



Mieli, Mario (1952-1983)

by Hubert Kennedy

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A leader of the Italian gay liberation movement in the 1970s, Mario Mieli combined a radical theoretical perspective with a courageous (and often provocative) public persona. He is best known for his Marxist account of homosexuality and homosexual oppression, *Elementi di critica omossuale* (1977), translated into English in 1980 as *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique* (1980).

Mario Mieli was born in Milan on May 21, 1952 into a large and prosperous family. He grew up on his family's estate near Como, but returned to Milan in 1968, where he participated in the radical student movement.

In the years from 1971 to 1974 Mieli spent much time in London, where he took part in the Gay Liberation Front. In April 1972, he, along with Angelo Pezzana (b. 1940) and the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne (b. 1920), conducted the first homosexual demonstration in Italy at a Congress of Sexology in San Remo, where they protested against the psychiatric condemnation of homosexual conduct and, especially, against the use of aversion therapy to "convert" homosexuals.

Inspired by the writings of Massimo Consoli, the collective Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano (Italian revolutionary homosexual united front), which is better known by its acronym FUORI! (Come out!), was founded in 1971. Though based in Turin, it appeared almost simultaneously in Turin, Rome, and Milan, where Mieli was an organizer.

When FUORI! united with the Radical Party in 1972, Mieli criticized the move as "counter-revolutionary," since he thought the gay movement should remain independent of political parties. He then left FUORI! to help organize the Collettivi Omosessuali Milanesi (Homosexual collectives of Milan), whose theatrical group Nostra Signora dei Fiori staged in 1976 his play "La Traviata Norma. Ovvero: Vaffanculo... ebbene sì!" (The title contains too many puns to attempt translation.) This outrageous production had an enormous success in Milan and the many other cities in which it was presented. An in-your-face spectacle, it deliberately presented behavior on stage that was designed to flout conventional, heterosexual norms. Its impact was explosive.

A controversial personality, Mieli was not beyond making a spectacle of himself. Once in Rome he publicly ate his own excrement and that of a dog. Some found this outrageous public behavior frightening, but in fact he was a gentle person who enjoyed cross-dressing. He could be very charming in private.

Shortly after I met him, Mieli sent me a letter, dated February 19, 1983, in which he spoke of a forthcoming book. "My book, entitled *Il risveglio dei Faraoni* [The awakening of the Pharaohs], will appear at the end of April and if you will let me know where you will be on that date, I will be sure to have a copy sent to you. At present I am feeling a bit bad because of the reactions that the book may arouse: I don't know if I told you, but it is the story of a risen Jesus and is at the same time autobiographical. Even though Einaudi [the publisher of *Elementi di critica omossuale*] is presenting it as a novel, one knows very well that it is not and I don't want anyone to do me in [che qualcuno mi facesse la pelle]. But perhaps this is all paranoia. In any case, it is my book and I could not write it differently." Shortly afterwards, however, another letter, dated

March 11, 1983, arrived. It contained the postscript: "My book will not be published by my free choice." The following day Mieli killed himself.

It thus appears that Mario Mieli's suicide in Milan, on March 12, 1983, was connected with the adverse reaction he expected from the publication of this book, though it is not clear just what objection to the book he anticipated. Even though a pirated edition was later published, his family brought legal action and had all copies destroyed. Hence, Mieli's suppressed book remains the subject of speculation.

Mieli is best remembered for his earlier book, the theoretical work *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, which is an elaboration of his university thesis of 1976. It was translated into English and Spanish. The book was reprinted in 2002 with additional essays by several gay scholars. (The title of Teresa de Lauretis's contribution, "La gaia scienza, ovvero la traviata Norma," even recalls Mieli's theatrical production.)

In this wide-ranging work, Mieli discusses six major topics. 1) He challenges antigay commonplaces (e.g., that homosexuality is an illness, that sexual attraction is permanent and directed to only one sex) in medicine, psychology, sociology, law, politics, religion, etc. from his own personal viewpoint, as gained from his participation in the gay liberation movement. 2) He traces the history of the social repression of homosexuality. 3) He insists on the universality of homoerotic desire (i.e., it concerns not just a minority, but is present in all individuals). 4) He attempts to shed light on the relationship between homoeroticism and that which is beyond the common perception of what is usually considered "normal"; i.e., he sees homosexuality as a bridge toward an existential dimension decidedly other, sublime, and profound, such as, he says, that which is partly revealed in the so-called "schizophrenic" experiences. 5) He underscores the importance of gay liberation within the framework of human liberation. 6) He sees the goal of liberation as the freeing of the total erotic potential of each individual.

The Freudian and Marxist aspects of the work are somewhat obscured in the English translation, which is 14% shorter than the original Italian. Some omissions would mainly be of interest to Italian readers (such as passages from the writings of Dante and Pier Paolo Pasolini), but a number of quotations of Marx were omitted, as were all references to Hegel. As a result, some coherence of the theoretical argument is lost, though Mieli's reasoning is everywhere quite compelling.

Soon after Mieli's death, the largest gay organization in Rome changed its name to Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli (Homosexual Cultural Circle "Mario Mieli"). Massimo Consoli, the founder of the Italian gay movement, has called Mieli "an extraordinary militant, one of the few clear minds of our movement."

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About the Author

Hubert Kennedy has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of

the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.