



Coccioli, Carlo (1920-2003)

by Richard Workman

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Carlo Coccioli.
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In novels, essays, plays, and short stories, the Italian-born writer Carlo Coccioli, author of a landmark gay novel, depicted the struggle to find and keep religious faith in spite of the seeming absurdity of life and the propensity of human beings to dehumanize each other.

For fifty years he made his living as a successful writer. He published over 30 novels, most of them critically acclaimed. Yet five years after his death only about eight of his books are in print, and they are available only in Spanish.

Coccioli has been almost forgotten in Italy and is even less well known in the English-speaking world. None of his work written since 1959 has been translated into English. He is not mentioned in the standard English-language histories of Italian literature, such as the *Dictionary of Italian Literature*, the *Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, or the *Cambridge History of Italian Literature*.

There may be several reasons for the eclipse of Coccioli's reputation. For one thing, many of his novels, like some of Graham Greene's, have a strong religious component that can make them a bit heavy going for the casual reader. For another, he was famous early in his career as the author of an unapologetically gay-positive novel at a time when that distinction carried considerable stigma.

But probably the main reason for Coccioli's obscurity is that he chose to be a trilingual writer, producing books in Italian, French, and Spanish. Many of his works were translated from one of those languages into the others or into English, but some of his later work was published only in Spanish.

Compounding the problem is the fact that Coccioli was sometimes his own translator, and, by his own admission, he considered a translation of one of his own books to be almost a rewriting. This leaves a student of his work with an even more complex task than, say, a Samuel Beckett scholar faces when dealing with Beckett's work in French and English. The demands that such an author makes on readers who might want to study his work are formidable to say the least, and the effect of his versatility has been to leave him unclaimed by any single national school of writing. But Coccioli is too important a writer to deserve this neglect.

Early Life and Career

From Livorno, Italy, where Coccioli was born May 15, 1920, his father, a career military officer, moved the family in 1927 to present-day Libya in North Africa, where they largely remained until 1938.

Coccioli excelled at school and was an avid reader. He claimed that he decided to become a writer at age 13 upon reading Dickens' *David Copperfield*. By the time he was studying at the college level, he was specializing in languages and Oriental and Hebrew studies.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 brought the family back to Italy, where Coccioli continued his studies,

defending his thesis on "Animal Stories in Oral African Literature" just before he was drafted into the Italian army in 1942.

In December 1943 Italy suddenly found itself divided into two parts, one controlled by the monarchy and the Allies in the south and the other dominated by Mussolini's Italian Social Republic in the north. Coccioli, who was stationed in Turin at the time, was faced with a dilemma: whether to stay with his unit and thus collaborate with the fascists or to desert. He deserted by throwing himself from a second-floor window and took up with the anti-fascist Resistance, serving as a lieutenant in charge of about 40 fighters who attacked German posts in the dark of night.

Before long, however, he was captured by the Germans. He expected to be shot, but as it happened, his captors found a notebook in his possession containing numbers, dates, lines of poetry, and English words. Wrongly thinking the notebook contained important information about the resistance, the Germans concluded he might be a valuable prisoner. They spared his life and incarcerated him in the medieval castle of Bologna.

When, one night, the Italian prisoners mounted a violent prison break, more than a hundred were killed by machine gun fire. Luckily, Coccioli was one of the unharmed escapees and fled across the Italian countryside back to his family in Florence and to his first love, an 18-year-old young man named Alberto, whom he called his "angel" and described as having "the face of a child and laughing eyes" and who, Coccioli said, had inspired him with the courage to fight for the Resistance.

In Florence Coccioli joined up with the Allies and spent the rest of the war working for General Eisenhower's top-secret Psychological Warfare Branch in North Africa. After the war he was decorated by Italy with the Silver Medal for Military Valor. When he received the medal, he said, he savored the irony that no one in the audience suspected the kind of love that had inspired his bravery.

In 1946 his first novel was published, *Il Migliore e l'Ultimo* (the title a quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "One fight more, / the best and the last"), based on his experiences in the Resistance. For whatever reason, the novel met with hostility from the Italian literary establishment, which Coccioli compared to a "mafia," and in particular from its Don, the writer Alberto Moravia. In Coccioli's view, Moravia demanded that all aspiring writers pay him court, and those who did not, like Coccioli, paid the price of being dismissed from the pages of the best literary journals. This was the beginning of Coccioli's disaffection with the Italian literary scene and his gradual drift away from Italy and the Italian language.

His next works took as their theme his struggle with his Catholic faith and attracted more attention from both the public and critics. Two novels were published with moderate success in Italy, *La Difficile Speranza* (1947) and *La Piccola Valle di Dio* (1948, translated into English as *The Little Valley of God*).

By 1950 he was living in France and began first to translate his own novels into French and then occasionally to write them in that language and translate them into Italian.

His biggest success, *Il Cielo e la Terra* (1950; published in English as *Heaven and Earth*), earned him critical respect and, at last, financial rewards. Coccioli was courted by publishers (Prentice-Hall plied him with caviar and champagne), and the novel was translated into several languages.

Fabrizio Lupo

In 1952 he published, if not his best-known novel, then certainly his most notorious: *Fabrizio Lupo* (published in England in 1960 as *The Eye and the Heart* and in the U.S. in 1966 as *Fabrizio's Book*).

After the big success of *Il Cielo e la Terra*, this novel was treated very differently by publishers. His French publisher Plon decided to take the cautious step of bringing it out under one of its more obscure imprints, La Table Ronde. Italian publishers refused to touch the book. It was not published in Italy until 1978.

The problem was that the subject of the novel was the love affair of two young men: Fabrizio Lupo, an Italian painter, and Laurent Rigault, a French sculptor. Both are successful artists, both have more or less come to terms with their homosexuality; neither is sexually inexperienced, but both have been waiting for a special relationship.

The outer events of the novel are utterly simple: the young men fall in love in Paris, then first Fabrizio and later Laurent travel to Italy where they take a long vacation together on an island. Laurent then returns to Paris, and later Fabrizio follows.

All the drama of the novel lies in the depiction of the inner life of Fabrizio, who reveals their story to a writer named Carlo Coccioli, author of a book titled *Il Cielo e la Terra* (a literary device that was not as well-worn 50 years ago as it is now). Part of the story Fabrizio tells during visits to the fictional Coccioli's home, part is revealed through copies of his letters to Laurent that he gives Coccioli, and part is told through a lengthy novel that Fabrizio wrote during the affair and that in fact takes up 250 of the 400 pages of the book.

Fabrizio exposes the two men's struggles to find happiness, and the forces that are relentlessly arrayed against them, the doubts, jealousies, religious and social pressures, and what today we would call internalized homophobia.

Coccioli saw the two men's fate as essentially a religious problem. They dared to pose what he termed the "terrible question": "Can God have created us as we are, only to condemn us later because we are what we are?" The fictional Coccioli affirms that God could not have done such a thing. It is only human beings and their flawed institutions, such as the Church, that are at fault.

The history of Fabrizio and Laurent is given more or less chronologically in the outer novel up to the point where Coccioli inserts the entire text of what he refers to as Fabrizio's "journal-novel," which consists of pages of Fabrizio's reminiscences of his relationship with Laurent interspersed with episodes of a strange and dream-like tale of a beautiful adolescent Child and his bizarre and yet moving encounters in a surreal world.

Fabrizio's novel elevates Coccioli's book into the realm of literature. There are harrowing pages written by Fabrizio in which he appears to have gone mad and obsesses on death and decay. The Child's story is sometimes bewildering; at times it seems to have no narrative direction at all. But gradually, the characters in the journal-novel begin to reflect less and less obscurely the events in the lives of Fabrizio and Laurent, even though there is never a one-to-one correspondence between the two lovers and any of the stylized characters in Fabrizio's novel.

At one point, the journal-novel even becomes, perhaps, a bit didactic. And yet the novel-within-a-novel also evokes a convincing mythic dimension to the lovers' struggles. In the end, Coccioli's book is saved by its originality, the brilliance of the writing, the richness of his imagination, and its historical importance as a landmark gay novel.

Fabrizio Lupo had such an effect on the public that Coccioli said he received over 10,000 letters from readers, many of them from unhappy gay men and a number of them from men who were planning suicide.

Some readers saw only tragedy in the book. Others, however, found the novel hopeful.

One French reader wrote: "I have just finished reading your novel *Fabrizio Lupo* and I need to write you to tell you what admiration I have for your talent and especially for your courage in having dared to write this book. . . . I'm but an unknown reader and perhaps you will care little for my opinion, but something drives me to tell you how touched and moved I was by the story of Fabrizio Lupo. This book will remain near me on my bedside, like a bible that one opens randomly in moments of sadness and discouragement, and that one recloses, comforted, calmed, after having read several pages. . . . I would like to have your talent for finding the words that would transmit all my gratitude--since I cannot do it in person--but I can only tell you, in my name and in the name of all the others, of all my isolated brothers: from the bottom of my heart, thank you."

Fabrizio Lupo probably drew on Coccioli's love for his war-time friend, Alberto. It was also fed by his relationship with a man named Michel, whom he met in 1950. Like Fabrizio and Laurent, Carlo and Michel met in Paris, Michel visited Carlo in Florence, the pair went on a vacation to an island, and subsequently both returned to Paris. Their relationship, however, did not end with the events in the novel. In Michel's company, he traveled first to Canada for a brief stay, and then to Mexico, where the affair finally ended in 1954.

The resulting crisis and depression eventually led to Coccioli's break with Catholicism. In the following years he explored several other religions, including Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and finally ended by speculating that the next step in the evolution of human faith might be in the hands of physicists.

Later Life and Career

After the breakup with Michel, Coccioli settled in Mexico, learned Spanish, and began to write articles for periodicals in that language. Most of his work was still written first in Italian or French, but after 1973 he began composing books in Spanish, as well. For the rest of his life, the first thing he did after deciding on a book project was choose the language in which to write.

The subject of homosexuality appeared in his work throughout his career, but it never dominated another book as it did *Fabrizio Lupo*. He disclaimed being a gay writer, and said late in life that "the drama of homosexuality or whatever it is, was not and is not the dominant color of my flag, of my literature."

Except for a brief period when he settled in Texas, first in Laredo, then in San Antonio, Coccioli lived and worked in Mexico with his partner, Juanito, and his adopted son, Javier, turning out newspaper columns, books on a wide array of subjects such as religion, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, his beloved dogs, Buddhism, the history of Mexico, Alcoholics Anonymous, and the 1966 Florence floods, as well as a stream of novels, including *La Ville et le Sang* (1955; *Daughter of the Town*); *Manuel le Mexicain* (1956; *Manuel the Mexican*), *Le Caillou Blanc* (1958; *The White Stone*), *Le Corde dell'Arpa* (1967), *Mémoires du Roi David* (1976), and *Le Case del Lago* (1980).

Coccioli died peacefully in Mexico City, having refused the last rites of the Catholic church, on August 5, 2003.

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but titled in English, "Experiences of a Trilingual Writer about Literary Vocation, Books, Love, Animals, and God," given by Coccioli at the University of Texas October 24, 1990, from which much of this entry is derived.]

About the Author

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