



CARLO DIONISOTTI

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1908–1998

I

CARLO DIONISOTTI, Professor of Italian at the University of London 1949–70 and a Fellow of the British Academy from 1972, is commonly considered the greatest Italian literary historian of his age. He had unrivalled expertise in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian literature, and a passionate interest in questions of Italian culture to which was added in his later years a particular insight into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

II

He was born on 9 June 1908 in Turin into a prosperous family.¹ His father, Eugenio (1866–1955), a graduate in law, was also Turinese. His paternal grandfather, Carlo (1824–1899), a magistrate and a historian, born in the nearby town of Vercelli, had studied and lived in Turin. Dionisotti, who was his namesake, was to mention with respect and affection the work of this grandfather.² His mother, Carla Cattaneo (1886–1973), was a Swiss

¹ The surname ‘Casalone’ which followed his own in his first publications is that of a family friend who wished his own name to survive, in association to that of Dionisotti.

² Carlo Dionisotti, *Appunti sui moderni. Foscolo, Leopardi, Manzoni e altri* (Bologna, il Mulino, 1988), 388–91. He also wrote a preface to the reprint of a book of his grandfather (originally

national, born and bred in Italy. Dionisotti always felt a particular bond of affection with Italian-speaking Switzerland³ and was to be a frequent visitor at Bigorio, outside Bellinzona, for the seminars regularly organised there by Swiss Italianists. In 1942 he married Maria Luisa (Marisa) Pinna Pintor, who belonged to a family among whose members we find a famous scholar and librarian, Fortunato Pintor (with whom Dionisotti became professionally linked when he worked for the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* at the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana),⁴ and Giaime Pintor, a much admired intellectual who died in the fight against the Nazi-Fascist regime in 1943.

Dionisotti's early education was peripatetic owing to family moves during the First World War, but he received his secondary education in Turin at the Istituto Sociale directed by the Jesuits, to whom he was always grateful, notwithstanding his non-religious inclinations, for the good Latin grounding he received. He read arts ('Lettere') at the University of Turin, where he graduated in 1929 with a thesis on Bembo's *Rime*, directed by the professor of Italian literature, Vittorio Cian, a sixteenth-century specialist, and by Ferdinando Neri, professor of French literature. Dionisotti occasionally mentioned Cian in his writings with a certain detached respect and dutiful pietas, notwithstanding his dissent from his fascist views, and the difference in stature, the pupil being superior to the teacher, both as a scholar and in intellectual calibre.⁵ Neri was more congenial to Dionisotti and warmly admired by him.⁶

In Italy it was not uncommon at the time for school-teaching to be the first stage in an academic career. In 1932 he obtained, through a competi-

Turin, Tip. Favale, 1871), *La Vallesesia ed il Comune di Romagnano-Sesia* (Novara, Paltrinieri, 1972), 3–12.

³ See the dedication of *Appunti sui moderni*, 8: 'Dedico il libro, tardo pegno di riconoscenza e di affetto, a Giulia Gianella di Bellinzona e con lei agli amici tutti della Svizzera Italiana, che mi hanno aiutato a passare, avanti e indietro, la frontiera. Non soltanto quella che divide la Confederazione dalla Repubblica.' See also Carlo Dionisotti, 'Una Svizzera che vive', in Giuseppe Billanovich, Carlo Dionisotti, Dante Isella, Giovanni Pozzi, *Maestri italiani a Friburgo (da Arcari a Contini e dopo)* (Locarno, Armando Dadò, 1998), 9–12.

⁴ See the memoir in Carlo Dionisotti, *Ricordi della scuola italiana* (Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1998), 461–7.

⁵ On Cian see P. Treves, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 25 (Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1981), 155–60. For Dionisotti's attitude see his *Gli umanisti e il volgare fra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Florence, Le Monnier, 1968), 41–3; Università degli Studi della Calabria, *Laurea Honoris Causa a Carlo Dionisotti 15 dicembre 1994* (Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 1996), 50–1.

⁶ On Ferdinando Neri see Dionisotti, *Ricordi*, 328–32; Università degli Studi della Calabria, *Laurea*, 55–7.

tive examination, a post to teach Latin and History at the Istituto Magistrale (Upper School for prospective teachers) at Vercelli and then in 1936 at the Istituto Magistrale Regina Margherita in Turin. In 1939 he transferred to teach Italian and Latin at the Liceo Cavour, also in Turin, and in 1941 at the Liceo Virgilio in Rome.

In the meantime, in 1937, he had obtained the Libera Docenza (the Italian equivalent of the traditional German title of Privatdozent) and had become the 'assistant' of Enrico Carrara, a specialist of Petrarch and of the Renaissance, at the Facoltà di Magistero, and then 'supplente' ('deputy professor') of the poet and bon vivant Francesco Pastonchi whom the regime had wished on the University of Turin as its professor of Italian literature.⁷ In Rome, in 1941–3, as well as teaching at the liceo Virgilio, he worked for the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana; in 1943 he was posted ('comandato') to the Istituto di Studi Germanici, and in 1944, after the liberation of Rome, he became an 'assistant' of Natalino Sapegno, who held the chair of Italian literature in Rome.⁸ In the same period he was an active journalist for the Resistance, with the 'Giustizia e Libertà' movement and the Partito d'Azione, and associated with progressive publishing initiatives, including those of Einaudi, in which he co-operated with Cesare Pavese.

In 1947 he took up a post of lecturer in Italian at the University of Oxford. The University Archives hold an interesting file concerning his appointment.⁹ There are three references, one from Roberto Weiss, the professor of Italian at University College London, who states that there is 'no doubt that Dionisotti occupies already a leading position among Italian students of the Renaissance', and that 'his coming over to England would prove extremely beneficial to Italian scholarship in this country'. The second reference is by James Wardrop, then Assistant Keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who had known him for about ten years and stated that he had been impressed 'by the range and depth of Mr. Dionisotti's scholarship, and by the humane and liberal direction he has given to his

⁷ On Pastonchi see Carlo Dionisotti, *Lettere londinesi* (1968–1995), a cura di Giuseppe Anceschi (Florence, Olschki, 2000), 16–17; and Dionisotti, *Ricordi*, 475.

⁸ See Carlo Dionisotti, *Natalino Sapegno dalla Torino di Gobetti alla cattedra romana*, con un'appendice di scritti di Natalino Sapegno. Lezione Sapegno 1994 (Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1994), and *Ricordi*, 477–88.

⁹ I have consulted the relevant file at the Bodleian (Oxford University Archives, FA9/1/91). I am grateful to my friend Diego Zancani of Balliol College who transcribed the relevant documents for me. For more information see the letters published by V. Fera as an appendix to his article in the proceedings of the Freiburg Colloquium: *Carlo Dionisotti. Geografia e storia di uno studioso*, a cura di Eduardo Fumagalli (Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2001), 69–118.

knowledge'. The war had ended shortly before and this contributes to explain some of the comments made in this reference: 'Mr. Dionisotti's entire dedication to Culture and his opposition to anything which threatened its existence were not abated by his country's participation in the war; and the continued expression of his sympathies placed him — as I have reason to know—in situations of frequent difficulty and danger.' Interesting are also some observations about Dionisotti as a person: 'With equal confidence I can recommend Mr Dionisotti on the score of those personal qualities of courtesy, modesty and intellectual probity which would commend him to the society of his fellows in Oxford, should he be, as I hope, nominated to the Lectureship'. A third, favourable but more impersonal reference, comes from Ferdinando Neri, as Dean of the Faculty of Letters in Turin in 1939–41.¹⁰

The file includes a correspondence with the Aliens' Department. In order to speed up the granting of a visa and a work permit, Douglas Veale, the University Registrar, stressed the urgent need for a new lecturer since there were 28 students of Italian in Autumn 1946, as compared with seven the previous year, with only two teachers to look after them (i.e. the Professor, Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves, and Miss Olga Bickley). Another interesting document is a detailed CV of Dionisotti, including the mention of works at an advanced stage of preparation (some of which however apparently were never published, like a volume on 'Pietro Bembo. Studi e documenti', and a 'critical edition of Girolamo Fracastoro'). The CV is handwritten and unsigned, but the writing is clearly that of Arnaldo Momigliano, the famous ancient historian, who had been living in Oxford since 1938 when he had escaped antisemitic laws in Italy. In him Dionisotti found, after war-time separation, a friend from student days, and they were to remain close, in Oxford and then in London, until Momigliano's death in 1987.¹¹

In 1949 Professor d'Entrèves proposed that Dionisotti be given the title of Reader 'on the grounds of his high international reputation and of his extremely important services within the Italian Department'. But in May Dionisotti was elected, with effect from the first of October, to the chair of Italian of Bedford College, University of London, which he held

¹⁰ Dionisotti mentions in *Ricordi*, 495, that he had been 'presentato e raccomandato' also by Benedetto Croce, for his teaching post at Oxford. The letter is not in the Oxford file. Croce had in fact written to Passerin d'Entrèves who was able to mention this in the discussions concerning the appointment. See V. Fera's article quoted in n. 9 above.

¹¹ See Carlo Dionisotti, *Ricordo di Arnaldo Momigliano* (Bologna, il Mulino, 1989); id., *Ricordi*, 587–604.

until 1970. After his retirement he had more opportunity to accept frequent invitations to lecture and participate in seminars and conferences in Italy, where he was highly admired and respected, and offered numerous honours and prizes.¹² He regularly returned, every year, to the large family house at Romagnano Sesia (Novara), the village where he was eventually to be buried.

Dionisotti was a man of natural distinction. He was tall and slim. His expression and carriage were severe. He looked like someone who does not suffer fools gladly and he could be intimidating. He was respected, but also feared among colleagues who knew he could be ruthless in his criticism, particularly towards people who were pompous and tried to conceal behind verbiage and nebulous theoretical jargon the poverty or shoddiness of their scholarship. More generous towards the young, he could inspire devoted admiration. He was a dedicated teacher, but for some colleagues it was difficult to resist the impression that there was a lack of fit between what he could give (as one of the most formidable specialists in the Italian Renaissance), and what could be received (by the pleasant cohorts of undergraduates reading Italian at Bedford College).¹³ He had few graduate students. One I should like to mention is Brian Richardson, who was supervised by him for his M.Phil. on Machiavelli and Livy, and went on to produce distinguished research on a characteristically Dionisottian topic, the importance of sixteenth-century editors for the establishment of the norm in the Italian literary language.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the severity of his appearance, he could be excellent company, humorous and entertaining. He was very generous and helpful, answering questions from colleagues and friends, or commenting on what he happened to be working on if he thought it would be of interest.¹⁵ He

¹² He was a member of the Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, of the Arcadia of Rome. He was awarded the Premio Viareggio in 1989, and he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Calabria in 1994 (see above, n. 3).

¹³ For Dionisotti as a teacher, see Nelia Saxby in *Italian Studies*, 54 (1999), 16–17.

¹⁴ See Brian Richardson's volume *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470–1600* (Cambridge, 1994), in which Dionisotti is by far the most frequently cited among modern scholars. See also Dionisotti's obituary by Richardson, mentioned below in n. 58.

¹⁵ I remember for instance one case in which he came to my seat at the North Library to show me, with a smile, a passage from *Idea della storia dell'Italia letterata* (Naples, Felice Mosca, 1723), by a minor Italian eighteenth-century erudite, Giacinto Gimma, about the use of 'un significante metaforico sopra un significato vero'. The use of 'significante' and 'significato' in 1723 was in fact remarkable; the smile which accompanied the quote was a teasing suggestion that I might interpret the passage in the perspective of Saussurean ideas, while he was (correctly) placing it within its own historical context (*Ricordi*, 17–19).

was also an extraordinary correspondent, punctually answering, in handwritten letters, and making precise and often original and precious observations about offprints or books he had been sent, showing that he was an incredibly voracious and attentive reader right to the end of his life.¹⁶

Dionisotti wrote a vigorous, sinewy Italian, full of zest and energy. He was a charismatic public speaker and an extremely vivacious and witty conversationalist. His speech, both in Italian and English, was unmistakably Piedmontese in rhythm, intonation, and phonological colouring. (Italian high culture at the University of London, in the decades when he was Professor at Bedford, and Momigliano at UCL, spoke with a Piedmontese accent.) He was alert to the difficulties connected with using a language not one's own, particularly in the tradition of Italian expatriates in Britain. He himself rarely published in English. In the nineteenth century, he observed, the English 'erano generalmente convinti e soddisfatti che insuperabile fosse la barriera linguistica, come quella del mare e della flotta di Sua Maestà intorno all'isola, e che insomma la loro lingua fosse al riparo dalla improntitudine degli stranieri'.¹⁷ But they had to accept that there were exceptions. One was Antonio Panizzi, the great editor of Boiardo and librarian of the British Museum, respected by Dionisotti¹⁸ (partly because he was a paragon of seriousness and hard work, not the main qualities for which Italians were appreciated); but Panizzi's speech, both in English and in Italian, was 'incorreggibile' in its Emilian pronunciation.¹⁹ Another exception was Antonio Gallenga, who 'scriveva una lingua non sua con diabolica scioltezza e vivacità, senza riscontro, ch'io sappia, nella storia degli Italiani in Inghilterra'. But he was not a man to deserve Dionisotti's admiration, since 'l'abilità linguistica del Gallenga comportava una buona dose di italiana ciarlataneria'.²⁰ Also interesting is Dionisotti's attention to the way in which Italians spoke their own language: 'l'esperienza nostra insegna che ancora oggi . . . non possiamo in Italia aprire bocca senza che la pronuncia riveli la nostra origine. È probabile che, quanto a pronuncia, il francese di Manzoni fosse molto migliore del suo italiano. E una testimonianza è rimasta, indiretta e tarda, ma proprio per questo notevole, di lui che a

¹⁶ For a striking example see Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy, 'La *Veniexiana* e il tocco femminile', in the Festschrift for Christian Bec, *Florenno-Venise. Des origines au XX^e siècle* (Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris Sorbonne, forthcoming).

¹⁷ *Ricordi*, 184.

¹⁸ Although he observed that some of his human traits were less than admirable; see *Ricordi*, 197–8, 208.

¹⁹ *Ricordi*, 210.

²⁰ *Ricordi*, 188.

Firenze “chiamava Niculini (con tanto d’u lombardo che pareva uno scorpione a chele aperte) il fiero Niccolini.”²¹ On other occasions we are reminded of Ascoli’s difficulties with Italian usage;²² or Paolo Marzolo’s ‘troppo accentuata pronuncia dialettale veneta, sopportabile a Milano, caricaturale a Napoli’.²³

Although he lived in England from 1947 with his wife Marisa, and his three daughters grew up here,²⁴ Dionisotti was never assimilated into an active social life in this country and rarely saw his colleagues outside professional contexts. His personal friends were mostly Italians, some dating from school and university days in Turin. As well as his close friend Arnaldo Momigliano, one can recall writers such as Lalla Romano and Mario Soldati, the historians Federico Chabod and Franco Venturi, and scholars and intellectuals in many fields such as Leone Ginzburg, Giulio Einaudi, Alessandro Galante Garrone, Massimo Mila, Aldo Garosci, Giuseppe Billanovich, Augusto Campana, don Giuseppe De Luca, Umberto Bosco, Guido Martellotti, and others with whom he established links later, such as Marino Berengo, Domenico De Robertis, Alfredo Stussi, and the friends from the Ticino, such as Giovanni Pozzi.

He participated, with the distinction which could be expected from a man of his stature, in the activities required by his academic position in Britain, usually making them the occasion for the production of some memorable scholarly contribution, as when he gave the Taylorian Lecture on ‘Europe in Sixteenth-Century Italian Literature’ in 1971;²⁵ the Presidential Address of the Modern Humanities Research Association in 1972, on ‘A Year’s Work in the Seventies’, a brilliant discussion of scholarship in Italy, in a European perspective, against the background of political and social events in the 1870s;²⁶ and the British Academy lecture on ‘Manzoni and the Catholic Revival’ in 1973.²⁷ But it was clear that the natural cultural context for his scholarly production was Italy. It was in

²¹ *Ricordi*, 309.

²² *Ricordi*, 281, 283.

²³ *Ricordi*, 287.

²⁴ The eldest, Anna Carlotta, teaches Classics at King’s College London; the second, Paola, is a well known actress; the third, Eugenia, is a librarian.

²⁵ Carlo Dionisotti, *Europe in Sixteenth-Century Italian Literature. The Taylorian Lecture Delivered 11 February 1971* (Oxford, 1971).

²⁶ Carlo Dionisotti, ‘A Year’s Work in the Seventies. The Presidential Address of the Modern Humanities Research Association Delivered at University College London on 7 January 1972’, *The Modern Language Review*, 67 (1972), xix–xxviii.

²⁷ Carlo Dionisotti, ‘Manzoni and the Catholic Revival’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 59 (1973), 341–53. For these lectures see Carlo Dionisotti, *Lezioni inglesi* (Turin, Aragno, 2001).

Italy that he was one of the founders and editors (from 1958), with Giuseppe Billanovich, Augusto Campana and Paolo Sambin, of one of the main journals in his field, *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, and in Italy he was in close contact with friends such as Vittore Branca (who invited him to lecture at the Fondazione Cini in Venice), Gianfranco Contini, Maria Corti, Cesare Segre, and many others whose names would make a roll-call of honour for Italian studies. On his retirement Dionisotti received two *Festschriften*, both published in Italy.²⁸

For many of the Italian academics who visited London to work at the British Museum Library, the trip was not complete if it was not rounded off by a conversation with Dionisotti, in one of the cafés near the Museum. The new British Library opened too late for him. In the last few years of his life he was more house-bound and friends from Italy went to see him at his home at Golders' Green, where they found him, until the very end, as well informed, curious about everything, and sharp-witted as ever. But the memory many will cherish of Dionisotti, is that of the reader at his desk, in the North Library, and in later years, when his interests had shifted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, in the Reading Room of the British Museum, sitting upright, reading with great concentration and taking notes. Colleagues used to comment, only half jocularly, that during over fifty years of nearly daily visits to the British Museum Library, Dionisotti had read all the early printed books of its Italian collections. This was probably only slightly exaggerated. The image of Dionisotti which seems to me most appropriate is in fact more than that of the teacher, the editor, the author or the public speaker, that of Dionisotti the reader.²⁹

III

If one tried to place Dionisotti's position within modern Italian culture, one could characterise him as an heir of the 'Scuola storica'³⁰ which

²⁸ *Studi di filologia e di letteratura italiana offerti a Carlo Dionisotti*, ed. by the Istituto di Letteratura e Filologia Italiana of the University of Pavia (Milan-Naples, Ricciardi, 1973); *Tra latino e volgare. Per Carlo Dionisotti*, a cura di Gabriella Bernardoni Trezzini *et al.*, two vols. (Padua, Antenore, 1974). The editors of the latter were members of the Bigorio group.

²⁹ It is appropriate to remember here the words from Horace which Dionisotti was fond of quoting: 'cui lecta potenter erit res' (see *Geografia e storia*, 103). They have been sometimes playfully interpreted as an invitation to 'read powerfully' rather than in the original sense they have in Horace.

³⁰ See Dionisotti's article 'Scuola storica' in V. Branca, ed., *Dizionario critico della letteratura italiana*, vol. 4 (Turin, UTET, 1986), 139–48; *Ricordi*, 393.

developed at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly at the University of Turin, through an emphasis on erudition and on a philological viewpoint, rather than on the interest, prevailing in Italy at the time, first in rhetorical formalism, and then in the philosophical theories of Benedetto Croce's idealism. Dionisotti had great respect for Croce's erudition and the rich historical sense which made his works so worthwhile and instructive, but disapproved of the facile adoption by his followers of idealistic attitudes which emphasised ready-made theoretical formulas at the expense of the concrete investigation of new historical facts, reliably established through competent use of paleography, printing history, metre, the conventions of literary genres, and all the other relevant disciplines which Croceans disparagingly belittled as 'pseudosciences'.

For his part, Dionisotti was fully conversant with the relevant 'pseudosciences', which are in fact the indispensable foundations and specialised tools of any serious literary study, and scathing about the enthusiasm for vacuous 'problems' based on 'theoretical' assumptions, rather than the more modest 'questions' one had to deal with in the course of an empirical investigation.³¹ He was very suspicious of trends and labels such as 'structuralism', 'critical theory', 'deconstruction' etc. It is worth noting that it was at the very time, at the end of the sixties, when French structuralism became a prevailing cultural movement, that the attitude which is summed up in the title of Dionisotti's book, 'Geography and history of Italian literature', acquired a remarkably deep resonance as a clarion call to study literary (and more generally cultural) facts, in the light of their specific, historical, chronological, and 'geographical' conditions. The felicitously titled volume of his collected essays brought Dionisotti to the attention of the general public in Italy and contributed to making him almost a symbol of the great Italians who through their chosen exile obtained insights they might not have reached at home.³² It

³¹ See the comments by Dionisotti in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin, Einaudi, 1967), 89–90: 'La *Storia* di Migliorini è, quale poteva attendersi, un libro onesto, sano, utile, e, grazie a Dio, non problematico. . . . Abbiamo dovuto avanzare tutto il tempo di nostra vita a stento, col fiato mozzo, in un'aria densa di problemi: "Dal volto rimovea quell'aere grasso, menando la sinistra innanzi spesso." (The quote from Dante's *Inferno*, canto 9, refers to the Messenger from Heaven removing from before his face the dense air of Hell.) As for these false problems, they were expected to be resolved by the latest interpreter 'munito, non dei volgari strumenti dell'indagine linguistica e storica, ma della sua *animula* presuntuosa e della pietra filosofale, che fortunatamente si trovava ad avere in mano, di una perfetta dottrina estetica e metodologia critica'.

³² 'Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana', *Italian Studies*, 6 (1951), 70–93; and in the volume quoted above, n. 31, pp. 23–45. This was based on the Inaugural Lecture for the Chair of Italian at Bedford College, given on 22 Nov. 1949.

was this view from afar and from outside that allowed Dionisotti to formulate them with exceptional clarity, incisiveness, and persuasiveness.

The mention of ‘geography’ was of course particularly important within the Italian context, since it countered the ideologically and politically biased view of Italian national history which was dominant both in the Risorgimento (see for instance the powerful but misleading interpretation offered by Francesco De Sanctis’ history of Italian literature), and in the nationalist assumptions adopted by fascism. Dionisotti’s work stressed instead the fragmentation, the conflicts which characterised the history of Italian culture. Being a Venetian or a Florentine, a Ferrarese or a Neapolitan, was a crucial defining factor (differing of course in different historical circumstances) which could not and ought not to be seen as subordinate to the overarching feature of being Italian—if anything it was the regional or even civic characterisation that gave real meaning and substance to an otherwise too vague and general national label. It also had a contemporary resonance since it stressed the importance and vitality of those regional traditions which had been publicly suppressed from the unification of the Italian state in 1861 to the fall of fascism in 1945, and were to remain only theoretically recognised for a long time after.

IV

Dionisotti’s published output is impressive. It takes the form mainly of articles, and these were often later collected into volumes. There are already some serviceable bibliographies of his works,³³ and some further collections are being prepared.³⁴ In what follows I shall comment briefly on some of his books, in approximate chronological order, mentioning in particular their importance for the history of the Italian language, partly owing to my own interest in this aspect, but principally in view of the linguistic relevance of Dionisotti’s ‘geografia e storia’ perspective, and of the attention he devoted to Bembo, one of the protagonists of the ‘questione della lingua’ and a figure who was crucial for the subsequent direction taken by the Italian literary language.

³³ Giulia Gianella, ‘Bibliografia degli scritti di Carlo Dionisotti’, in *Tra latino e volgare*, vol. I, XVII–XXXII; Mirella Ferrari, ‘In memoria di Carlo Dionisotti (1908–1998): Bibliografia’, *Aevum*, 72 (1998), 817–46. A revised and updated version of the latter appeared in the Freiburg Colloquium volume (see above, note 9), 151–95.

³⁴ *Scritti sul Bembo*, ed. Claudio Vela, and *Scritti civili*, ed. E. Alessandrone Perona and G. Panizza, will be published by Einaudi.

In the thirties he published important editions of Bembo's *Prose*³⁵ and *Asolani e Rime*.³⁶ These were later unified into a volume of *Prose e rime*,³⁷ with a new introduction, which enjoyed a notable success and several reprints. It is still the most useful modern edition of Bembo's works. In 1945 he published, with an important introduction, Giovanni Guidiccioni's Oration to the noblemen of Lucca, an interesting text about the insurrection of the 'straccioni' (literally 'dressed in rags') in the town in 1531.³⁸ In 1948 a formidable set of indices was printed, covering the first hundred volumes (for the years 1883–1932) of the *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*,³⁹ the main periodical representing the 'Scuola storica'.

In 1949, together with Cecil Grayson (who, after having obtained a First in Modern Languages, had just started his teaching career at Oxford in 1948) he published a selection of *Early Italian Texts*,⁴⁰ aimed at undergraduates and modest in appearance, but splendid for the good judgement and the solid scholarship on which both the choice of the texts and the philological introductions and commentary were based. The book was deservedly well received, and not only in Britain. When I was a university student at Pisa in the mid fifties this was one of the textbooks we used for our examination on the history of the Italian Language, and even now, over fifty years after its publication, it ranks among the most useful collections one can recommend to students of early Italian. In 1950 Dionisotti published, with a rich introduction, an edition of Maria Savorgnan's love letters to Bembo.⁴¹

An interesting contribution is the second edition (1952) of the elegant *Oxford Book of Italian Verse* originally published in 1910 by St John Lucas.⁴²

³⁵ Pietro Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, introduzione e note di Carlo Dionisotti Casalone (Turin, UTET, 1931).

³⁶ Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani e le Rime*, introduzione e note di Carlo Dionisotti Casalone (Turin, UTET, 1932).

³⁷ Pietro Bembo, *Prose e rime*, a cura di Carlo Dionisotti (Turin, UTET, 1960). Second edition 1966.

³⁸ Giovanni Guidiccioni, *Orazione ai nobili di Lucca*, a cura di Carlo Dionisotti (Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1945). New edition (Milan, Adelphi, 1994).

³⁹ *Indici del 'Giornale storico della letteratura italiana'. Volumi 1–100 e supplementi 1883–1932*, a cura di Carlo Dionisotti (Turin, Chiantore, 1948).

⁴⁰ *Early Italian Texts*, edited with Notes by Carlo Dionisotti and Cecil Grayson (Oxford, 1949). New edition 1965.

⁴¹ Maria Savorgnan—Pietro Bembo, *Carteggio d'amore (1500–1501)*, a cura di Carlo Dionisotti (Florence, Le Monnier, 1950).

⁴² *The Oxford Book of Italian Verse, xiiiith Century–xixth Century*, chosen by St John Lucas. Second edition revised with xxth-century supplement by Carlo Dionisotti (Oxford, 1952).

In the Oxford syllabus, in the early fifties, Italian literature still ended in 1860. Dionisotti brought the total number of poems up from 345 to 376, adding some names in the body of the anthology⁴³ and at the end,⁴⁴ and eliminating certain others.⁴⁵ The criteria mentioned by Dionisotti in the preface are worth quoting: 'It might be remembered that this is a book of Italian verse, that is to say of poems which were written in what is considered to be the Italian language. Italian poets who wrote either in Latin or in one or other of the Italian dialects had to be set aside'. On the one hand this may appear just as common sense: poems written in Latin or in dialect are not suitable for foreign readers of a 'Book of Italian Verse'. On the other, we should avoid the temptation to read into this statement a restrictive definition of what can be said to belong to Italian literature. On the contrary, we must remember that just three years before, delivering his trailblazing lecture at Bedford College, Dionisotti had stressed the multi-lingual nature of Italian literature, and it is this awareness that allows him to avoid the blurring of linguistic distinctions and enables him instead to differentiate clearly between poems written in 'what is considered to be the Italian language', and those written in other languages, by authors who were nevertheless still 'Italian poets'.

Dionisotti's name is above all linked with his book on 'geography and history' of Italian literature.⁴⁶ This includes nine memorable essays separately published between 1946 and 1966. They are preceded by a preface in which Dionisotti dedicates the volume to 'the first of his friends', Aldo Garosci, together with the companions of their youth in Turin. The city, when they were university students, was of course no longer that of Gobetti and Gramsci, the great figures respectively of the liberal and of the communist opposition to fascism. Fascist dictatorship had prevailed, there as in the rest of Italy, and independently minded intellectuals could only look abroad, or to the past, if they wanted to nourish the hope of a new Italy capable of reviving the Medieval and Renaissance traditions which had made such a crucial contribution to the common heritage of European civilisation. Dionisotti presents his work as witness of 'una inchiesta condotta con scrupolo di verità, ma con passione politica'.

⁴³ L. B. Alberti, G. Alfani, T. Campanella, Cariteo, F. Della Valle, G. Fantoni, G. A. Petrucci, A. Pucci, O. Rinuccini, L. Savioli Fontana, G. B. Strozzi, L. Tornabuoni de' Medici, G. Zanella.

⁴⁴ Pascoli, Vittoria Aganoor, D'Annunzio, Gozzano, Corazzini, Michelstaedter.

⁴⁵ Ciullo/Cielo d'Alcamo, Federico II, Re Enzo, Anselmo da Ferrara, A. Caro, B. Rota, A. Tassoni, F. A. Ghedini, P. Manara, A. Mazza, L. Carrer, F. dall'Ongaro.

⁴⁶ *Geografia e storia*, see above, n. 31. The volume was later republished in the Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi 163 (Turin, Einaudi, 1971; eleventh reprint 1999).

Among the most powerful of these essays is the eponymous one (pp. 23–45, 1951) I mentioned above, which questions the ‘linea unitaria’ generally followed in tracing the history of Italian literature, and develops in particular the aspect which he calls ‘polivalenza linguistica’, resulting from the coexistence of Latin, Provençal, French, and Tuscan traditions, as well as the ‘dialect’ ones. The third essay, ‘Chierici e laici’ (pp. 47–73, 1960)⁴⁷ presents a strikingly enlightening outline, such as had never been attempted before, of the history of Italian literature from the viewpoint of the distinction between clergy and laity,⁴⁸ with a general prevalence of clerics among the main exponents of Italian letters until the end of the eighteenth century and the establishment of lay education after the French revolution. Previously, lay initiative had been crucial for the emergence of vernacular literature with the Sicilians, in the thirteenth century, with Dante, and between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with the crisis of the Church in the age of the Schism, and the great humanists working for the State. Otherwise it was the Church, through religious orders, ecclesiastical benefits, placements as bishops and cardinals, that offered men of letters security, a degree of independence, and general living conditions preferable to those offered by other employments. The image of Italian literature conveyed by traditional nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography ignores almost completely, or gives an insufficient account of the centrality of the Church for Italian men of letters.

The fourth essay, ‘Per una storia della lingua italiana’ (pp. 75–102, 1962)⁴⁹ offers a synthetic account, based on a review of the book by Bruno Migliorini which is still the most informative, solid, and reliable presentation of the history of the Italian language, chronologically structured, with individual chapters devoted to successive centuries. Dionisotti

⁴⁷ Originally with the title ‘Chierici e laici nella letteratura italiana del primo Cinquecento’, in *Problemi di vita religiosa in Italia nel Cinquecento, Atti del Convegno di Storia della Chiesa in Italia, Bologna, 2–6 sett. 1958* (Padua, Antenore, 1960), 167–85. Then republished in a new edition: Carlo Dionisotti, *Chierici e laici*, con una lettera di Delio Cantimori, introd. by Roberto Cicala (Novara, Interlinea edizioni, 1995).

⁴⁸ Dionisotti in an article of 1991 (*Ricordi*, 515) stresses the link between his historical research and his present experience. He explains how he was moved to investigate the question of ‘chierici e laici’ by the prevalence in post-war Italy of a political party backed by the Catholic Church, ‘una prevalenza che i miei primi e la mia parte in Piemonte mai avrebbero creduto possibile’; but even before, during the war, he was led to question his previous assumptions, when in the general collapse of the Italian state, the church structures had proved themselves much stronger and more deeply rooted than the civic ones. And this had made him look afresh at the relation between ‘chierici’ and ‘laici’ throughout the history of Italian culture.

⁴⁹ The review originally appeared in *Romance Philology*, 16 (1962), 41–58.

takes the opportunity to illustrate the importance of language for his 'geografia e storia' view of the Italian tradition. On the one hand the fourteenth century sees the victory, sudden and definitive, of Tuscan over the other regional vernaculars, and therefore the birth of the Italian national literary language. On the other, the dialects live on, as spoken languages, until the twentieth century and beyond, and this contributes to explaining the static, formal perfection of literary Italian, the scarcity of what is known about the history of spoken Italian (as against the dialects), and the interesting fact that, for instance, humanistic literature in Latin, in the late Quattrocento, is more 'popular' and 'realistic' than its vernacular counterpart.

Similar points are made, with great vigour and extraordinary erudition, in the chapters of the slim volume *Gli umanisti e il volgare*,⁵⁰ which stresses the importance of the newly developed interest in Greek, with its variety of literary dialects (as against the unitary character of Latin) for the discussions on the 'questione della lingua', even though Bembo's solution finally imposed a unitary standard comparable to the Ciceronian one which prevailed for Latin.

Other important collections are the volumes which put together the essays on Machiavelli;⁵¹ those on Foscolo, Pietro Giordani, Leopardi, Manzoni, Nievo (as well as other striking articles, 'Piemontesi e spiemontizzati', which opens the book, and 'Ricordo di Quintino Sella' which closes it);⁵² those on Aldo Manuzio;⁵³ those on Leonardo, Giorgione, Titian, Vasari, Battista Fiera,⁵⁴ Francesco Colonna, Niccolò Liburnio, Pirro Ligorio, G. B. Marino and other authors relevant for the relation between artists and men of letters.⁵⁵ An impressive selection, prepared by Dionisotti and published after his death, is *Ricordi della scuola italiana*.⁵⁶ It includes thirty-six articles devoted to authors and episodes in Italian culture from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Among the most rewarding are those on Antonio Panizzi (pp. 179–276, 1979 and 1980), on Graziadio Ascoli and the discussions on the Italian language after

⁵⁰ Carlo Dionisotti, *Gli umanisti e il volgare* (see above, n. 5).

⁵¹ Carlo Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie* (Turin, Einaudi, 1980), including important studies not previously published.

⁵² Carlo Dionisotti, *Appunti sui moderni* (see above, n. 2).

⁵³ Carlo Dionisotti, *Aldo Manuzio, umanista e editore* (Milan, Edizioni il Polifilo, 1995).

⁵⁴ Battista Fiera had been studied by James Wardrop. The warm appreciation manifested in the reference for Dionisotti (mentioned above) was reciprocated, as can be seen from the moving and elegantly worded expressions in *Appunti su arti e lettere* (see below, n. 55), 57–8.

⁵⁵ Carlo Dionisotti, *Appunti su arti e lettere* (Milan, Jaca Book, 1995).

⁵⁶ Carlo Dionisotti, *Ricordi* (see above, n. 4)

unification (pp. 277–314, 1991 and 1993), and on Alessandro D’Ancona’s correspondence (pp. 321–68, 1976).

V

I should like finally to observe that one impression which Dionisotti could make (and did make on some colleagues) was of a man of the nineteenth century—almost a figure of the Italian Risorgimento, one of those serious, upright, irreproachable Piedmontese ‘tutti d’un pezzo’ who contributed so much to the formation of an Italian national ideal (if not with equal success to the effective reality of the new state), whom Dionisotti admired and whose memory he helped to keep alive. But this view does not do justice to the sense of emotional, passionate involvement with the present that one senses in Dionisotti’s work. His distaste for fashionable cultural trends was not based on lack of interest for things modern but rather on an uncompromising hostility against attitudes he considered frivolous or wanting in commitment to truth and objectivity as irreducible values in historical research.

This had its political counterpart in his espousal of the line of ‘Giustizia e Libertà’, the antifascist left-liberal movement, distant from both Catholic and communist positions. Characteristic of Dionisotti’s ideas on the responsibility of intellectuals were the comments he made (and did not hesitate to repeat and elaborate in later years) on the killing of Giovanni Gentile, the famous philosopher and cultural organiser, president of the Enciclopedia Italiana Institute, who completely identified himself with the fascist regime. He was killed (murdered, or executed, depending on the viewpoint), almost certainly by communist partisans, in Florence, on 15 April 1944. This caused an enormous sensation among Italian intellectuals, many of whom (including those who were politically not on his side) appreciated his human qualities and personal honesty. Dionisotti wrote in the *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà*⁵⁷ an article in which he ‘explained’ the killing in the pitiless light of the savage civil war which was being fought in Italy at the time—a war in which it was impossible, and in any case would have been morally unacceptable, not to

⁵⁷ *Nuovi Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* (May–June 1944), 86–95. Reprinted in *L’Indice dei Libri del mese*, 2:9 (1985), 23–6. Also id., ‘La morte amara di Gentile’, *Resistenza. Giustizia e Libertà*, 18:4 (1964), 1.

take sides—a war the ferocity of which was not unfamiliar to historians of Mediaeval and Renaissance Italy. The passionate antifascist who intervened on that burning political and ideological question was all of a piece with the dispassionate scholar who spent most of his life in the British Library investigating and bringing back to life figures and texts from Italy's past.⁵⁸

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Note. I am grateful to Anna Carlotta Dionisotti and Luigi Meneghello for help and advice.

⁵⁸ Among the obituaries and profiles, I should like to mention Verina R. Jones, 'Ricordo di Carlo Dionisotti', *Annali Manzoni*, Nuova serie III (1999), 427–31; Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy, 'Carlo Dionisotti (A Personal Appreciation)', *The Italianist*, 18 (1998), 5–9; Giulio Lepschy, 'Ricordo di Carlo Dionisotti', *Rinascimento*, 99 (1999), 119–25; Brian Richardson, 'Carlo Dionisotti', *Italian Studies*, 54 (1999), 13–16; Alfredo Stussi, 'Ricordo di Carlo Dionisotti', *Intersezioni*, 18 (1998), 379–88; Claudia Villa, 'Ricordo di Carlo Dionisotti', *Belfagor*, 54 (1999), 61–9 (also ead., 'Carlo Dionisotti' (Ritratti critici di contemporanei), *Belfagor*, 43 (1988), 49–65.

