

Vincenzo Guerrazzi:
from Factory Worker to Writer and Painter
by Salvatore Vento

Two events have recently taken place that draw our attention to a historical cycle of extraordinary social and intellectual commitment. The first is the exhibition of Vincenzo Guerrazzi's paintings at the Loggia della Mercanzia in Piazza Banchi in the heart of Genoa's historical center. The second is the publication of the book *Verso il futuro. Dal presente agli anni '70*, by the same author.

From 1958 to 1974, Guerrazzi worked for Ansaldo as a common laborer. This experience proved to be a fundamental source of his literary and artistic inspiration. The Ansaldo factory was (and still is) inextricably linked to the image of Genoa, a principle city of Italy's industrial triangle (Turin, Milan and Genoa). Ansaldo's deep-seated tradition, exerted a strong cultural influence on the civil fabric of the city. The leadership of the Ansaldo factory workers' carved out their own distinct history and identity during the Resistance Movement (1943-45) and the "rebuilding of the nation" after WWII, in which they proudly felt they had a leading role. The leadership's working life—from entry in the factory as trainees to the moment of retirement—developed over the same period.

Over the years, the company has been restructured many times, but whoever has presided over political issues or social policy has necessarily had to consider Ansaldo's traditions in any decision-making process. On this point, all historical and sociological research studies about Ansaldo have reached the same conclusion.

The period between 1968-75 has been historically defined as the "hot autumn" (*autunno caldo*) where the "centrality of the factory workers' conditions" came to the foreground of Italian labor relations. Ansaldo's Meccanico factory in Sampierdarena, employer of 3,000 people at the time, permits us to analyse the transition to a new phase of intense social conflict. From the point of view of union organisation, a transition took place; the internal Commission was replaced by the delegates' Council made up of representative workers who were elected in each department. Some of the representatives were relieved of their production duties in order to pursue full-time union activity.

In 1969, the first innovative contract was signed. The next contract, signed in 1973, further reinforced conditions; for example, workers were granted 150 hours of the right to study (including remedial lessons in secondary schools and specialised courses at university). The "season of rights" culminated in the political conquest of the Statute of Laborers (1970) and the integrated salary scheme of factory and office workers, which the Genoese factories implemented two years ahead of the national contract of the same category. It was a long

and exhausting eight-month fight, and reached about two hundred hours of strike, when the government intervened to put an end to the period of industrial agitation on the 31st of December, 1971.

Vincenzo Guerrazzi, the factory worker and “incoherent intellectual”, came face to face with this reality every day. His writings, starting from his first short stories, published in local newspapers, reveals behaviours and feelings quite different from those perceived before the “*autunno caldo*”. At that time, the militant and his ideals (that is, the middle-ranking trade unionist and the political party) took center stage, according to prevalent historical and political reconstructions. In contrast, Vincenzo wrote about common workers, tormented by the difficulties of every day life, who expressed themselves with instinctive and irreverent language, paying little attention to social niceties. While reading his books, we understand the positive and the negative aspects of the factory experience that remain a wellspring of the author’s artistic creativity. He describes moments of alienation (the recurrent theme of nausea) and the feeling of not belonging; of the desire to escape, to realise oneself *out of the factory*. He wrote as if the factory were irremediable and “industrial democracy” were only demagoguery and not a challenge to be conquered. Guerrazzi’s vision is closer to the description of an unskilled laborer on an assembly line, rather than that of a skilled laborer, typical of Ansaldo. His description (in *Nord e Sud uniti nella lotta*) of the voyage by ship of one thousand steelworkers on their way to protest in Reggio Calabria in October 1972 is unforgettable.

Thirty years later, in 2004, the author once again returns to his working origins in Ansaldo, with his novel *L’aiutante di S.B. presidente operaio*. Guerrazzi focuses now on technical progress, represented by a new machine that does everything: the great Kollmann milling machine(www.kollmann-metalle.at). In the book, his boss tells him to treat this formidable machine like a charming woman, full of love; here again, we perceive the factory worker’s experience mingled with literary imagination.

The volume, edited by the Genoese EEditrice.com, apart from an unpublished short story by Guerrazzi, includes the reviews written by Stefano Bigazzi, Giorgio Cavallini, Brunetto De Batté, Mariantonietta Piga, Stefano Termanini and Salvatore Vento. The exhibition was carried out by two young architects, Marika Guerrazzi and Nuno Lopes.

Other books by Guerrazzi:

Nord e Sud uniti nella lotta, 1974

Le ferie di un operaio, 1974

1975-78 :

L’altra cultura. Inchiesta operaia;

I dirigenti;

Gli intelligenti

La festa dell’Unità

La fabbrica dei pazzi

La fabbrica del sogno

L’aiutante di S. B. presidente operaio

For Guerrazzi’s paintings and other works see www.vincenzoguerrazzi.org