considered as second class citizens because they lack the ability to engage with the professionals. Writing to the editor of the *Giornale del Mattino*, a letter which the editor failed to publish, (28.03.1956), Don Milani argues that ‘...One can presume a priori that, for ex. a twenty year old woodsman is knowledgeable and has a vision of the world which is the same as that of a twenty year old university student. I do not mean equal, but equivalent yes...

I am therefore sure that the difference between my child and yours is not in the quantity, nor in the quality of the Treasure hidden away in his mind and heart, but something which is on the threshold between being let in and being left out. Or better still, it is the threshold itself: the Word...

What my children lack is therefore only this: control over the word. Over other people’s word in order to grasp its intimate essence and its precise parameters; over their own word so that it expresses without any strain and without betrayals the infinite riches hidden away in the mind.

I have been teaching farmers and workers for the last eight years and I have cast aside almost all the other subjects. I don’t do anything but language and languages. I refer to etymologies ten, twenty times every evening. I spend time on words, I dissect them, I make them come to life like persons who are born, develop, transform themselves, deform themselves...

And here is my social ideal. When the poor will know how to obtain control over words as if they were persons, the tyranny of the pharmacist, of the speaker in a political meeting and of the landowner’s overseer will be broken...

When a doctor, in this day, speaks with an engineer or with a lawyer, he speaks on an equal footing. But this is not because he knows as much as them about engineering or about the law. He speaks with them on an equal footing because he shares with them the control over the word. Well, we can bring the worker and the farmer to this parity without causing society to go into ruin. There will always be the worker and the engineer; there is nothing to do about that. But this should in no way imply that

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today's injustice should perpetuate itself in that the engineer should be more human than the worker (I call human whoever has control over his word). This is not a professional requisite, but a need of life of every man, from the first to the last who call themselves humans' (Gesualdi 2006: 64, 65).

#### THE REAL EXAM P.108

It had become customary for Don Milani to send the older pupils of his school for work camps in foreign countries during the Summer. In this venture he was usually helped financially by Elena Brambilla, member of the rich Pirelli family, who in June 1965 cashed out the sum of 325,000 Italian Lire to support the whole project for that Summer, as well as by the local council of Vicchio which dished out another 200,000 Lire (Battelli: 436). Students travelled in small groups or even on their own. For example, Arnaldo and Nello, in the Summer of 1965, 'will work in a mining village in Yorkshire and will be hosted by a teacher.' Six students in all were going to various destinations in England. 'Among these there is the first girl from Barbiana who will be travelling abroad on her own, that is, Luciana (17 years of age) who is studying to become a paediatric nurse' (Letter of L.Milani to Elena Brambilla in Battelli: 435). A year later she was followed by another girl. Writing again to Brambilla (11.9.1966) Milani says, 'Dear Elena, Mauro has finally decided to leave for England. At the same time a very secure offer has been made to me and which I had asked as a condition in order to send Carla. And so the first fifteen year old girl from Barbiana will finally have equality with the males. She is going to stay with a family for two months in England. For the trip I will send her brother with her; he has not been anywhere this year, and so he does one trip and two favours, one to himself and one to her' (Gesualdi 2006: 266).

#### SUEZ P.108

The reference to the Ethiopian war here refers to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-36. Milani experienced this war as a school boy. He comments on this in his *Letter to the Judges* written in 1965: 'They presented the Empire to us as if it were a Glory of the Fatherland! I was 13 years old. It seems just like yesterday. I jumped for joy for the Empire. Our teachers had forgotten to tell us that the Ethiopians were better than us. That we had gone to burn their huts, with their women and children inside, when they had not done anything wrong to us. That contemptible school, knowingly or unknowingly, I don't know, was paving the way for the horrors that followed three years later. It prepared millions of obedient soldiers. Obedient to Mussolini's orders. Or, to be more precise, obedient to Hitler's orders. Fifty million deaths' (Milani L. and the School of Barbiana 1965: 46).

## AGAINST A WALL P.109

It was in fact the way three students from Barbiana failed the end-of-year exams in the *Magistrale* that led Don Milani and his students to write a public letter denouncing the way boys (and girls) from the lower classes were being cast aside by the public school system. Nevio, one of the authors, writes that the *Letter* ‘started off as a denunciation of a great injustice perpetrated against some students who had the only misfortune of being mountain dwellers’ (Personal letter to the authors. 2008).

## EITHER US OR YOU P.109

Milani himself, in a letter to an unknown teacher employed in a *Magistrale* (07.12.1965), explains why he was so angry at teachers of the *Magistrale* and why *Letter to a Teacher* was an expression of his own and his students’ frustrations. In this letter he goes into some detail about why his students felt like outcasts at the teacher training college in Florence. The themes underpinning this letter are developed further in the following paragraphs of *Letter to a Teacher*. Lorenzo Milani writes, ‘I have a marvellous school which dishes up marvellous children who speak fluently two or three modern languages, who have worked abroad for long periods of time, who know everything about politics and trade unionism, who lead a very austere life which no seminary rector would ever dream of. The children who leave here in order to become trade unionists prevail over their surroundings. Those who go to work in workshops abroad or in Italy, make an impact. However, those who would like to dedicate their life to teaching run into the wall of the *Magistrale*, receiving humiliations like little children, when they have been living for years like adults, stern adults. The writing method which I have taught them, there it is considered as inadequate, and then, with the topics they are given, they are not able to write because they consider the topic a farce, something conventional. Here they were used to write only when there was the need to write and never in the form of an exercise. Speaking a foreign language fluently there, is not given any consideration at all if one does not know all the petty rules. Modern history in which they are very strong, they do not even do it there. Political Geography, which they know very well, is not even considered as a requirement. A knowledge of trade unionism even less so. A passion for teaching, or even the years of teaching experience they have accumulated here while teaching their younger peers is not given as much consideration as the knowledge of the kinship of Aeneas (about whom my children do not know anything, and then they do not want to know the kinship of somebody who has never existed). All in all, it is a series of tragedies’ (Gesualdi 2006: 240-241).

One of the two students who had eventually made it at the Istituto Tecnico was Aldo Bozzolini who published his own memoirs of his days at Barbiana. In his book he tells how he was one of the first group of students at the school of Barbiana. His experience sheds light on the way Milani encouraged his students to dedicate

themselves either to teaching or to trade unions. Michele Gesualdi had managed to get into the Cisl, one of Italy's three major trade unions, and helped to make one of Milani's dreams come true. On the other hand, his students who tried to take up teaching were finding their way blocked by insensitive examiners at the *magistrali* teacher training institutes who failed them in the end of year exams. Aldo Bozzolini took a completely different route which was neither the *magistrale* nor the trade union. He felt he was discriminated by his peers for choosing a different path but he vindicates his choice by arguing that in *Letter to a Teacher* he is personally pinpointed as a proof that the school of Barbiana produced students who were well prepared to continue with their studies elsewhere, an argument made to prove that if Barbiana students failed at the *magistrali*, it was not because there was anything wrong with the teaching methods used at Barbiana but because there was something wrong with the *magistrali*.

'In order to go to the *superiori* you had to have the school leaving certificate from the *media* school. Helped in Latin by our teacher Adele Corradi, we prepared ourselves for the exam. But for me, the possibility of going to the *magistrale* was not the best thing. The memories and the things I felt in the hostels, summed up to Latin which I did not like, much in the same way that I thought that life in the trade union, which I had experienced for about 20 days together with Michele who was already then at the Cisl, was not for me, led me to take a different route. I criticized the Prior for having a kind of school where one rarely got to the bottom of things and which was too much, way too much, based on the measure of helping others either through the school or through the trade union (even if then, out of the first six students, I was perhaps the only one to work for free for two years, at a time when the community work alternative to conscription still did not exist!). I wanted to go deeper in my study of technical subjects and, having made up for a 4 in Latin in the September supplementary exam, I enrolled at the *Istituto Tecnico* "Leonardo da Vinci" in Florence, where in '68 I obtained a diploma of Technical expert in Telecommunications. This contestation of mine, even if it cost me discrimination for many years (even after the death of the Prior), and the tag of he who studies "for himself", or even worse, "for the masters", I have to acknowledge the fact that the Prior left me free to do it, and in the end I found myself indicated as a testimony to "the school of Barbiana that works". "Even the two who attended the *Istituto Tecnico* have succeeded. They pass just like Pierinos. Our culture holds up wherever there is true life. At the *magistrali* it is useless." (*Lettera a una professoressa*, 103)' (Bozzolini: 103).

## BLIND P.113

Here Milani and his students are comparing the way the establishment reacts to the first year university students' behaviour towards the traffic warden, and the way it reacts towards the workers when they use more sober ways to protest for their rights. The first are considered as innocent and pardonable pranks while the second are

considered as an affront to law and order. With relation to these double standards, in his *Appunti per un nuovo galateo*, a work never brought to completion and publication, Milani wrote: 'I do not accept lessons in good manners from people who consider me as insensible to neighbourly sensibility in such things as for ex. a beard that has not been well shaved, and who at the same time keep servants, or worse still, keep them in the kitchen. In reality, it is just a house of cards meant to conceal under the pretence of respect for others, the egoism and the exploitation of the poor. In other words, bourgeoisie education does not teach respect for one's neighbour, but only respect for those who belong to the dominant class' (Pecorini: 217).

## THE INDIVIDUAL P.118

Lorenzo Milani was very conscious of the key role he played in his own school. He was not a neutral facilitator but what in Freirean terms is called "an authoritative teacher" (Freire 2001: 83). And he considered his teaching role as inseparable from that of parish priest. In *Esperienze Pastorali* he argues: 'I do not think it is very difficult to show that, a parish priest who considers the teaching of the poor as his main concern and activity would not be doing anything that is beyond his specific mission (kindly allow me this heresy, given that a worse heresy than this, that of the priest whose main activity lies in the youth club, has been by now consecrated). As a father he cannot permit that his children live at so different a level of humanity, or worse than that, that the great majority live at a level of humanity that is so much inferior to his own, or that is not human at all. As a preacher of the Gospel he cannot remain indifferent in the face of the wall that the ignorance of the civil population places between his preaching and the poor' (Milani 1997: 219).

## THE SEMINARY P.118

Milani was very preoccupied with the way Seminaries throughout Italy recruited aspirants to the priesthood from among the subaltern lower classes, educating them into further submission and sending them back into their own fold to educate their kin into obedience towards the political (including ecclesiastical) structures that oppress them. Milani's view of education was the exact opposite of this, that is, educating the sons of the subdued classes to become 'sovereign citizens', 'servants of God and of no one else'. Speaking to the journalist Giorgio Pecorini some months earlier, Milani had stated: 'Now, as I was saying, the seminary which gathers all the sons of the poor is diabolical, because it gives lessons in humility to the humble. It has brought up the priests we usually find around: extremely good, extremely humble, extremely tending towards obedience, towards dedication, towards..., how shall I put it?, towards subjection; because it takes the sons of the subjected and subjects them. This is the seminary. And it dishes out priests who will educate

children, who are the Italian Catholics, who before making a political alliance, they go and ask permission from a cardinal' (Pecorini: 293).

AGRICULTURAL CULTURE P.121

The authors want to drive home the point that in the schools, the culture of the farmers was wholly ignored and was only taken on board in a sense of tokenism rather than in a sense of true acknowledgment and engagement. It was very evident that hegemonic culture was the culture of the middle classes living in the post-war industrialised flourishing Italian cities and towns. Here the authors want to reiterate the fact that if the children of the farmers did not feel comfortable with the culture which surrounded them in state schools, it was not because they were stupid, devoid of any knowledge and culture, or because they were not able to learn new things, but just because their own knowledge and culture never enjoyed any form of legitimacy within the school. Writing to the editor of the *Giornale del Mattino*, (the letter was not published) (28.3.1956), Don Milani questions the validity and intrinsic value of certain knowledge imparted at school and argues vehemently against the total exclusion of rural culture from the official syllabi: 'Ten years during which a child has kept his eyes wide open on the world are worth ten years here on Mount Giovi as in Via Tornabuoni [a street in the city of Florence]. And while your children were fixing their eyes on a heap of chosen things, my children were not keeping their eyes closed; they were rather fixing them on other things. Your children know about the dinosaur and the puma but cannot tell a male rabbit from a female. My children do not know the colours of the traffic lights, neither if a water-tap is to be turned to the right or to the left; but in compensation they know everything about life in the woods with its infinite number of nests, reptiles, plants, as they change with the seasons and with every hour. Ten years are worth ten years, believe me. It is true that in books you will find a *concentration* of observations which we cannot obtain relying only on our own eyes. But in compensation, in the big book of the woods and the fields, there is a *concreteness* of observations that one can never obtain from books' (Gesualdi 2006: 63).

ALONE LIKE DOGS P.122

Here the argument follows up on that of the previous paragraph. The children living on the hills outside the celebrated city of Florence not only learned from nature but also from the social relationships and customs in which they gravitated. The authors question the anonymity of life in the living quarters of the ever expanding Italian cities during the post-war economic boom and give value to the way people on the hills managed to forge social relationships notwithstanding the adverse living conditions on the hills. In the letter to the editor of the *Il Giornale del Mattino*

(28.3.1956), Don Milani further develops his argument: ‘But beyond the book of the woods there is also that of the families. A child of ours knows much more about the families and their laws and their relationships, than one of yours. A funeral passes and you do not know who has died, how he has died, if he has left any sorrow and feuds behind. What do you want to know about life, then, beyond the restricted circle of your home or of the books you read and which deceive you because they are usually written by people isolated in a hard crust like you?’ (Gesualdi 2006: 63). Following upon this reasoning, Milani even came to the conclusion that writing books in order to educate others was not worthwhile anymore because ultimately his publications will end up being read only by people whose culture depends mainly on reading books rather than ‘reading the world’. On the other hand, ironically, they would not be read by the illiterate lower classes to whom he had dedicated his whole life. So he decided to resort to writing only if it helped to empower his students. And the only acceptable solution to this dilemma was the use of collective writing in the school of Barbiana, which resulted in the drawing up of two very important publications, the *Letter to the Judges*, published in October 1965, and *Letter to a Teacher*, published in 1967. Speaking to a group of students and lecturers from a school of journalism of Florence in December 1965, he comments: ‘And so, from that time onwards I have stopped writing – well, it is also true that I had written very little, I had written that book [*Esperienze Pastorali*] and that’s all – I have stopped writing because I am not interested in writing when I know that so great a number of my brothers,... of my fellow citizens, is not in a position to read it; and I am not inclined to write for an élite, and so I have stopped writing immediately, and I will not write anymore, and I will not have written anymore, if not in these two or three occasions which have come our way, and so we have written in the form of a school exercise, considering them in the same way in which we today consider a work of art. We have produced the letter to the judges in the same way one would produce a work of art, we consider it a work of art, we have a very precise artistic technique; this is our daily activity, it consists in learning how to write, learning how to convince, learning how to... influence others using the word. And so, having taken the lead provided by the provocation of the military chaplains, or something like that, we happened to come up with this document as a product of our school. Then my activity, by now, is that of a teacher, and if, by any chance, while doing my job as a teacher, there comes an occasion for us to write a letter which causes a sensation, support, hatred and all that it [*Letter to the Judges*] has produced, it is simply because we write very well. This is the reason’ (Pecorini: 348).

The reference in this paragraph to the flooding of Florence is not only a casual reference. The event had achieved international proportions with young people and art students from all over the world going to Florence to help save the artistic heritage of the city from the ravages of the flood. The flood had also impinged on the work on the Letter, even if Barbiana was not affected negatively by the flood. Don Milani writes to his mother saying, ‘Since yesterday we have taken the work on the letter back in hand. In the past days I thought it was indecent for us to remain here to dwell



on poetry while so many people are in anguish. Then everything passes. At least for us who are not on the spot!’ (11.11.1966) In two other letters, Milani describes the effects of the flood. Writing to Francuccio he states, ‘The flood has recreated the atmosphere of the post-war period. Priests and Communists, standing shoulder to shoulder, have taken the situation in hand. The government is always the last to arrive and nobody trusts it. Priests, who up till yesterday were not worth anything and did not know where to unwind their day, neither them nor their youths, have opened the church for meetings with the Communists or for the setting up of aid collection and distribution centres. When everything would have passed, who knows what will remain of this’ (4.12.1966, in Battelli: 471). In a letter to Mauro, a student of Barbiana residing in London at the time of the flood, he describes the social situation created in Florence. ‘All of a sudden the farmers of the mountains have taken hold of the situation just like twenty years ago [the immediate post-war period]. In Florence, the rich and the poor have become once again equal, all soiled from top to bottom with mud and fuel oil, begging for a piece of bread and a flask of water. The poorest among the poor, if they have not found themselves in the flooded areas, have never been so well. For the others a very tragic Winter lies ahead. As for the aqueduct of the Anconella which provides for 75% of the Florentines, it will take about one month of works. And without water they cannot even clean their homes and the few things that remain. In the countryside there are thousands of evacuees just like in the days of the war.’ Milani goes on to describe with great satisfaction the voluntary work carried out by the boys of San Donato di Calenzano, his ex students, to help those most stricken by the flood, including old people and animals (letter to Mauro 11.11.1966. Gesualdi 2006: 275). The flood had also affected Don Milani in an indirect way. The Libreria Editrice Fiorentina had reprinted 3000 copies of Milani’s first book, *Esperienze Pastorali*. But all copies had been carried away by the flood while they were in the binding process. In the meantime the publisher had come to know about Milani’s *Letter to a Teacher* and was insisting on publishing it as soon as possible in order to make up for the loss of the 3000 copies of the first book (Letter to his mum 21.11.1966 in Battelli: 473).

## HUMAN CULTURE P.123

Here Milani and his students accuse the state school teacher that she is unable to speak the language of the students she teaches, because she is completely cut off from their culture. This is in stark contrast to Lorenzo Milani who as a teacher had committed what Freire calls a ‘cultural suicide’, shedding his bourgeois culture in order to immerse himself in the culture of his students. In the words of Michele Gesualdi, ‘The majority of the intellectuals who came up to Barbiana, did it for egoistic reasons. They came up there to meet the interesting, intelligent, fascinating, progressive person, the person to be interviewed. When they, then, went back to the city, very often they made of this strange figure the object of their sitting room chats.

Very often they did not take any notice of the school, nor of the fact that by now Don Lorenzo was a different person and had changed from within. He had probably fought with the angel, he had won and came out of it a cripple, a different man just as happened to Jacob after his fight with the angel. Of all this, the intellectuals have been, and still are, all in the dark. He was not the white man who worked for the welfare of the black people, but rather the white man who became black, who lived among them and like them, having adhered completely to their cause' (Gruppo Don Milani, Calenzano. 2000: 52).

## PEDAGOGY P.125

We have been tempted to seek the pedagogical points of reference of Milani. Notwithstanding the fact that this letter is all about pedagogy, there is hardly any reference to established pedagogues in the text. We have asked Adele Corradi, a volunteer teacher in Barbiana during the last three years of its existence, about Don Milani's pedagogical points of reference. She told us that 'I cannot answer because I don't know. I have never heard him speak of pedagogues. But I have attended the school of Barbiana only from 1963 to 1967 in my free time when I was not at my school. The contacts with Mario Lodi have certainly made him aware of the Movement of Cooperative Learning and probably of the ideas of Freinet (I'm only trying to guess). One must ask Mario Lodi. I also know of a letter by Don Milani (I don't know to whom) where Milani asks someone to find him a book by Dewey' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). The school in which Mario Lodi worked was actually the state school, at the heart of much of the criticism that characterizes *Letter to a Teacher*. But the social, economic and political environment in which he worked was not very different from San Donato and Barbiana. Mario Lodi describes his motivation to seek a new pedagogy that responded to the needs of a people living in misery and subjection by participating in the Movement of Cooperative Learning, giving life to a kind of pedagogy the tenets of which were also at the base of much of the learning that went on in Barbiana itself. Mario Lodi published his experiences in the state schools of San Giovanni in Croce and in Vho di Piadena in two books, *C'È Speranza Se Questo Accade Al Vho* (1963) and *Il Paese Sbagliato. Diario di un'esperienza didattica* (1970).

## GOSPEL P.126

In the school of Barbiana the Gospels were a central text. As explained by Nello, a student of Barbiana, every Sunday Don Milani used to give an extensive explanation of a text from the Gospels. This was not done in church during Sunday Mass but in the school room, adjacent to the church. '[Sundays were] just like all the other days, school work or reading or else getting into conversation with the guests who came to

Barbiana in order to get to know this extraordinary person. We, together with the people from San Donato, inhabitants of that controversial parish, who used to come there on buses. We gathered in one single family around the Prior. The only difference from the other days was the celebration of the Holy Mass at 11.00am, with a detailed explanation of the Gospel, not in church but in the classroom with all the parishioners, who later came with us in church for the Mass, all very heedful and disciplined' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). The central place occupied by the Gospels explains in a way Lorenzo Milani's return to basics in his relationship with the institutional church. In his first book, *Esperienze Pastorali*, he questions the effectiveness of the pastoral activity going on in the parishes, as well as the connivance between the Vatican, the echelons of the Italian Church and the hegemonic *Democrazia Cristiana* which ruled Italy for almost fifty years in the post-war period. It seemed to him that tradition and rituals had obfuscated the real source of Christian life. In a letter to his friend Don Ezio Palombo, (17.12.1955), Lorenzo Milani sums up his thoughts about the Gospels: 'To say the least, very little will remain in the listeners of the idea of what the Gospel really is and of how dear it is and of how much attention it merits and of how far it is from being just a simple fairytale, and that it is rather the object of interminable and passionate study' (Gesualdi 2006: 75).

RELIGION P.126

According to Don Lorenzo Milani, the ideal religion lesson would be one where the student is helped by the priest, representative of the Church's magisterium, to interpret the Gospels, the real source of Christian life. Speaking to Giorgio Pecorini in an interview on the 1st of May 1965, he states: 'But if it's true, which I believe it is, that Jesus wanted the Church to be, hem... authoritative for the very reason mentioned earlier... about supervision, about the truth, about unity in doctrine, for the fact that we need an objective truth and not a subjective one – all things which I extremely believe to be true – then I will not leave the Church for anything in this world: because I remember what it was like to live outside the Church, trying to read the Gospel without the support of the Church. Someone who tries... a miserable student, or a young painter, who tries to find the truth with the Gospel in hand, what would the Gospel tell him? He would find himself facing an infinite number of words which can be interpreted... all the words can be interpreted in a thousand ways; he would be at a loss. And if, at a certain point, imagine a student, a person who has always lived away from the Church and from Religion, and who will feel a religious urge, who will want to hear a word from God rather than from his own reasoning...: this is Religion. Religion consists in expecting the truth to come from high, from God, from revelation, from a sacred book, from a church or whatever, this is Religion. If one gets into this frame of mind, he will take the Gospel in hand, he will think it is a marvellous book, and will expect the truth out of this Gospel... And then there isn't one page in the Gospel, if he is consistent,

there isn't one page in the Gospel in which the doubt will not come continuously to his mind: "But this must be the interpretation which suits my interests." That is, I will find myself again in the same situation of when I was a philosopher rather than a theologian' (Pecorini: 297-298).

## HISTORY P.128

The history which the pupils at Barbiana were familiar with was in fact modern and contemporary history, a branch which evidently was ignored at the *Magistrale*. As Milani himself explains to a teacher of the *Magistrale*, 'Modern History, in which they are very well read, is not even done there. Political Geography, about which they would know everything, is not given any consideration. Trade union culture even less' (Gesualdi 2006: 240). It was very much evident that the teaching and learning going on at the *Magistrale* institutes was meant to give the student-teachers a very basic knowledge of classic culture that was very much removed from the social, cultural and political concerns of the lower classes, something which at Barbiana occupied centre stage.

With regards to the obsession with wars and with the idea of the nation-state, the fatherland, or Patria, Milani writes in his reply to the military chaplains of Tuscany: 'If you have the right to divide the world into Italians and foreigners, then I must tell you that in your view of things, I have no Fatherland and I claim the right to divide the world into disinherited and oppressed on one side, and privileged and oppressors on the other. The first are my Fatherland, the others are my foreigners' (Milani n.d.: p.12).

## A HUMBLE TECHNIQUE P.131

Lorenzo Milani was introduced to the idea of collective writing by Mario Lodi, a teacher at Piadena, Cremona. In a letter to Lodi (2.11.1963), which contained a letter by the students of Barbiana in which they described the way things worked in their school, Milani writes: 'Dear master, I enclose the letter. I thank you for proposing this idea to us because I felt myself at ease using it. In all these years I have been teaching, I have never had such a complete and deep reaching occasion to study the art of writing with my students. So everything is fine for us. I'm even very enthusiastic about it. On the other hand I'm afraid the letter will not suit you. Being all immersed in the study of the maximum level of ability of expression of these children, we have forgot somehow about the age of the readers. It's not that we have not taken it into account, but a curious phenomenon has occurred which I had not foreseen, but which I can now explain very well: the cooperative work and the prolonged rethinking have produced a letter which though entirely the work of these children, as much of the older students as of the younger ones, has resulted in the end to be of such a maturity that is beyond that of each of its single authors' (Gesualdi 2006: 171-172).

Mileno, one of the student-authors of *Letter to a Teacher*, speaking about the collective writing process, says that, ‘The collective writing which was at the origin of *Lettera a una professoressa* was in a sense very simple. All the students worked in a team around the topic under discussion. Then, under the guidance of Don Lorenzo, this would be followed by a process of simplification with the aim of obtaining clarity’ (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). Don Lorenzo explains the process in a letter to Franco Gesualdi. ‘We cut the whole thing into pieces and then put it together again using the scissors and glue. Now we are trying to make it as flowing as possible after these surgical operations which give consolidation and an underlying unity, but interrupt and weaken the flow in various ways’ (letter to F.Gesualdi 15.11.1966 in Battelli: 471). In the meantime, ‘We read it to all those who visit us, especially to people with a low level of education to see if they understand everything’ (letter to his mum, 8.12.1966 in Battelli: 474). Don Lorenzo also sent a copy to his spiritual director Don Bensi and to his former students at San Donato di Calenzano to obtain their feedback on the clarity of the Letter (Letter to his mum 7.2.1967 in Battelli: 477). Another copy was sent to Edoardo, a student of Barbiana who was in London at the time (Gesualdi 2006: 277).

Milani discussed this method of collective writing with architect Michelucci (architect of the railway station of Florence) who was also very interested in works of art which were the result of a collective effort leading to the almost anonymity of all the artists involved in the production. As an example, Michelucci often cited the artists who created the Christian mosaics or built mediaeval cathedrals or civil engineering works such as railway lines or motorways. Milani was enthusiastic about the idea in that, even *Letter to a Teacher* was the work of a group of artists. The end product would be the result of a collective effort which would have involved the Barbiana students, the people who contributed statistics, guests who gave their feedback on the text and Milani himself as coordinator of the whole effort. Because of this affinity to collective anonymous art, Milani asked architect Michelucci to write a preface to the Letter to highlight the writing process. However, ‘Michelucci’s preface turned out to be too difficult for the readers we had in mind and so I asked that good man if I could omit it’ (letter to F.Gesualdi 6.1.1967 in Battelli: 476). Michelucci’s preface was eventually published in a fortieth anniversary publication of *Letter to a Teacher* edited by Michele Gesualdi in 2007 by Libreria Editrice Fiorentina.

## PERSONAL OPINIONS P.133

The students of Barbiana speak very clearly on the role that the teacher, Don Lorenzo, had in the school. It was not a pseudo-democratic school on the lines grotesquely described here when speaking of the American school where students vote to show their opinion with regard to their teacher’s opinions. When asked to comment about the teaching style of Milani with reference to democratic teaching styles, Mileno declares unequivocally, ‘No democracy. He was the Master and the children the

students' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). On the other hand, Adele Corradi, a teacher who used to go to Barbiana in her free time to help out Don Milani, explains that, 'Everyone in Barbiana could discuss anything, contradicting the master, as long as he had "arguments", and not just empty words or a sterile wish for controversy' (Personal letter to the authors. 2008). What irked Milani most, in fact, were students from other schools who were given permission to come and visit Barbiana. Milani used to host these students giving them seats among his own pupils. Some were very respectful towards the way the school functioned. Others interrupted Milani and the Barbiana students with unwarranted personal comments and judgements, trying to show off their superiority in the face of a bunch of country boys. In an interview with the journalist and personal friend Giorgio Pecorini, done on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 1965, Milani speaks about these city students' personal opinions, a symptom of their superiority complex in relation to the inferiority complex of the lower classes: 'And so the characteristic ailment of the students is arrogance, and they should be humiliated. The characteristic ailment of the unfortunate, the mountain dwellers, the farmers, the many workers, even in the city... Because, in the city, you may find somebody who argues that the workers are emancipated and free. But it's only because he has known somebody who is emancipated and free. But the greatest majority is like that... frightened, thoughtful... just like the children here: extremely thoughtful, extremely cautious, they are very cautious about their words, and so they end up saying nothing. They keep silent a lot, they meditate a lot, they understand a lot, but they absolutely do not get involved in any way in society. They don't speak.

And so in my teaching here, even at San Donato, I have realised that the moral lesson to give to the sons of the farmers especially, is the lesson of pride. Not of humility. Exactly the opposite lesson. Because they never say anything; if only they said anything, even for once! They never say anything. They stay there, listen, think, judge, but it takes a lot to make them say a word. Think of a fellow like Maresco. He rarely says a word, but when he does it strikes like lightning. But you just can't imagine how much I have struggled to make Maresco speak... He was very shy. Maresco never said a word. I've had to struggle for years in order to make him speak; and now, finally, he speaks. But he speaks too little. And he is a masterpiece of a man. He is a great man. There are very few like him in the world. Can you imagine someone like Maresco to come out of university? It doesn't happen... I'll bet that in all Milan you wouldn't find one who has come out of university who has the same scale and preparation of Maresco, don't you think so? And why? Because he is the fruit of this silence, farmer and worker, of this humility, of this..., of this considering himself a small cog in a much bigger machine. Of not considering himself... 'above everyone else'. Here they say 'above everyone else', considering oneself 'above everyone else'.

How do the bourgeoisie educate their children? They educate them, from a very tender age, to give their own opinions on... on a *canto* of Dante, it's true; in the *Medie* they already ask them for their aesthetic comment on a poem, they ask them for their advice, they praise them if they have their own, personal opinion, it's considered an honour to have one's own idea etc.. As I was saying, Maresco, is the fruit of this humility, of not

#### LORENZO MILANI AND THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

giving any consideration to himself, coupled with my thrust towards pride, of my having spurred him on for years, saying: you're a great man, move, speak, take the situation in hand, do this, do that, no? And he has turned out to be the masterpiece he is now.

And so, the school of the poor must be all based upon an education for pride. And the school of the rich must be all based upon an education for humility. There's need for such a diametrical difference, in general, excluding all the exceptions; but normally that's how things stand (Pecorini: 292-293).

#### THE ART P.136

In an interview with students and lecturers from a Florentine school for journalists, Milani had already spoken about his idea of what true art is. Commenting on the technique of collective writing as used in the writing of the *Letter to the Judges*, Milani says: 'A work of art is that which manages to build a bridge between the one who makes it and the one who receives it; and if this is the definition of a work of art, then that is a work of art... That is, we start off with the idea, we go in search of truth through writing... and we correct it bit by bit, we improve upon it in search of the maximum efficacy using the minimum number of words: the greatest efficacy with the least possible number of words... When we prolong this process for weeks... and every time we received a friend... and were interested in getting his feedback, we would read it aloud and listen to his opinion, and recorrect, put things again in their right place, try to pinpoint all possible misunderstandings; and we would correct, recorrect, recorrect, polish, take away, cut out, remove repetitions... take away useless adjectives... summarise, concentrate even more... When we would have gone through this long process, we not only would have reached a high level of expression, a high level of... efficacy, that is of communication, but above everything else we would have reached the truth' (Pecorini: 349, 357).

#### THE DOUBT P.137

As stated above, Milani's dream for his students was not that of ushering them into the privileged group of the higher classes (change race) but that of creating true revolutionaries, people imbued with a great sense of generosity, people who acquire the necessary skills in order to enter politics and trade unionism in order to help the poor and the oppressed to have a better quality of life. Speaking of the Catholic politicians within the hegemonic *Democrazia Cristiana*, he reveals his scepticism towards their true motives: 'And tomorrow, when they will have taken away from the poorer classes some tens of thousands of individuals chosen among the best, and will have planted them in the closed orchard of the privileged to enrich it further with new flowers, impoverishing even further with this same act the emarginated classes, that is excavating deeper and wider the cultural divide, that day they will say that the D.C. has made an act of high social significance' (Milani 1997: 222).

## ALMS P.138

Francuccio had some initial problems to fix his trip to North Africa. As Lorenzo Milani himself explains in a letter to Elena Brambilla, the main sponsor of the students' visits abroad, 'Francuccio speaks good Arabic by now, but has not been able to find a single Arab country that would accept him for any reason. He is a welder (electric and oxygen), speaks good French and English. Today he is in Milan to speak to a certain padre Barbieri, a Jesuit, who is involved in these things. If he does not make headway even there, then he will go to England where he has already obtained a work contract and will improve his English. He is 15 years old, but small in stature and no one would take him seriously as he merits. Damn my school which brings children to maturity in an incredibly short time' (Battelli: 435).

With regards to the question of alms, Francuccio's letter was read aloud at Barbiana as usually happened with most of the letters posted at the school. A debate among the students followed. Lorenzo Milani wrote another letter to Francuccio (17.8.1966) to brief him about the ensuing debate and its conclusions. 'Dear Francuccio, today we have read your letter about almsgiving and we discussed it all together. Michele and Carlo have started saying that they have never done it and will never do it because it is not educational. And so I asked them what would they do with the Alpi [A family that had been settled in Barbiana for quite some time. Illiterate parents, chronically unemployed; eight children. Don Lorenzo provided the necessities for the children.] Michele says: "I would find them a job and would make them get down to it by hook or by crook." "Apart from the difficulties, what would you do with the children?" Conclusion: almsgiving is horrible when the person who gives it out thinks he has settled his obligations towards God and towards his fellow men. Politics is similarly horrible when the person who is involved in it thinks he is immune to the hardships of those whose immediate needs are not being satisfied because they still do not benefit from present policies. It is evident that today we need to move, with the one hand, the far reaching levers (politics, trade unions, the school) and with the other, the small but immediate levers of almsgiving' (Gesualdi 2006: 264).

In the end, Francuccio's stay in North Africa was cut short because of Don Milani's failing health. Adele Corradi writes that 'Francuccio had come back from a muslim country, from Libya I think, where he had gone to work in order to learn well how to speak Arabic. Don Lorenzo had called him back from there because by now he was quickly reaching the end and now he looked at him, happy to have him by his bed side' (Corradi: 130).

## SUPERFICIAL P.141

The results of the two students at the *Magistrale* arrived in Barbiana when the students involved were abroad as part of Milani's apprenticeship programme in various countries in Europe and North Africa. Milani's reaction was very strong to



say the least. Writing to his mother he explains, ‘Il Biondo [Luciano] and Enrico have been failed. It is a shame, especially for Il Biondo who has spent the Summer studying from morning to evening. The others have all passed, with the exception of Michele who pulled out’ (Letter of L.Milani to his mother 13.09.1965 in Battelli: 443). On the same day he wrote to Luciano himself who was in England at the time. Milani spares no feelings. ‘Dear Luciano, both of you have been failed with 4 – 4 and 4 – 4 – 5. I hope that you will not let yourself be disheartened because of those [...] beasts. I am happy that you will get over it. Remain in England as much as you deem fit and then come back here to study on your own and at liberty’ (Gesualdi 2006: 214). A year later, the same thing happened to three students from Barbiana. Eventually this was the final straw. Writing to Gostino Burberi, a student from Barbiana working in Milan (20.9.1966), he states, ‘We are working on an important open letter to the teacher who failed Il Biondo and Enrico last year. This year’s three failures have rekindled my anger and I think that we will make a masterpiece out of it. It will be a hymn of faith in the school and a manifesto of the parents’ union of which, you and Michele will one day become the soul’ (Gesualdi 2006: 268).

## SECOND REVENGE P.142

We have been tempted to ask what had led Don Milani and his pupils to use such outspoken and daring language in this letter. Such words as ‘vendetta’ (revenge) addressed to the teaching body as a whole was no mean feat. We may get an inkling about this from a letter which Milani sent to his friend journalist Giorgio Pecorini. Commenting on the similar language used in *Lettera ai cappellani militari* Milani writes, ‘I shoot aimlessly because I have nothing to lose’ (Battelli: 427). The phrase ‘I have nothing to lose’ seems to imply that he was aware of a looming premature death due to his serious illness. In fact, he died the same year in which *Letter to a Teacher* was published. It seems that in the last years of his life he wanted to leave no stone unturned in anything that concerned the wellbeing of his students.

Adele Corradi, collaborator at his school during the last three and a half years of his life, writes about the end of the writing process of *Letter to a Teacher* which seemed to coincide with don Milani’s end. There seemed to be some apprehension about the fact the Don Milani might not make it to see the *Letter* concluded and sent to print. ‘It was almost Spring. And work on the *Letter* had been going on for almost nine months. But it was still not finished and at times tension emerged. Because the illness progressed. And time was running out quickly. There was the need to hurry up. But one morning, the boys had just stood up from the table where they worked and there was only me in don Lorenzo’s room, standing next to the table, because I was going to leave, too. “I’m not afraid,” said he all of a sudden, and I stopped. What was it that he was not afraid of?, I asked myself listening to him without looking at him. “I’m not afraid of not being able to say all that I still have to say before the time runs out... It’s not important that I say it... Truth makes a headway for itself” (Corradi: 140).

## WE'RE WAITING FOR A LETTER P.142

This letter would have found an empty school since Don Lorenzo died soon after the publication of the letter. His mother comments: ‘This one of the 27<sup>th</sup> of February [1967] is the last one I have received from Lorenzo. There was no more correspondence afterwards because in March Lorenzo came over to my house in Florence for radiation and remained there, except for a short return to Barbiana in April, till the day of his death, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1967’ (Battelli: 480).

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The words (Personal letter to the authors, 2008) refer to the correspondence exchanged between two of the authors of this book and former students and collaborators of Lorenzo Milani

## **EPILOGUE**

### **DEFICIT MENTALITY AND THE NEED FOR SUBVERSION: REFLECTIONS ON MILANI**

John P. Portelli

In this essay, I shall consider two themes which, in my view, are well related to the ideas and actions of Don Lorenzo Milani, the Tuscan cleric who went against the flow in various ways. This commentary will focus on the educational aspect of his work. Milani strongly criticised the educational institutions of his time on the grounds that they were not promoting social justice. On the contrary, the schools and many of the educators looked on working-class students with a certain fatalism and through the lens of deficiency. They saw no intellectual potential in these children. This is an affliction which still affects us strongly to this day, especially in today's context of neoliberalism. Therefore, the problem of the deficit mentality is the first theme to be considered. However, Milani was not discouraged and he dedicated himself heart and soul to subversion as a means with which he could ameliorate the socioeconomic situation. As far as he was concerned, as he stated clearly and openly, obedience, in the context where he practised, was not a virtue. Blind obedience which doubled the injustice and shackled passion and the spirit for what is right and just was a debilitating vice (Milani, 1969). Instead, he proposed subversion – and this is the second theme I shall consider in this essay.

I commence with the theme of deficit mentality. This mentality goes back a long way: it is not a modern phenomenon. This mentality rejects all that is considered as being not “normal” when compared to the values and qualities of the dominant. Ultimately, this mentality is the root of colonialism and imperialism. Therefore this mentality creates two classes of citizens: those who are considered “normal” according to the norms of the times and those who are marginalized as they are different from what is deemed to be “normal” by the dominant views. This mentality has led to racism, sexism, classism and homophobia, among other social problems. If white people, men and the rich were considered to be the norm, then black people, women and the poor would be regarded as weak and abnormal. We cannot ignore the fact that, for a long time, black people and women were not regarded as citizens fit to hold their own opinions and to vote.

However, one may retort: Do we still have a deficit mentality today, considering the progress made in the social sphere? It is true that progress has been made in some aspects when one considers the situation of workers, black people and women 200

years ago – although in the last 15 years or so the attack on unions from neoliberal politicians and abuses from neoliberal managerial mentalities has produced a deterioration of workers' conditions (for example, the massive increase of part time employment without benefits and security is alarming while, at the same time, salaries of CEOs continue to increase). But this does not mean that, in the field of education, the deficit mentality has disappeared. There are various examples one could quote from the literature (Valencia, 1997; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Borg & Mayo, 2006; Weiner, 2006). However, I will cite some examples from my experience as an educator in North America. Wang, a fifteen-year old student of Asian descent, was doing very well in his English literature classes. On one occasion, when he wrote the best essay in a class of 35 students, his teacher asked him if he had really written the essay. When he asked why, she replied, "Because, seeing that you are Asian, I expected you to be good in Maths and not in English." As if there is necessarily any connection between ethnicity and academic qualities! Mandira, a nine-year old girl of Indian descent, wished to train with the school basketball team. She was very good at sports but, when she spoke to the gym instructor about her plans, he said, "You had better go home because I know that your family won't let you play. They want you girls to stay home to do chores and clean and marry young." You can imagine how Mandira felt! Furthermore, how many times have I met teachers who, despite never having taught or even set foot in a certain school, make negative comments and judgments about its students and schooling community, as if they knew all there was to know about the abilities of these students because they were from working class or immigrant families. And they would roll their eyes as they bad-mouthed these children and their families without having ever met them. On another occasion a teacher complained that the parents of a new immigrant student do not care about education. When I spoke to this student he told me that his parents really care about his education but since they both work 14 hours a day they cannot attend school activities. Yes, the deficit thinking mentality is still with us, hale and hearty.

What can we do to eradicate this mentality? First of all, we need to understand fully what this mentality means and what its implications are. This is a mentality that grips us all, even people like me who rant so much against it ... we do not even realise we have slipped into the deficit mentality. It is well to understand and query all that we consider to be "normal". "Normal" for whom? And in what context? And what is the justification for what is considered to be "normal"? And if there is a dispute about what is to be considered "normal" which position is to be considered as more important? And who will decide? The deficit mentality, without weighing the evidence fairly and critically, concludes that certain qualities are to be considered "normal". For example, why should a dialect be considered as a deficiency? From the point of view of a person who uses a dialect, it is the standard language variety that is, in fact, not "normal." However, a dialect could be closer to the way the standard variety used to be spoken in the past. Therefore, isn't this more "normal," historically?

In fact, it may happen that what is held to be different may not only satisfy the criteria of normality, but actually surpasses them. Who can tell how many good

qualities shown by our students we, as educators, have brushed aside simply because we were not familiar with these qualities? Just to give one example, I am not an expert in the field of vehicle technology, so how can I judge whether the qualities of a mechanic are more important than philosophical qualities?

As both Dewey (1916) and Noddings (2011) have argued there is no subject area that is intrinsically more intellectual than another one. Noddings (2011) concludes that: “If we identify the intellectual with thinking, the algebra taught in schools is not inherently more intellectual than cooking or motorcycle repair” (p.2). We need to widen, not restrict, the educational field if we really want to fight the deficit mentality – unless we do so our notion of education becomes too narrow and hence miseducative

Cooper (2009) argues that, while the form of thought based on deficit has changed over the years, this type of reasoning remains different from other thought as it places the fault for a student’s failure on the student’s shoulders and on the lack of those elements necessary for academic success, among them parents. This deficit reasoning leads to an educational policy designed to correct the behaviour of students and their parents without considering meaningful alternatives. The deficit mentality systemically makes us forget those aspects of the life-experience of students and their families that make them unique and resilient. When students do not perform well according to the accepted dominant norms the deficit mentality instantly assigns the blame to the student, or their families or their culture and never questions whether the failing is, in fact, due to the system itself. This mentality assumes that the system and its rules are invariably right and proper. Valencia (1997) points out that: “The model of thought based on the deficit concept ... assumes that any student who fails academically fails due to internal faults and deficiencies. These deficiencies manifest themselves ... in limited intellectual skills, linguistic faults, lack of motivation for learning and immoral behaviour” (p.3). And thus the system, with all its faults and inadequacies, remains untouched. But we, who work in today’s educational system, know only too well how many faults and problems bedevil this system! Naturally, criticising the system does not imply that all that the children bring to school is perfect. If we do that, we would be falling into the trap of excessive romanticism. There are cases where students’ attitudes and behaviours need to change. But the system also needs to change. Milani nurtured high and great ideals for the children he worked with. He never succumbed to fatalism. On the contrary, through discipline, humility and love, he continued to work for the benefit of his students as he was convinced they were as capable as any others. The main problem was the system and the distorted and stereotyped values it embraced.

Are we prepared to confront the systemic deficit problems and the corresponding attitudes that we have created as educators? Do we have the courage shown by Milani? If we are ready to overcome this mentality we have to be clear with ourselves about our ideological position. We cannot defend neutrality and pretend that everything is coming up roses. We have to admit that there are problems in the system including those we may have created ourselves. An unwillingness to admit the reality of such problems would amount to an expression of arrogance and foolhardiness – attitudes

which will hinder us from dismantling the deficit mentality. Yet, with courage and openness, we need to articulate the moral, political and pedagogical underpinnings of our work as educators and administrators.

Some of the educators I worked with, and who understood the problem of the deficit mentality, while working in a neoliberal system, often ask: how can I strive for the ideal of social justice when the system itself works against this ideal? It is precisely here that we can start to consider the second lesson we can extract from Milani's work – which is the importance of measured and diplomatic subversion.

Normally, we would have been brought up in such a way that, at first glance, our first reaction to the word 'subversion' would be a negative one. Subversion is considered as a 'bad thing' to be always avoided as it is deceitful and, therefore, considered to be a lie. But what does the word subversion really mean? The word 'subversion' is derived from two Latin terms: 'sub' (meaning below) and 'vertere' (meaning turning, to turn). So etymologically, the word means 'to turn or change from below.' In itself, there is nothing wrong and, in this sense, subversion can have many forms and positions. And we, as human beings, pass through so many moments of subversion that it is impossible to acknowledge every moment of subversion we go through. The matter becomes more delicate and complicated when we consider the context and the intention of the subversive act. If, for example, someone is working secretly to eliminate black people as he or she believes they have no right to exist like other human beings, or someone believes that children have no rights and tries secretly to indoctrinate them to believe that anyone with red hair is not human, then we are considering an aim that goes against human rights and dignity. But if some group works secretly to save some who are going to be killed, or changes course (as the Magi did after the visitation by the angel) with a good motive, then subversion is justified. Needless to say, there are cases where the matter is delicate and ambiguous. But the point I want to stress is that the popular image of subversion as being always something negative is a mistaken image which only serves to perpetuate certain customs and actions without consideration of the qualities of this behaviour.

Don Lorenzo Milani believed that, once schools were creating certain unjust conditions, it was necessary, both morally as well as pedagogically, to disobey certain educational policies and therefore necessary to work quietly, sometime behind the scenes, to change the situation. In the neoliberal moment we live in, there are many moral justifications for the need for subversion. Neoliberal ideology and policies are constructed on an extreme interpretation of the liberal principles of the nineteenth century in the philosophy of John Stuart Mill and even linked to the works of Locke and other eighteenth century figures. The two pillars of liberalism are the rights of the individual and liberty. In the political as well as the educational contexts of the last 25 years, these principles have been transformed into the adoption of rugged individualism, liberty without responsibility, wide choices in every aspect in an uncontrolled market, exaggerated instrumentalism and narrow reductionism and a mentality that believes that equity and equality (that is 'one size fits all') are the same thing. Without any doubt, those who, during the nineteenth century, worked for liberal

principles that opened the way for various human rights did not envisage today's neoliberal qualities. Various writers like Carlson and Apple (1998), Freire (1998), hooks (2009), Hyslop Margisson and Sears (2006), Ross and Gibson (2007), Sleeter (2006) and Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005), Mayo (2012), Borg (2013) and others argued that neoliberal qualities, in fact, work against the robust principles of critical democracy based on: satisfying everybody's needs, not just those able to pay for services; freedom of speech with a sense of responsibility; the need to set aside racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and other types of discrimination; the need of moral responsibility which goes beyond reductive accountability. These are the moral principles which are inherently linked to social justice.

If it is true that neoliberal qualities are contrary to moral principles, as I believe is the case, then both as educators as well as citizens, we have an obligation to strive to change the situation. How can I, for example, accept processes and criteria for entrance to educational programs which inherently favour those who are rich or who have enough contacts to overcome obstacles? How can I continue to accept school curricula that do not represent the needs of those who are less fortunate than myself? How can I continue to accept processes, criteria and actions in schools that are based on deficit mentality? How can I accept certain educational policies that are two-faced and meant to win votes instead of promoting the interest of the students who need to learn and make progress? These are examples I frequently encounter in the contexts where I work, which include the university context. I am also aware that it is not always possible to talk openly about these problems as those in positions of authority may not be open or amenable to justified criticism based on a sense of responsible morality. But, on the other hand, this does not mean that we cannot work together for change by using the tactic of diplomatic subversion. We need to be creative and make alliances. That which we cannot achieve on our own can be achieved through collective thought and creativity. Therefore, the work of educators who strongly espouse the ideal of social justice and equity has to be carried out on two levels. On an individual level, in the classroom, we have to prepare and help the children in all their needs, while keeping in mind the problem of the deficit mentality and, therefore, maintaining high ideals. To achieve this, in certain situations, it will be necessary that certain processes considered to be "normal" are not always followed. For example in the context of Ontario, in Canada, teachers are not supposed to provide any explanation during provincial testing of students. But some teachers do not observe this rule especially when their students are disadvantaged by the elitist nature of the subjects given for written work. On a more public level, we have to work together and highlight the existing problems in the educational system and provide evidence from our reality. And very often the best evidence can be found in the successes of our students or in the words of the students themselves who speak clearly and convincingly about the need to change certain "normalities".

In order to achieve the ideal of social justice and equity as explained in this essay we need to be courageous and develop sound justifications for our educational and moral initiatives. It is crucial that we exhibit a strong dosage of intellectualism (in contrast to

exhibiting formal academic qualities) and, at the same time, show how the ideal may be realised in various forms and under various conditions. It is equally imperative that we understand the criticism we may face in our work. The most common criticism is that those who believe in social justice are not neutral and have political motives. This criticism originates in the mentality that neutrality is possible and that it is a just aim. In fact, neutrality is not possible. It is possible to pretend to be neutral. But pretence is not reality. There is a substantial difference between 'being neutral' and 'pretending to be neutral'. And the statements and arguments for neutrality show, in themselves, that even this liberal position is, in fact, a political position. As human beings we can never escape the web of politics in the sense that our experiences as human beings always involve some element of a relationship to strength and power. Needless to say, we have to understand that the elements of a relationship to strength and power are not always negative.

There are various cases where a power relationship leads to positive situations and opportunities. And to achieve such possibilities we cannot ignore the problems of the deficit mentality and the contradictions created by neoliberalism. Above all, we also have to use subversion as a tool to change the immoral conditions which create pedagogical and educational problems. In the times we are living today, critical democracy demands that we take these steps. A democracy which does not struggle against the deficit mentality and the mentality of neutrality is a false and bankrupt democracy.

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