



Busi, Aldo (b. 1948)

by Desmond Ariel

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Aldo Busi, one of the most provocative and prolific of European gay authors, is often cited alongside Pier Vittorio Tondelli as representative of a new strain in Italian literature. He is also known as a translator of, among others, Lewis Carroll, Castiglione, Boccaccio, and Schiller. Among his translations into Italian are such works as J. R. Ackerley's *My Father and Myself* and Goethe's *Werther*. His novels in turn have been translated into several languages.

While Busi eschews simplistic labels, particularly that of "gay writer," his work nevertheless frequently presents homosexual acts as normative behavior and foregrounds gay sex as an epiphany for his protagonists. Moreover, he has appeared on Italian television in drag, expressing a variety of controversial views, thus making him a media celebrity.

He was born February 25, 1948, in Montichiari, Italy. A precocious and defiant youth, he was thrown out of his home town at the age of 14 for declaring himself homosexual. He worked as a waiter in Milan, but spent time in other European cities, where he mastered French, German, and English. He returned to Italy and began to work as a translator, before achieving success in 1984 with his first novel. He lives in central Italy with his mother.

Early Works

Busi's first book *Semario sulla gioventù* (*Seminar of Youth*, 1984) was received warmly. It is a semi-autobiographical novel that embodies many of the discursive elements to be found in his later works. In eight episodes, it outlines the adventures and misadventures of handsome Barbino, a young man from northern Italy, who flees his hometown and goes to Paris, where he spends his life castigating and confounding those who desire him, both male and female.

Among his admirers is his main female protector Arlette, whom he treats with some cruelty and disdain. Through his treatment of her, he enacts a kind of revenge on society. Barbino's bilious personality finds any kind of domesticity confining. Thus, at the conclusion of the novel, he departs for London.

His second book, *Vita standard di un venditore provvisorio di collant* (*The Standard Life of a Temporary Pantyhose Salesman*, 1985), also achieved acclaim. It centers on Angelo Bazarovi, who saves his boss's abandoned child, Georgina, from her mother. Angelo's boss is Celestino Lometto, a pantyhose business magnate, whose aim is to teach Angelo "the ABCs of corruption, to begin to steal in order to obtain what is right." Both, however, repeatedly attempt to bamboozle the other in comic, picaresque style.

As in Busi's first novel, autobiographical elements emerge, starting with scenes of Angelo in the cruising areas around Sirmione, on Lake Garda. In this novel, Busi ruthlessly satirizes the morals of Italian-style business.

Another early work, *La Delphina Bizantina* (*The Byzantine Dolphin*, 1986), is set in Ravenna, and vigorously

tackles a feminist theme.

In 1988, Busi achieved national attention with his novel, *Sodomie in Corpo 11* (Sodomies in Elevenpoint). This work charts its protagonist's convoluted misadventures in Morocco, including several homosexual episodes. Busi presents the protagonist as both outsider and wanderer.

This book was reviled by the Catholic church as immoral, and charged by the Italian judicial system with obscenity. Busi was absolved of criminal charges, and the highly publicized trial probably increased the sales of the book.

Later Works

Following the notoriety he achieved with *Sodomie in Corpo 11*, Busi continued to publish regularly. Some of his books, however, have not yet been translated into English.

Among the more notable of his recent works is *Altri Abusi; viaggi, sonnambulismi e giri dell'oca* (Uses and Abuses: Journeys, Sleepwalking and Fool's Errands, 1995), which gained attention for its style. It poses as memoir and travelogue, and features a first person narrator. He visits France, the U. K., Iceland, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil, commenting freely on all that he observes.

Frequently, the narrative steers into literary criticism, such as when he visits the Rimbaud Museum in France. For Busi, Rimbaud is the classic writerly hero. He defends Rimbaud's mother Vitalie Cuif, suggesting that Rimbaud's relationship with his mother was more important than biographers have supposed. He also speculates that Rimbaud's disease, which at the time was diagnosed as cancer, may have been AIDS a century before it emerged.

Style

Busi's writing consists of largely plotless narratives, the dynamics of which rest on the narrator's incisive, caustic, and skeptical observations. His ironic stance towards society and the world emphasizes the base and grotesque nature of human exchanges.

There is much linguistic innovation in Busi's work, especially in the use of mock-philosophic peroration, satire, and social commentary. He also confounds expectations: his novels lapse into stream-of-consciousness, essay, and commentary; his travel books echo the escapades of his fictional characters, so generic boundaries are often blurred.

Busi's entire oeuvre may be regarded as a *roman fleuve*, one long seamless work of prose dialogue among the many facets of himself. To this end, he has identified the self with the fluidity of the sea.

While his work sometimes inadvertently tends to reinforce stereotypical views that highly-sexed males are doomed to become gypsies and wanderers, addicted to promiscuous sex and unable to have happy relationships, Busi himself is very clear about his scorn for such notions. He does however describe a world where the lonely writer acts as the arch-critic of conventional morality and of homosexual aspirations to be "normalized" by society.

Italian literature since Dante has historically emphasized the subversive potential of homosexuals in society; it has rarely explored them as individuals capable of integration. Thus, Busi may also be constrained by this distinctly Italian perspective. It is a view that often also assumes a divide between the educated man and the unhindered virility of the lower-class male, a world also explored by film maker Pasolini, with whom Busi has some interesting affinities.

Thus, Busi's work, despite being prodigious, daring, and inventive, offers cold comfort. Its focus is on the repellent in human behavior. He nevertheless remains a scabrous, perhaps necessary, singular voice. His is the voice of the misanthrope and transgressor, who subverts the unquestioned assumptions of Italian masculinity in the finest prose.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Desmond Ariel is a Briton who writes fiction, essays, and reviews. His short story, "Twelve Days in a Week," appears in *Foreign Affairs: Erotic Travel Tales*, edited by Mitzi Szereto (2004, Cleis Press). His memoir, "Shushalooza Meyl: Johannesburg to Capetown," will appear in *Looking for Love in Faraway Places: Tales of Gay Men's Romance Overseas*, edited by Michael Luongo (2006, Haworth Press).