

Luigi Malerba, *Che vergogna scrivere*, Milano: Mondadori, 1996.

This collection of four loosely-connected essays deals, inter alia, with the status of literature and the writer in society.

The first, "Lo scrittore come fantasma", moves from the servile position of the author during the Renaissance, to the author becoming a producer of commodities with the advent of copyright in 1793, pointing out that the society of the period was not yet ready to accept intellectual work as a form of production, to the "death of the author" proclaimed by, amongst others, Valéry and Blanchot. Malerba asserts that, in the consumer society, copyright has enabled some writers to become quite wealthy, "ma non è riuscita a dare allo scrittore uno statuto sociale".

The second essay is entitled "Che vergogna scrivere". It discusses the development, in 20th-century literature, towards manipulating and even "attacking" the reader, denying the traditional idea of literature as representation. The avantgarde championed a subversive, sometimes anarchic kind of writing, which eventually merely inspired indifference on the reader's part. Today, it is debatable whether the great avantgarde writers will be accessible to future generations, and whether the publishing industry would care to reprint their works. No writer is in a position to state that he is writing

for posterity; as the consumer society is constantly clamouring for new, disposable thrills, there may be no "posterity". There is also a possibility that the literary text itself will be lost in a flood of comments and critical writings.

The third essay, "Il laboratorio", is divided into brief sections on concepts related to the writer's craft, such as inspiration, the primitive need to tell stories, and the various kinds of critics. There is a section on Malerba's work method and his motives for writing. He remarks that he often writes "sulla spinta di sensazioni forti", without precise and clearly defined ideas. He also rejects writing directly on the computer, because "L'uso del computer rischia di togliere a un testo quel sapore di 'hand made'".

This runs contrary to the current tendency towards virtual (hyper)texts, sometimes generated by a virtual community of readers and writers, the current preference for facility and efficiency, and instead, suggests the idea of the text as an artefact, produced by a craftsman.

The final essay, "A che cosa serve la letteratura", is an apology for literature and humanistic values. Malerba acknowledges that literature cannot be justified on the basis of its practical indispensability. It is, he writes, perhaps the only discipline which negates a direct correlation between price and value. An edition of the *Divina Commedia*, for example, may only cost a thousand lire, yet its value is incalculable. This argument is especially relevant to embattled literature departments in a society which measures value in terms of "usefulness" and "marketability". Malerba also attempts to justify literature on the basis of its ability to propose "modelli di realtà", to create an awareness of the "problemi che incombono sul destino dell'umanità". In other words, the function of literature is not to provide tools for problemsolving, like more utilitarian disciplines, but to stimulate critical awareness. Often, the shortsighted and immoral positions adopted by the powers that be, are based on the careless use of language, justified by distorting the meanings of words. Only a "cultura umanistica" can oppose the shortsightedness and lack of perspective which often characterizes the contemporary capitalist society. It should be added that Malerba also advocates a strong

awareness of the findings of contemporary science, and their integration into literary writing.

Malerba's book neither sets out to be an academic treatise, nor does it aim to put forward a coherent thesis, yet it contains numerous spunti for reflection. It is written in an easily accessible style. In outlining some of the arguments it advances, I hope to have given a taste of this stimulating little book, which can profitably be read both by Italianists and the general public, even those who continue to believe that literature is a marginal and useless adjunct to society.

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