

OBITUARY

Alberto Asor Rosa, 1933–2022

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Alberto Asor Rosa died in Rome on 21 December 2022 at the age of 89. He was an astonishingly prolific, capacious literary critic and historian, a militant Marxist cultural operator and essayist (and latterly a novelist), whose influence over close on 60 years of intense debate around literature, politics and their role in Italian history was second to none. At his height, he was a formidable presence, immediately recognisable with his *baffi* and gruff manner, at the heart of several intersecting networks of influence centred on the Roman left (and its outpost at Capalbio in the Maremma area of Tuscany), the PCI, the Turinese publisher Einaudi and La Sapienza university, leading to the nickname ‘*il barone rosso*’.

The scale of his published work was prodigious: his contemporary and friend, the linguist Tullio de Mauro, in a tribute written for his eightieth birthday, jokingly calculated that Asor Rosa had produced, from his impeccably neat handwritten drafts, somewhere in the region of 200,000 printed pages, or 70 million ‘*battute*’ (De Mauro 2013, 75).¹ And he continued to write and publish for nearly a decade more, up to his final book, *L’eroe virile* (Asor Rosa 2021), an elegant essay on an author of emblematic power for his generation, and for a whole idea of modern literature, Joseph Conrad.

Few other figures shaped the Italian literary-intellectual field of the late twentieth century with such vigorous and frequently polemical forcefulness, or indeed embodied, for good or ill, the so-called ‘cultural hegemony of the left’ that was characteristic of much of the postwar period in Italy; a hegemony which was, however, propelled by furious internal clashes, factional arguments, and sometimes surprising intersections between the establishment and radical margins. Over the course of his career, Asor Rosa occupied both of these poles, at times simultaneously, and always fought his corner with clarity and conviction.

Amongst his dozens of books and hundreds of essays, two works, two projects in particular, stand out – and indeed encapsulate the dual poles of the radical Asor Rosa and the establishment Asor Rosa – and they are by far the most significant contributions he made over his long career. First, there was *Scrittori e popolo* (Asor Rosa 1965), the explosive critical broadside that made his name in 1965, tearing strips off the pious aspirations of a century of post-Risorgimento Italian literature somehow to capture in literary form the authentic life of the poor, of the people and therefore of the nation; and secondly, the 20 years and more that he spent from the late 1970s onwards as lead editor of the vast, collaborative and notably innovative *grande opera* produced by Einaudi, the 17-volume *Letteratura italiana* (Asor Rosa 1982–2000).

Asor Rosa was born in Rome on 23 September 1933. His father worked in the railways and the family lived in the working-class district of San Giovanni (Piazza Tuscolo). In one of his late novels, *Assunta e Alessandro*, he explains how an ancestor of his father's from the 1820s, Giuseppe Rosa, decided to distinguish between his legitimate and illegitimate offspring by appending Asor, the inverse of Rosa, to the latter's surname: '... e così, via, palindromi per sempre' (Asor Rosa 2010, 4).²

After the war, he studied under the great literary historian and critic (and recent PCI convert) Natalino Sapegno at La Sapienza, graduating with a thesis on the Florentine novelist Vasco Pratolini. In 1952, he joined the PCI and was active as a young militant in the Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana (FGCI) but, in 1956, he was a co-signatory of the so-called 'Manifesto dei 101', written in protest at the Soviet invasion of Hungary. He broke with the PCI and gravitated towards radical socialism, first in the PSI, then the schismatic Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria (PSIUP) and the intense, intellectually invigorating circles of a nascent *operaismo*, where he was close to Mario Tronti, Renato Panzieri and others. He wrote for or co-edited a series of militant journals, including *Quaderni rossi*, *Classe operaia*, *Laboratorio politico*, *Quaderni piacentini* and *Mondo nuovo*. In 1968, he founded and edited *Contropiano*, with Massimo Cacciari and, briefly, Antonio Negri.³

It was early in this phase, growing out of the fervent debates within these groups and their critiques of the PCI, that *Scrittori e popolo* emerged, published by the recently founded new left publisher in Rome, Samonà e Savelli. The book was profoundly destabilising and radical in its scrutiny of a long-term, toxic continuity in Italian literature and the literary-intellectual function of the preceding century, including both (apparent) progressives and conservatives, and cutting across the chronological caesurae between liberal, Fascist and Republican Italy. The line of continuity consisted for Asor Rosa in a persistent, maudlin and essentially petty-bourgeois fascination with 'the people', the populist myth of rural, peasant culture taken as the embodiment of an ingrained national identity and tradition. The defence of this myth was, consciously or otherwise, wrongly assimilated as the vocation for a literature that was properly Italian, whether that meant national(ist) or 'national-popular', with no substantial distinction made between the two. Asor Rosa demystified and desecrated the condescension of the impulse to '*andare verso il popolo*' and contrasted it with a more historically and materially conscious, European, bourgeois literature – the moderns, from Proust to Mann, Joyce to Kafka, (and, possibly, occasionally, in Italy, Svevo, Gadda, Montale, Pirandello) – who were able to evolve their literature into some kind of critique of the contradictions of the (bourgeois) present:

mentre l'Europa esprimeva nel Novecento l'ultima grande fiammata di una letteratura borghese audacemente critica e distruttiva verso il mondo stesso che l'aveva espressa, l'Italia continuava a produrre generazioni di intellettuali ingenuamente fiduciosi nella funzione socialmente rigeneratrice dell'arte e della poesia (whilst Europe in the twentieth century saw the last great flowering of a bourgeois literature that managed to be boldly critical and destructive of the very world that had formed it, Italy continued to produce generations of intellectuals who were naively confident in the socially regenerative function of art and poetry). (Asor Rosa 1988, 279)

Asor Rosa took no prisoners in *Scrittori e popolo*, targeting a wide spectrum of literary figures including, among others, Gioberti, Carducci, Pascoli and Oriani, Malaparte and Pavese, Gramsci and the Gramscians, Pratolini and the partisans, Cassola and, finally, Pasolini. The long closing chapter on Pasolini stands, paradoxically, as one of the very first major critical studies of this remarkable figure (and it is not without its moments

of admiration); but also as a devastating critique of Pasolini's narcissism, nostalgia, sensualism and exaltation of 'the people', whether they be Friulian peasants or the Roman underclasses; in short and once again, his populism. The conclusion is damning: '*viene naturale pensare che egli [Pasolini] scambi la sua sofferenza letteraria per una sofferenza umana, come è certo che egli scambia se stesso, letterato decadente e palesemente conservatore, per uno scrittore progressista*' ('it seems inevitable to conclude that he [Pasolini] has mistaken his own literary suffering for some higher human suffering, just as it is equally clear that he has mistaken himself – a decadent and blatantly conservative man of letters – for a progressive writer'). (Asor Rosa 1988, 363).

The book was a cult success, as well as the object of furious objections from the 'official' left (e.g. by Carlo Salinari). Pasolini later greeted Asor Rosa, half seriously, as '*l'uomo che mi ha fatto più male nella vita*' (Fiori 2015). It was taken up on the new left, amongst students of both the 1968 and 1977 movements, and would be reprinted eight times over the following decade, with a lucid new preface by Asor Rosa for a 1988 Einaudi edition (Asor Rosa 1988, iv–xviii) reflecting on its strengths, its limitations and a growing sense of the fading anachronism of some of its *operaista* assumptions, as well as of its faith in the very category of literature itself as an instrument of critique. For its fiftieth anniversary, he appended a new part and gave the work a new overall title, *Scrittori e popolo 1965. Scrittori e massa 2015*, to capture the collapse of the notion of 'the people' as a subject of history, subsumed instead in a fragmented, passive, mediated mass, in which there is no space for the necessary, fertile conflict of ideas and the intellectual has lost all purpose (Asor Rosa 2015). As he put it with lapidary clarity in 2011: '*gli intellettuali e la letteratura sono completamente usciti di scena*' (Serri 2011).

Following *Scrittori e popolo*, the early 1970s marked a striking turning-point in Asor Rosa's trajectory, with a certain tempering of his radicalism, but certainly no slowing of his productivity nor his growing influence. In 1972, having taught in schools for some years, he was appointed as professor of literature at La Sapienza, where he would spend the rest of his academic career, accruing a great deal of cultural capital and institutional weight. He published books on Thomas Mann and on intellectuals and the working classes (Asor Rosa 1971; 1973), and several volumes on aspects of the early modern, such as the Counter-Reformation, Galileo Galilei, and baroque poetry (Asor Rosa 1974a; 1974b; 1975a). This turn, which would also take the form of a sustained engagement with the work of Machiavelli (Asor Rosa 2019), has been seen as not so much a departure from the hot contemporary ideological debates of the 1960s, as a reframing of them through the study of an analogous period of profound political and institutional crisis and retrenchment, which drew in intellectuals and *letterati*, from clerics (especially the Jesuits) to poets, diplomats to (proto-) scientists.

The year 1972 also saw the collapse of the PSIUP and most of its members, like Asor Rosa, merged back into the PCI. Over the coming years, he would become a significant voice in the party, and not only on literary matters. He would briefly be elected to parliament with the PCI in 1979–80, contributing especially to debates on schools, universities and cultural matters. He would be the last editor, in 1989–91, of *Rinascita*, the historic party journal founded by Togliatti in 1944. In the late 1980s, he was close to reforming party secretary Achille Occhetto, only to break with him over his proposal to abandon the PCI name, following the events of 1989, and create a new political entity, the PDS.

Back in the pivotal years of the early 1970s, Asor Rosa's academic work also took another new turn: he was commissioned to write a major volume on the culture of Italy since the Risorgimento, for the first of the great Einaudi encyclopedic *grandi opere*, the *Storia d'Italia* (Ruggiero and Vivanti 1972–2018). The volume *La cultura* (Asor Rosa 1975b), took on and extended many of the ideas of continuity and critique that

underpinned *Scrittori e popolo* and maintained some of its polemical verve (e.g. Fascist culture was described as 'il coacervo delle ambizioni insoddisfatte e delle illusioni sbagliate, questo impasto polifaciale ... la fogna, insomma in cui va a sboccare tutto l'aspetto arcaico, arretrato, provinciale e schizofrenico della cultura italiana postunitaria' ('a patchwork of unsatisfied ambitions and mistaken illusions, this multi-headed mish-mash ... in short, a cesspool into which poured all the archaic, backward, provincial and schizophrenic facets of post-unification Italian culture') Asor Rosa 1975b, 1386). It also marked the development of a kind of magisterial scope to Asor Rosa's writing, proffering vast critical syntheses in the history of literature, ideas and the institutions of culture and politics. This same scope would be expanded further still in the project he now took on as a direct descendant of the *Storia d'Italia*, the *Letteratura italiana* Einaudi, on which he began work in the late 1970s, with the first volume, tellingly entitled *Il letterato e le istituzioni*, appearing in 1982.

The *Letteratura italiana* was a vast, catholic but also paradigm-shifting achievement, encompassing work by more than 200 scholars, many of them major figures in their own right, whose separate contributions to the Einaudi project significantly marked their fields of expertise. Asor Rosa himself contributed important essays, several of which were later collected in *Genus italicum* (Asor Rosa 1997), on the question of the canon and the category of the 'laico', on Boccaccio, Guicciardini, Sarpi, Verga, Collodi, Michelstaedter, Campana, and Calvino.⁴ But it was his articulated vision for the structure and conception of the whole that constituted his most telling contribution, allowing it to evolve in several directions at once, challenging whilst maintaining traditional approaches to canonical authors and works, through formal literary analysis and interpretation (*Le forme del testo*, 1984; *L'interpretazione*, 1985), even as the scope of the category of the literary was stretched. He framed the literary field with strongly historicist, institutional and geographical dimensions, in order to probe the material processes of literary production. Hence the first volume, centred on institutions and the figure of the 'letterato', a more socially embedded figure than the 'author', followed by the second volume *Produzione e consumo* (1983). A crucial multi-volume section of the work, *Storia e geografia della letteratura italiana* (1987–9), aimed to take up the brilliant intuitions of Carlo Dionisotti's *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Dionisotti 1967, based on his 1949 inaugural lecture at Bedford College, University of London), by capturing the radical literary and linguistic polycentrism of the 'Italian' tradition, thus setting itself against the model of Francesco de Sanctis's nineteenth-century myth of a national literature for the new Italy born of Tuscan genius. Asor Rosa's 'italicità' – the 'italiana' of *Letteratura italiana* – was a far more complex and problematic notion.

Italian publishers are by no means shy of producing multiple and weighty 'manuali' or encyclopedic syntheses and there are thus many rival histories of Italian literature available, each with their own claims to novelty. But Einaudi's *Letteratura italiana* deeply marked the generations that followed,⁵ and inevitably also become something of a *monstre sacré*, to be assaulted and slain. When Einaudi, once again, launched an equally ambitious reconceptualisation of the literary history of Italy three decades on, the *Atlante della letteratura italiana* (Luzzatto and Pedullà 2010–12), Asor Rosa responded with an acid review saying there was nothing new here, but a preface to the *Atlante* had already taken care to dismantle his *Letteratura italiana*, describing it as deeply flawed or unachieved ('[un] fallimento', victim of 'le debolezze teoriche di un certo marxismo accademico italiano', Pedullà 2010, 81, 79) and nowhere near as innovative as it claimed, either in its institutional perspective or its Dionisottian ambitions. In the end, they said, it was no more than 'una versione regionalizzata di un manuale standard di letteratura, organizzato cioè per autori e movimenti' (Pedullà 2010, 80). The vigorous polemical vein on display here is perhaps, ironically enough, the greatest tribute of all to Asor Rosa's legacy.

Before, during and after the years of the *Letteratura italiana*, Asor Rosa repeatedly produced alternative or parallel synoptic views of Italian literary history, with some inevitable recycling but also always with intelligent new insights to offer, expressed in lucid prose: from *Sintesi di storia della letteratura italiana* (Asor Rosa 1972); to the three-volume *Storia europea della letteratura italiana* (Asor Rosa 2009), a fertile corrective to the national perspective, filtered through a Europeanising lens (throughout his career, Asor maintained a steady undercurrent of interest in the European canon, especially the moderns, although rarely beyond Europe); to a summary *Breve storia della letteratura italiana* (Asor Rosa 1972, 2009, 2013). He also published several works of a more directly interventionist, political nature, such as *Le due società* (Asor Rosa 1977). From the turn of the century, whilst continuing to publish key critical works, he took to writing novels, starting with the autobiographical *L'alba di un mondo nuovo* (Asor Rosa 2002); became interested in ecological issues; intervened with pointed aggression in public debate, especially against the figure of Silvio Berlusconi;⁶ and continued to argue within the left. Mondadori published a volume of his collected works in the prestigious Meridiani series in 2020 (Asor Rosa 2020), a somewhat anomalous move given the high literary repute of figures in this canonising series. It is one that perhaps says less about Asor Rosa's genuine stature as a writer, than it does about his remarkable cultural heft as an intellectual, no doubt one of the last literary intellectuals to achieve such formidable status in the Italian public sphere (cf. Caravale 2023), the last *letterato* perhaps.

Notes

1. The SBN national library catalogue lists 518 authored items by Asor Rosa, a vast corpus, even taking into account repetitions and reprints (SBN 2023).
2. Both the students of the 1977 movement and the poet Eugenio Montale played games with his 'palindromic' name, the latter in his poem 'Asor': 'Asor, nome gentile (il suo retrogrado/ è il più bel fiore)/ non ama il privatismo in poesia ...' (Montale 1984, 495).
3. His essays from this period are collected in Asor Rosa 2011a.
4. He remained drawn to Calvino as one of his preferred moderns, up to Asor Rosa 2001.
5. A rare contemporary example of a project of comparable, or greater, creativity, methodological innovation and legacy – although clearly more *manuale* than encyclopedia – was Ceserani and De Federicis 1979–88.
6. A 2011 article in *Il manifesto* caused a minor scandal as it was interpreted as calling for a *coup d'état* against then-presidente del consiglio Berlusconi (Asor Rosa 2011b).

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