This book foregrounds the ideas of an important European pedagogue whose writings provide insights for a critical social justice oriented approach to education. Lorenzo Milani has all the credentials to be regarded as potentially a key source of inspiration for critical pedagogy. Milani's approach to education for social justice gives importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race issues especially with his critique of North-South relations and cultural/technological transfer, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring), reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one's learning (from the occasional to the profound motive) and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to 'conscientious objection' with its process of reading/teaching history against the grain.

There is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which gives pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables and vouchers.

— Peter Mayo, University of Malta

Cover design by Raphael Vella
Social Class, Language and Power
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‘Letter to a Teacher’: Lorenzo Milani and the School of Barbiana

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PREFACE

This volume is the result of the collaboration between the authors and a number of colleagues, researchers and scholars who have been touched by Don Lorenzo Milani’s contributions to education and society. The first result of this endeavour was published in 2009, in the form of a volume entitled ‘Letter to a Teacher. Lorenzo Milani’s contribution to critical citizenship’ (Malta: Agenda). The interest created by this volume encouraged us to further our research and to extend our collaboration with other colleagues, who commented our work and with whom we engaged critically in order to produce this new volume. In it we retain the translated version of Don Milani’s LetteradunaProfessoressa, including footnotes and notes, which appeared originally in our 2009 publication. These, however, have been revised and corrections have also been affected. The other original contributions highlight the importance of Don Milani’s work, the relevance of its powerful message in today’s society and his use of language as a means to transmit his enlightening philosophy.

We would like to thank all the colleagues and students whose comments, reactions and criticism inspired us to carry further research on Don Lorenzo Milani’s works. We also thank all those who provided feedback on different drafts of this book, Antoinette Pace for proofreading the final draft, Raphael Vella for his contribution to the cover design and Joe Cassar for his editorial support.

Carmel Borg, Mario Cardona, Sandro Caruana
FOREWORD

DON MILANI, THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA
AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

This book foregrounds the ideas of an important European pedagogue whose writings provide insights for a critical social justice oriented approach to education. He has all the credentials to be regarded as potentially a key source of inspiration for critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that movement which is very much inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and others but which has had its origins in North America. One need only visit the site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University to verify this as we come across such names as those of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Apple, Deborah Britzman, bell hooks, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder and Shirley Steinberg, among the leading figures¹ (I would include Maxine Greene and Roger I. Simon among the major North American exponents). Among the historical figures that include John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Lev Vygotsky, W.E.B. Du Bois and more recently Jesus ‘Pato’ Gomez² and Joe Kincheloe, one should also add Don Lorenzo Milani. In this regard, Milani joins other important figures from Italy who provide insights for a critical pedagogical approach to knowledge, learning and action. These include Danilo Dolci, who wedded community learning and social action, through community mobilization, ‘reverse strikes’ and ‘hunger strikes’ (Castiglione, 2004), and Aldo Capitini, the anti-fascist peace educator and activist who organized various educational and mobilizing activities within the context of a peace education movement and his post-war centres for social orientation (COS) (Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini, undated). Capitini was a visitor at Milani’s school at Barbiana.

Milani’s approach to education for social justice gives importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race issues especially with his critique of North-South relations and cultural/technological transfer, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring) reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one’s learning (from the occasional to the profound motive) and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. The list is by no means exhaustive.

² Ibid.
There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to ‘conscientious objection’ with its process of reading/teaching history against the grain. The last feature of Milani’s pedagogical approach would be very apt for critical pedagogues engaged in exploring signposts for a pedagogical politics after Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (Giroux, 2005) and for a pedagogy against empire (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007).

Being quite eclectic like Freire and sharing with the Brazilian educator the influence of the Holy Gospels, Lorenzo Milani differs with respect to Marxism. And yet Gramsci’s writings, an important influence on critical pedagogy, were of interest to Milani. The Italian Marxist’s Letters from Prison were important reading material at the School of Barbiana. However one does not come across traces of Marxism or references to Marx in the writings of the Tuscan priest. The Gospels were the most important source of inspiration for Milani. This notwithstanding, his classes at San Donato, the place where he served prior to Barbiana, were devoid of religious symbols – a secular, non-denominational school (Simeone, 1996, p. 99).

Despite the absence of Marxist influences in Milani’s works, it is interesting to note that what he wrote in Esperienze Pastorali and that which the eight boys wrote in the Lettera anticipate or echo the arguments of French sociologists and philosophers and English and American sociologists, a number of whom of neo-Marxist orientation, with regard to the themes of the bourgeois school and its role in social reproduction. Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Raymond Boudon, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron come to mind. In this regard, one should underline the convergence of the ideas expressed in the Lettera and the ideas concerning the school and bourgeois cultural capital expressed by the leading French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (certainly not a Marxist). It seems that Milani, a keen reader of French literature, had been exposed to the critique of bourgeois culture and power that occurred in France and that certainly influenced Bourdieu.

Like all human beings, Milani has his contradictions, as one can observe from the interviews reproduced by his helpers, students and colleagues in this book. One must also keep in mind the time when his writings emerged. However, there is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which gives pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables, vouchers. When the Lettera was published in 1967, it provided an important source of inspiration for the movement for change known as the 68 Movement and was heralded by the leading Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini, as one of the few books that had aroused his enthusiasm at the time. The text underlines, as this translation will show, the social class basis of school failure and does so with much clarity as it contrasts the fortunes

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3 Letter to a Teacher is a collective piece of work authored by the eight students of Barbiana under his direction.
and everyday worlds of Pierino and Gianni. Its vignettes from peasant/working class and middle class lives, centering around Pierino and Gianni, serve to render the arguments made most compelling.

It goes beyond this. For, in projecting an alternative vision for schooling, it draws on the experiences that took place at Barbiana, experiences which, as Freire would argue, almost echoing Milani on this, cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. In Don Milani’s view, the experience at Barbiana started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. This is not to say that critical pedagogues cannot glean ideas from the Barbiana experience, as presented in this book, to contribute to a more humane, more social justice oriented education predicated on rigour, love, collective work and vivid imagination, and which eschews a process of programming for failure.

Peter Mayo

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Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini (undated) Introducing Aldo Capitini, DVD.
INTRODUCTION

Taking as its point of departure the moral conviction that education is inherently political (Mayo, 1999; Mayo, 2004; Borg & Mayo, 2006; Borg & Cardona, 2008; Borg, Cardona & Caruana, 2009; Borg, 2010; Borg, 2013) this book highlights the educational legacy of Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) and the students who attended his school in Barbiana, an isolated community in the Mugello region of Tuscany. Lettera a una professoressa ("Letter to a Teacher") is the key text that defines the Barbiana phase in Milani’s life. Written under his close editorial supervision, the book is recognised as the work of eight boys from the school. Forty-seven years from its publication, the Lettera, translated into several languages, continues to inspire academics, educationalists, students and social activists who have embraced social justice as their vision for education (Gesualdi, 2007; Hoffman, 2007; Martinelli, 2007).

Born in May 1923, Lorenzo Milani Comparetti was meant to reproduce the prestigious history of his extended family – the Comparetti-Milani-Weiss families. Domenico Comparetti, a well known 19th century philosopher, was proficient in 19 languages. He was studying another language – Arabic – when he died at age 88. Domenico’s wife, Elena Raffalovich was a life-time collaborator of Friedrich Froebel (Martinelli, 2007). Luigi, Lorenzo’s grandfather, was an accomplished archaeologist. Born in Trieste, a cosmopolitan city under Austrian rule, Lorenzo’s mother, Alice Weiss, was not a university graduate. However, her sophistication and cultural capital were admired by a wide circle of friends. Alice’s cousin, Edoardo Weiss was a student of Freud; he established the psychoanalytic school in Italy and was a personal friend of James Joyce, the Irish writer who for some time taught at the Berlitz School in Trieste where Alice had taken some courses (Borghini, 2004). Proficient in six languages, Albano, Milani’s father, was a chemistry professor with vast interests in literature.

As a child, Milani’s upbringing was cushioned by privilege, comfort, intellectual stimulation and bourgeois ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984). His immediate social context was serviced by maids, a cook, a driver, a private tutor and a wet nurse. The presence of learned relatives, friends and collections of artistic and archaeological artifacts defined the cosmopolitan milieu of his home (Fallaci, 2005). At home, Lorenzo, like his brother and sister, was not simply a child to be seen but not heard. On the contrary, he was central to what was happening within the family. Roberto Dessales, a school friend of Adriano, Lorenzo’s brother, recalls how the father would recite poems in Latin and listen to classical music with his children and their friends (Fallaci, 2005). No wonder Lorenzo possessed a weltanschaung that was transnational in nature and a linguistic repertoire that included German, Italian, English, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew and Ancient Greek (Becchi, 2004).
The Milani family belonged to the rentier class (Borg and Mayo, 2006, 2008), a socio-economic location that was only partially challenged at a time when Italy, like the rest of the world, was facing an economic depression. In fact, early in the 1930s, Albano moved his family from Firenze to Milan with the aim of supplementing his family’s income. In Milan, Lorenzo’s father took up a managerial position while maintaining an estate of twenty-five farms at Gigliola in Montespertoli and a summer residence at Castiglioncello. The family’s addresses in Milan – 15, Via Conservatorio, followed by 26, Via Fiamma – and the class register of the Emilio Castiglione elementary school, which classified Lorenzo’s family as rich, attest to the fact that while the family’s economic status was partially dented, it continued to enjoy a high standard of living even when economic depression had raised its ugly head.

In Milan, Lorenzo experienced a schooling process that, to his mind, served to socialise students into assimilating a diet of fascist ideology. Lorenzo revisited his schooling years in Lettera ai giudici, a document written towards the end of his life, in response to the accusation of incitement to the crime of desertion and military disobedience. In Lettera ai giudici he accused his former teachers of acting as organic intellectuals to the fascist bloc by legitimising ‘common sense’ (read fascist) knowledge within schools.

Lorenzo’s antipathy towards the school’s socialisation process, the fact that his social class position brought him in direct contact with social, cultural and economic privilege and dominance, his close contact with poverty on the streets of Firenze and Milan, coupled with an early understanding of the social injustice that characterised the society in which he lived, constituted the beginning of a journey that led to his preferential option for the poor and to his pacifist stance.

Early in his life, Milani developed a reputation for being an anti-conformist, a quasi-bohemian who lived on the edge of what was perceived as socially acceptable (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). His genuine conversion to Catholicism represents one of his major acts of ‘rebellion’. Born into an agnostic family with a mother of Jewish descent, Lorenzo was baptised, following his parents’ remarrying within the Catholic Church. All happened on the same day - 29th June, 1933 – in the shadow of Hitler’s rise to power. It was a Catholic marriage of convenience, choreographed by Don Vincenzo Viviani, a friend of the Milani family from the parish of San Pietro in Mercato. This marriage was meant to shield the family from the anti-semitic hysteria that characterised the years leading to World War II. According to one of Milani’s biographers (Fallaci, 2005), the decision by Alicia and Albano to baptise their three children was also taken in response to Adriano’s, Lorenzo’s brother, traumatic experience in a Catholic private school. Adriano was constantly being bullied by the teacher of Religion and by his peers for being a “heretic” (sic).

It seems that Lorenzo’s baptism at age 10 constituted his awakening to the fact that his mother had Jewish roots. In a review of Lettere alla mamma, originally published in Il Tempo, in 1973, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian film director, suggested that Lorenzo was psychologically and culturally Jewish (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). Don Bensi, Milani’s spiritual director, argued that Lorenzo “was a
Christian, but also a Jew: he always kept a foot, albeit in his own way, in the Old Testament. This explains his rigour, his outbursts, and his frightening intransigence” (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 11). As with Catholicism, there is nothing in Milani’s biography to suggest that Alicia was interested in transmitting her Jewish cultural heritage to her children (Borg and Cardona, 2008). Elena Milani Comparetti (1999), Lorenzo’s sister, confirms that, as children, they were never exposed to a Jewish education process or value system. This fact was confirmed by Alicia herself, in an interview with Nazzareno Fabbretti (in Martinelli, 2007). The rigour that defined Milani’s pedagogical and pastoral stance was intellectual (Braccini and Taddei, 1999) and deeply spiritual, while his intransigence and arrogance could be attributed to his bourgeois upbringing. Milani’s subjectivity stemmed from his sociological analysis of the immediate, national and international, socio-economic realities, and from his unconditional Christian love.

The root causes of Milani’s transformation from a potential bourgeois and secular intellectual to a Catholic priest committed to the oppressed, remain largely a mystery. Milani’s biographers (Fallaci, 2005, Pecorini, 1998) point at two possible indicators, including Lorenzo’s decision, contrary to his parents’ expectations, to study Art, following his completion of the compulsory years of schooling in 1941. On the advice of Giorgio Pasquali from Florence, his father engaged the services of Hans Joachim Staude, an established German artist known for his profound spirituality. Lorenzo’s dialogues with Staude over Sacred Art seems to have initiated Milani into a deeply spiritual experience. Moreover, Lorenzo’s chance discovery, in the summer of 1942, of an old missal, in a desecrated chapel on the family’s estate of Gigliola, is often mentioned as another possible catalyst to his real conversion to Catholicism.

In 1943, Lorenzo received the sacrament of confirmation from Cardinal Elia Della Costa. Lorenzo’s parents were not informed and were shocked when, within months of his confirmation, on the 9th of November, at the age of twenty, he entered the seminary at Castello in Oltrarno. Lorenzo was ordained priest four years later, on the 13th of July, 1947, at the age of 24.

The radical attitude that defined his years at the seminary constituted the prelude to a pastoral life that was characterized by an obsession with coherence and by a total commitment to a liberatory vision and project. Close to his ordination, Lorenzo renounced his family’s inheritance, a deeply symbolic gesture of how he wanted to live his pastoral years.

Milani’s twenty years of pastoral leadership unfolded against a socio-political backdrop marked by Pious XII’s crusade against communism; a crusade that was partially responsible for the polarisation of Italian society. Milani refused to foreground anti-communism in his pastoral work. He considered communists as children of an equal God. As a priest, Milani felt morally obliged to reach out to all, irrespective of one’s ideological background.

The Diocese of Florence, Milani’s immediate pastoral patch, was first led by Cardinal Elia della Costa, an anti-fascist, and then by Cardinal Ermenegildo Florit,
who played an important role, together with other religious leaders, in isolating Don Milani. At the time of Lorenzo’s most radical decisions, Florence was rich in projects that addressed peace and social justice. Some of these projects were led by radical Catholics such as Don Primo Mazzolari, Giorgio La Pira, Don Bruno Borghi, Ernesto Balducci, and others from the circle of Testimonianze, a well established Catholic periodical. Aldo Capitini, whose reflections and action were inspired by the philosophy of passive resistance of Mahatma Gandhi, was also highly influential within Catholic circles in Tuscany (Schettini, 2008).

Milani’s pastoral journey started at the parish of San Donato di Calenzano, a small community near Prato, fifteen kilometres away from Florence. It was populated by farmers and textile workers and led spiritually by an old provost, don Pugi. As witnessed in his book Esperienze Pastorali, published in 1958, the parishioners’ spirituality was essentially folkloristic in nature. Their way of experiencing religion contrasted heavily with Don Milani’s radical reading of the Word.

Milani’s pastoral life at San Donato mirrored the principles that informed his entire pastoral journey – i) coherence between action, reflection and spirituality (Schettini, 2008); ii) dominance of moral law over predominance of power; and iii) a life dedicated to others, particularly those who were living in poverty (Fiorani, 1999). In the spirit of what today one would refer to as radical or emancipatory community development, Milani immersed himself totally within the community. He did not wait for the community to approach him. In the morning, after Mass, he would walk through the village to phone, collect the post or buy the newspaper. On the road, he would encounter the ‘generative themes’ (Freire, 1970, 1971) that defined San Donato. Unemployment, exploitation of child labour and the crisis in accommodation constituted some of the chronic ethical, moral and political problems of Milani’s first pastoral community.

San Donato’s cultural landscape was mainly defined by high levels of illiteracy and by what Milani considered as low levels of analysis, weak organisation of ideas and poor communication skills. Shyness was also understood by Milani as a major impediment to the community’s emancipation. Against such a backdrop, Milani’s educational project at San Donato, which consisted of a scuola serale (evening school), the Conferenza del venerdì (Friday conference) and drama sessions at the headquarters of the Compagnia del S.S. Sacramento, an old confraternity of San Donato, was meant to reclaim the community members’ humanity by engaging in a process of ‘locating and dislocating oppression’ (Freire, 1973, Ledwith, 2005).

Milani’s educational vision was not secular. He wanted to set up the school at San Donato primarily to overcome the linguistic barrier that limited his conversation with the parishioners on matters inspired by the Gospels (Bruni, 1974). The scuola popolare formed part of his strategy to evangelise and to reach out to the lost sheep (Schettini, 2008). The main motivation for his action was profoundly religious (Simeone, 1996).

True to Milani’s inclusiveness, the educational context of San Donato was non-denominational in nature. Milani rejected the confessional school. For Milani, school
constituted a space for genuine dialogue and for active engagement with issues that were profound, relevant, immediate and potentially transformative in nature. Milani argued that the search for truth and genuine dialogue were not possible within a school climate that was partisan and exclusive.

Language was central to Milani’s pedagogy of freedom. He understood that one cannot read the ‘world’ without mastering the ‘word’ (Freire, 1995). Milani referred to language as the ‘ghostly key’ that opens every door, including the door of sovereignty. For Milani, proficiency in the language of power is intimately tied to the struggle for democracy, equity and social justice.

According to three of his students from San Donato – Mario Rosi, Ferruccio Francioni and Benito Ferrini – Don Milani would explain a word in detail: its provenance; how it can be used in different circumstances; its shades of meaning; how it translates in different languages; and other words that derive from it (Fallaci, 2005).

In a letter to Enrico Barnebei, Director of the Italian newspaper Giornale del Mattino, Milani explains that:

In the first years the young men were not interested in this work because they did not appreciate its functionality. However, with time, they started to enjoy it (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 38)

Apart from speaking well, Milani expected students to write equally well. In current terms, Milani’s students at San Donato and, later, at Barbiana, engaged in emancipatory action research. The students were the subjects and protagonists in the process of research and writing. Blending archival research with direct, experiential knowledge, the writing phase served to collectively bond them with the contents of their analysis. In the true spirit of social theology, the ultimate goal of the writing was to help the community transform the conditions that facilitate material as well as cultural domination. As a result, the writing had to be kept simple and sieved of any flowery language that tends to colonise rather than emancipate the reader.

Given Milani’s radical stance on many issues, the absence of females from two of the three official educational spaces created or led by Milani at San Donato – the scuola serale and the conferenza del venerdì – could not be overlooked or dismissed as an inevitable detail accruing from a particular historical moment. The all-male situation obtained in the aforementioned sites may be traced to Don Pugi’s conservativeness and to the prevailing mentality, accentuated in rural areas, that late evenings are too dangerous for women to stay out, and that women, unlike men, could do with little education. The suggestion that Milani targeted men because, unlike women, they were increasingly distancing themselves from the Church and because Milani’s personality, characterised by frequent outbursts, was more compatible with an all-men context (Braccini and Taddei, 1999), seems too speculative to explain his lack of action in this regard. At San Donato, Milani partially redeemed himself in this area by allowing females to interact with males during the drama sessions.
Milani’s radical pastoral approach at San Donato disturbed the comfort zone of a number of parishioners, ecclesiastics in the vicinity and the ecclesiastical authorities in Florence. While the practice of priests manning the coffee bar or selling pigs and wine seems to have been tolerated (Milani in Martinelli, 2007), Milani’s radical option for the poor, his readiness to problematise, question and challenge established practices, his aggressiveness towards speakers who he considered as ill prepared and, therefore, disrespectful of the community, his willingness to venture into hazardous territories, his openness to all, irrespective of political allegiances, his controversial sermons, some of which included references to upcoming elections and twice, in 1951 and 1953, provided clear indications of his voting preferences, his open antipathy towards Azione Cattolica (Catholic Action), his critique of parish priests in the area and of communists for their alienating practices, rendered his transfer to another community a foregone conclusion.

On 6 December 1954, soon after Don Pugi’s death, and seven years into his priesthood, Don Milani arrived at his new parish – Sant’Andrea a Barbiana. Situated in the hills of the Mugello region, Barbiana was a hamlet of about twenty farmhouses. The hamlet lacked most of the basic services, including an access road, water, and electricity which was introduced in 1965, two years before Milani’s death. Typical of settlements located in mountainous regions, Barbiana was populated by families with very young children. Families moved down to the plains as soon as their children reached fourteen years, the work-permit age. The educational life of children born at Barbiana followed a definite script – they would come out of the quinta elementare semi-literate, timid and with poor self-esteem. In fact, most of the children who would later attend his school would “have either failed their exams and left school or were bitterly discouraged with the way they were taught” (Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 10).

While subsistence farming, conditioned by a thin layer of very poor soil, characterised the economy of the Barbiana peasants, life for the industrial workers was equally hard. The day for the latter category of workers started at five in the morning. They would walk seven kilometres to the train station and would spend an hour-and-a-half on the train to Florence. They would normally return home at half-past-eight in the evening.

While ‘exile’ was meant to silence and isolate Milani, the Barbiana phase proved to be the most productive, radical, public and controversial of the two pastoral experiences. This phase was characterised by his total dedication to an educational project – the school of Barbiana - that served students, ranging in age from eleven to eighteen, twelve hours a day, seven days a week, public holidays included. The school was established a few days after Milani’s arrival (Bozzolini, 2011). It did not belong to the state school system. In fact, it was described as private, meaning that it did not receive financial support from the state. Milani did not charge fees.

The physical space of the school consisted of four rooms - two rooms within the priory and two workshops dedicated to wood and metal work respectively. The immediate grounds of the priory were conceived of as an extension to the school...
School resources were limited. Some of them were manufactured by Milani and the students themselves. Such was the case with the in-house production and projection of a microfilm based on Beethoven’s seventh symphony, the manufacturing of an instrument that photographed, in black and white, the different phases of the eclipse of the sun, and the construction of a teodolite that measured the distance between the belfry of San Martino and the station of Vicchio (Martinelli, 2007). Milani also drew from his family resources.

Only a few of the students belonged to the parish of Barbiana. Some of the non-parishoners lived with families at Barbiana. Others came from nearby parishes and returned home every day. According to Martinelli (2007), save for five students, most of them attended Milani’s school enthusiastically. Some opted for school when faced with choosing between school and work.

Milani’s school at Barbiana started as a scuola serale, a multi-age class taught by one teacher. This initiative was meant to support the elementary school of Padulivo, a cluster of houses, one kilometre from the Church. Later, Milani established a full-time ‘professional’ school for students wanting to continue beyond the quinta elementare. Milani’s school saved the children from going to Borgo San Lorenzo for secondary education, and, as indicated earlier, postponed the movement to the plains of some of the families (*).

Kleindeinst (1994) provides us with video footage of life at the school of Barbiana. Hoffmann (2007) describes some of the scenes from the documentary as follows:

The boys trudging up the steep, forbidding hill, bundled against the region’s rain and cold. We see them gathered around long tables in the presbytery during the winter months, the older boys instructing the younger children. In spring and summer they move the tables outside under those cypresses, where they write, tinker with an astrolabe that they will use to study the night time sky, or sit listening attentively to one of the many fascinating visitors whom Father Milani has invited to make the outside world a reality to children living in what was then a remote corner of Tuscany (p. 5).

Students who wrote the Lettera confirm that there was no break. Save for swimming and skiing, tolerated for their functionality, there was little space for leisure pursuits within the school curriculum. Leisure, according to Milani, ruined the life chances of working-class youth (Milani in Gesualdi, 2007).

Given the fact that the formal education system had shortchanged most of his students, Milani acted with a sense of urgency. The school at Barbiana had to quickly equip students with relevant skills while preparing them for the formal exams imposed by the official system. It was a parallel curriculum that addressed official and parental expectations as well as what Milani perceived as real needs. From the eyes of one of his former students, real needs were skills in critical and active citizenship “…that would later enable us to defend ourselves against the bosses, against the doctor’s son, against the ruling classes” (Kleindeinst, in Hoffman, 1994).
INTRODUCTION

The school’s ethos is best captured in the motto inscribed on one of the walls. Written in English - “I Care” – it provided an antidote to dominant educational practices where individualism, achievement and selection were symptomatic of a system that reproduced dominant cultures and asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific class, gender and linguistic lines. Not only did pupils care but their caring also took the form of a pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners, a political and pedagogical principle that Freire would develop, almost simultaneously, in Brazil (Mayo, 2007). Martinelli (2007) describes the Barbiana experience as a school with 23 teachers.

Milani himself tutored the first group of students. As students increased in number – in one particular summer there were around forty students - he adopted peer tutoring as a main pedagogical tool. Peer tutoring was possible because Milani fostered a spirit and mentality of cooperation among the students. Physically, the school adopted a flexible and circular arrangement which was conducive to cooperative learning. Such a pedagogy was also possible because Milani promoted the art of mutual listening, a skill that transformed students into student-teachers.

The Barbiana experience revolved around a very important principle – schools should not fail students. The authors of the Lettera considered failure as the weapon used by schools to perpetuate a ‘caste system’ (Darder, 1991) This was regarded by Milani as the root cause of most of the intra-class hatred, and by the authors of the Lettera as politically unsustainable and unconstitutional in that everyone was entitled, according to the Italian Constitution, to several, unrepeated years of education. Repetition and exclusion were discriminatory since they acted as sorting devises that ultimately pushed students from disadvantaged backgrounds out of the education system.

Visually and symbolically, the logic of inclusion was expressed in a different way at Barbiana. While at San Donato the holy cross was removed to create an open, non-denominational space for all, at Barbiana the holy cross reappeared on the wall, next to other symbols – Gandhi, Confucius, and the Cuban poem.

At Barbiana, time was perceived as a function of inclusion. The school community was prepared to slow down the pace not to leave anyone behind. Coverage, an obsession of modern curricula, was sacrificed for quality and collective well being. Furthermore, the Barbiana curriculum was essentially interdisciplinary and integrated in nature. It was perfectly possible for students to learn Mathematics during a lesson of Anatomy (Martinelli, 2007). While not using the term intercultural dialogue, Milani’s curriculum centered around the affirmation and valorisation of difference. Difference was perceived by Milani as an essential ingredient in the formation of human beings as well as in the development of democratic societies.

Photographs of Milani in class with his children and video footage (Kleindeinst, 1994) indicate that, unlike San Donato, girls, albeit outnumbered by boys, did attend his school at Barbiana. There are also indications in the Lettera that the school did confront the issue of gender inequity. In a section dedicated to ‘The girls’, the authors problematise the absence of girls from town, referring to such absence at the school
of Barbiana as symptomatic of the prevailing mentality that ‘woman can live her life with the brains of a hen.’ The boys referred to such a mentality as a form of racism.

Milani’s biographers, former students and collaborators confirm that Milani’s pedagogical regime at Barbiana was more austere and disciplined than that of San Donato (Borg and Mayo, 2006). Borg and Mayo (2006) argue that Milani’s austerity, like that of Gramsci’s (Borg and Mayo, 2006), is based on the notion that success at school, perceived by many as value free and as a mirror-image of one’s intelligence (sic), is largely dependent on material and cultural resources. Milani was aware that only long hours of hard work, critical analysis and linguistic competence could interrupt the boys’ cycle of scholastic failure and, as a result, puncture the perpetuation of an education system that rewards the privileged.

The affective domain was central to the Barbiana curricular experience. While emotionally unpredictable and, at times, unbearably tough, Milani generated an emotional milieu characterised by warmth and genuine love. Often harsh with the outside world, Milani acted as a surrogate father who was always present and ready to endure a lot of pain for his pupils (Fallaci, 2005).

Milani’s obsession with language became more apparent at Barbiana. Milani conducted one- to three-hour-a-day, reading sessions. These sessions were consciously meant to sharpen the students’ use of the Italian language and to provide them with a backdrop to understand the world from the point of view of the oppressed. During these sessions, students were exposed to narratives of revolutions, wars, resistance, liberation movements, trade unionism and social movements, among others. These narratives were analysed against a historical backdrop that ranged from the war experience of their grandparents and parents to the Russian revolution or the wars of liberation in Africa and Asia. These reading sessions centered around Milani’s idea that those who could not read and understand the first page of the newspaper were easily pushed to sports pages and doomed to a life of subordination.

Reading was not limited to newspapers. Books were also read loudly. Among the several books read, one of his students recalls Gandhi’s autobiography, ‘Apartheid’ by Angelo Boca and the letters of Claude Eatherly (Martinelli, 2007). Socrates was also a favourite read at Barbiana. As with the newspapers, the reading of books was meant to stimulate critical thinking as well as exposing students to standard Italian. Some of the books took several weeks to cover as one sentence could stimulate a long-drawn discussion.

Milani’s approach to reading contrasted heavily with the fascist practice of using newspapers and periodicals for propaganda. Such was the case in 1936 and 1941, during the occupation of Ethiopia and the first defeats in Africa respectively. Fascist propaganda was also disseminated in schools by Balilla and GILE.

Barbiana’s curriculum was also characterised by an ongoing struggle against insularity. Such a struggle is symbolically represented by the completion of the road to Vicchio by the community itself and driving lessons as one of the first adult education activities at Barbiana. The Barbiana curriculum also provided a context for the struggle against ethnocentricity and mono-culturalism (Toriello, 2008). Apart
from the exposure to several types of texts, starting from 1959, Don Milani hosted a number of young foreigners with whom his students could interact in English, French or German. Those who demonstrated sufficient knowledge of any of the foreign languages would normally be encouraged to spend some time abroad. Such trips were preceded by lengthy preparations, especially if the student was considered by Milani to be very timid. The trips served a triple purpose: to consolidate students’ knowledge of foreign languages; to help them overcome their shyness; and to help them in character formation. Ultimately, the experience of travelling abroad, what Milani considered as the end-of-compulsory-schooling-age exam (l’esame di maturità), added credibility to the intercultural dimension of Barbiana’s curriculum as it was through such an experience that language genuinely served as an instrument of social relations, real exchange, culture and negotiation (Toriello, 2008).

The experience of living in foreign, mostly urban, centres and the direct encounter with foreign guests at Barbiana, complemented a teaching regime of foreign languages based on hours of listening to music records of, for example, Bob Dylan and Brassens, and to radio broadcasts. Those who arrived early in the morning would find Milani preparing the materials for the day, which often included the recording of radio programmes in English, French, German or Spanish (Martinelli, 2007).

As indicated above, writing constituted a star skill in Barbiana’s curricular repertoire. Milani taught students how to compile notes, place them on individual cards, organise the cards into categories, put categories into a sequence and name each section. Milani insisted that each section should be named. For Milani, a difficult-to-name paragraph meant that it either lacked substance or was overloaded. Named sections were meant to help Milani and his students to arrive at a logical sequence of statements which would eventually form a coherent whole. Once the paragraphs are put into a sequence, the language is filtered of difficult words, long sentences, repetitions, and overloaded and ambiguous sentences. This was all done collectively and with a commitment for quality.

Milani started experimenting with collective writing in 1950 when he used a rather crude version of the foregoing pedagogy to build a collage of student writings around the life of Jesus. Milani, clearly influenced by Mario Lodi, perfected the writing process in question and was followed rigorously in the writing of the Lettera. Milani’s writing principles are described in the Lettera:

Have something important to say, something useful to everyone or at least to many. Know for whom you are writing. Gather all useful materials. Find a logical pattern with which to develop the theme. Eliminate every useless word. Eliminate every word not used in the spoken language. Never set time limits (in Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 25).

Written by eight of his students, all boys and in their teens, the ‘I’ of the Lettera is a composite of the eight authors while the ‘you’ they address throughout the book represents the kind of teachers they had encountered in schools – teachers who were
more likely to harbour negative attitudes towards low-socioeconomic-status children and whose lower expectations were fuelled by testing and tracking procedures which were themselves stacked against lower-class children. Well aware that there are teachers who care – Milani was one of them – the boys distinguished between a teacher whose attitude and action contributed to their exile to a life of labour in the fields and a teacher, like Milani, who loves unconditionally to the point of going on a hunger strike to reclaim a child who was taken away from school by his parents (Abbate, 2008).

The catalyst for writing the Lettera came from a series of failures experienced by three of his students on their way to becoming teachers: Enrico, Luciano and Michele. Most of the themes were developed in an earlier letter, written in December, 1965, and addressed to a teacher of the Istituto magistrale. Lettera a una professoressa was written at a time when Milani knew he was terminally ill, having been diagnosed in 1957 with Hodgkin’s disease and, later, with leukemia. In addition to the chronic pain and discomfort, Milani was very bitter over the official condemnation and subsequent removal from the commercial book shelves of the book published in 1958 – Esperienze Pastorali – that exposed the puerile spirituality of the parishioners of San Donato and its environs. He also received further denunciation from Archbishop Florit who criticised his attitude and positions and accused him of classismo (classism). Such denunciation angered Milani to the extent that he asked bourgeois intellectuals and collaborators to stay away from Barbiana. This was a time when Milani’s rapport with the world turned sour.

The Lettera was also written in the shadow of a major controversy that started in 1965 when Milani’s health had deteriorated to such an extent that he was no longer able to travel to Rome. A group of retired military chaplains published a letter in La Nazione denouncing those who refused service in the Italian army on the grounds that they were conscientious objectors. The chaplains considered conscientious objection as an insult to the fatherland and to its fallen. They also referred to conscientious objection as something alien to the Christian commandment of love, and as an expression of cowardice.

Considering the chaplains’ letter as diametrically opposed to his educational philosophy, one based on critical reading of the world rather than passive acceptance of cultural invasion, Milani, in conversation with his students, crafted a letter that linked obedience with support for a string of unjust and repressive wars waged by Fascist Italy that served only the privileged. His historical analysis led him to conclude that the liberal-bourgeois monarchy, from 1862 to its downfall, waged wars but did very little for the poor. He also questioned the chaplains’ faith by asking: “Is it God or men that we ought to obey?”

Milani’s letter was immediately condemned by the veterans of war. The public confrontation that developed as a result of the two letters, including the autodifesa (self-defence) that followed, attracted a lot of Barbiana-centered attention, both locally and internationally, including that of Eric Fromm who sent his secretary,
Clara Urquhart, to the parish (Martinelli, 2007). In this particular period, Barbiana became a laboratory where research, critical and historical analysis, an ongoing process of writing and rewriting, dialogue and external critical input informed the daily life of the foregoing community of learning.

The fact that the only periodical that published the letter in its entirety was La Rinascita, the communist publication edited by a childhood friend – Luca Pavolini – reinforced his image as the red priest. Milani was uncomfortable with this label, an image that communists and marxists challenged by claiming that Milani was not even a Cattolico di sinistra. Milani was simply a Catholic; he was always for and within the Church (Schettini, 2008).

The anger that characterises Lettera a una professoressa is partially attributed to Milani’s personal experiences as well as to the boys’ recognition of the fact that the school system served to reproduce vertical inequalities rather than liberate students. What appears to be an innocent and apolitical system, intended to offer equal opportunities for all, is, in effect, a school system that sorts, classifies and labels students, often assigning a highly disproportionate number of low socio economic status students to low-ability groupings.

Don Milani and his schoolboys were well aware that parents could play a decisive role in the struggle for quality education. The Lettera directly addressed parents, encouraging them to stand up to a system that was engineered to perpetuate the hierarchical structure of society; a system that was ironically funded by the labour of the poor.

Milani insisted that all parents should understand the contents and spirit of the Lettera, including those parents who just made it to the quinta elementare. Before presenting the manuscript to the press he read several extracts from the Lettera to different people to ensure that the language used throughout the work was comprehensible to peasants, industrial workers and home makers. On a similar note, the introduction written by Michelucci, a dear friend and collaborator of Milani, was rejected on the grounds that the language used by him was incompatible with the language and style of the Lettera (Martinelli. 2007).

The Lettera revolves around the different fortunes of two boys – Pierino and Gianni. Pierino, a generic name, represents the privileged students who are rewarded and promoted by the education system, and eventually by an ‘occupational hierarchy’ (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) that is essentially credentialist in nature. Scholastic life is easy for Pierino as he comes to school already equipped with the psycho-physical discipline, the cultural capital and the mental attitude expected from school. Gianni, another generic name, mirrors the authors’ background and fortunes. He represents the low-socio-economic status students who have been pushed out by the education system and forced into internalising a complex of inferiority and low self-worth, an education system that did not respect their culture, an education system that was at war with the poor.

The boys wanted the Lettera to be more than an emotional protest (Rossi and Cole, 1970). They illustrated how the education system safeguards the interests of
the Pierinos by presenting empirical evidence. The data they compiled and the level of analysis were impressive. In Rossi and Cole’s words (1970):

Under the leadership of Milani, they insisted that their conclusions also be accurate, and were willing to go through a painstaking discipline. Although some readers may only glance at the statistical work, its presence makes their moving appeal for change still more forceful (p. 13).

The authors of the Lettera argued that the old intermediate school reinforced class distinctions through instruments of power that included: short hours of schooling; long holidays; teachers’ authoritarianism; irrelevant curricula; a banal assessment regime; inert knowledge; and culturally biased curricula that excluded Gianni’s knowledge.

In response to the analysis of their own failure, the Barbiana boys favoured a broad-based curriculum, a curriculum which they themselves experienced at Barbiana. The tried-and-tested formula proposed in the Lettera is simple as much as it is radical: do not fail pupils. On the contrary, privilege the weak and give priority to those students who fall behind; no one is useless. Schools are spaces where the rights of citizenship – the right to be listened to, included and respected – are affirmed; provide students who are completely demotivated with relevant educational experiences which can excite and stimulate them; and provide students who have a history of failure with a full-time (read a whole-day) educational experience.

Milani had spent most of the last phase of his life in bed, battling a cancer which would eventually kill him (Corradi, 2012). From bed, he oversaw the teaching-learning process that was unfolding at Barbiana while editing the letter of the eight boys. Lettera a una professoressa appeared on the book shelves in May, 1967, a month before the death of Milani on 26th June, 1967.

The year 1968 is remembered as the year of student contestation, a year where the school and the capitalist systems were challenged and confronted by millions of students around the world. Against such a backdrop, the book produced by the school of Barbiana was, for many, a reference point in the struggle for the abolition of the selection process within schools and, by implication, from universities.

Lettera a una professoressa is a political text written by a group of politically liberated students under the supervision of an engaged teacher. It bears witness to a school that prepared students to confront the world and its unethical social relations. As hope seems to be escaping the radar of many educators, Barbiana confirms that even in the most difficult circumstances and with very limited resources, collective learning, critical literacy, genuine inclusion and transformative action are all possible. In their attempt to demystify and challenge a world that is becoming more oppressive, cynical and dangerous, Milani should provide engaged educators with signs of hope and possibility.

This book is dedicated to those teachers who have transformed students’ nightmares into dreams of hope and possibility.
INTRODUCTION

REFERENCES


LANGUAGE USE AND STYLE IN
‘LETTERA A UNA PROFESSORESSA’

“Because only language can render equal. Equal is he who can express himself and he who understands the idiom of others.” (Page 110)

1. INTRODUCTION

The link between language and power and the indispensable and urgent need for the oppressed to master the dominant language for emancipatory purposes are among the recurrent themes of Lettera a una professoressa. Developing communicative abilities and learning the ‘art’ of writing are seen by the authors of the Lettera as instruments of empowerment and means to resist the dominant location of hegemonic groups who reproduce their power through an education process that self-serves the interests of the most powerful. One of the main notions expressed constantly throughout the Lettera is that each and every child can learn how to reflect on his/her use of different languages, including the mother tongue, and that all learning experiences in life are valuable, regardless of one’s socio-economic status. However, when children with different backgrounds start attending school they go through different experiences, even because of the form of language used by teachers: in some cases this may be a natural transition from what they are exposed to at home, even in their pre-school years; in other cases the language of schooling is totally different, the language register may be more formal and the variety used may approach standard forms which contrast with local or regional varieties used at home. The language of schooling may therefore represent one of the first obstacles towards the socialisation and integration of some pupils.

From the beginning of the Lettera, the authors stress the importance of learning the ‘art’ of writing. Failure to do so leads to social disadvantages as the negative repercussions which result from linguistic and communicative deficiencies affect one’s life:

In June of the third year at Barbiana I sat for the licenza media exam as a private candidate. The essay title was: “The train wagons speak”. At Barbiana I had learnt that the rules of writing are: to have something important to say and that it may be useful to everybody or to many. To know who you are writing to. To gather all that is necessary. To find a logical way of putting it in order. To eliminate any unnecessary words. To eliminate any word which we do not use while speaking. Not to set any limits of time. (…) But faced with such an essay title, what could I do with the humble and sound
rules of the art of all times? If I were to be honest I would have to leave the page blank. Or criticise the essay title and whoever had assigned it to me. (p. 44)

From the above extract it is clear that there is a distinction between writing for communicative purposes and the writing tasks which were given at school, especially those set for examination purposes: students at Barbiana were taught to develop specific skills which were related to self-expression and to convey one’s thoughts in a manner which is relevant to the reader. On the other hand the author of the above extract found himself involved in a writing task which was distant from the ones with which he was familiar.

Departing from such considerations, in this chapter an overview of language-related aspects in the *Lettera* is provided in order to illustrate both the authors’ reflections on languages as well their use of syntactic and discoursive features of Italian. This will also lead to observations which are deemed fundamental for the translation of the *Lettera* from Italian into English, presented in the next section of this book. The main objective of this translation is to present the *Lettera* in a manner that reflects as closely as possible the philosophy of Don Lorenzo Milani and his students.

2. THE LANGUAGE OF SCHOOLING IN THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE *LETTERA*

Since language is a reflection of the society in which it is spoken and written, any linguistic considerations regarding the *Lettera* must take into account the historical background of Italy in the Sixties. During these years the country was going through the final phase of an economic boom which changed it radically and put the suffering and humiliation of the Second World War firmly behind its back. Although this led to immense wealth for some individuals, many others were left in dire poverty. This was also a very significant era for standard Italian: the widespread diffusion of mass media (especially television) as well as internal migratory movements (mostly from the South of the country to the North) enhanced and strengthened the use of standard Italian while local and regional dialects and language varieties became less widespread, thereby leading to a decline in their status.

As a result of this, those who had an elite family background, sufficient economic means and the necessary cultural milieu in order to be exposed regularly to and comprehend standard Italian were in an advantageous position at school: in fact, lessons were held in standard Italian, which was obviously also used in writing. Local and regional dialects were not only absent within the schooling context, but their use was frowned upon and discouraged by teachers. The *Lettera* addresses this very precisely:
After all one ought to agree as to what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor who then continue to renew them infinitely. The rich crystallise them in order to taunt those who do not speak as they do. Or to fail them.

You say that Pierino, son of the doctor, writes correctly. Of course you say so, he speaks just like you do. He is part of the firm. (p. 43)

Standard language forms are normally determined through the status and prestige gained by specific language varieties that, in the course of time, become a reference point in order to establish grammatical rules. Such norms, however, can also be used as an instrument of discrimination as indicated in the above extract from the Lettera.

The spoken varieties used for everyday communicative purposes do not necessarily correspond to the standard forms used at school. Whereas spoken language is normally spontaneous and fulfils immediate communicative and social functions, the formal written word often requires more reflection and its correctness and appropriateness are measured against grammatical and orthographic rules. As far as schooling is concerned, language is used to examine, select and classify students thereby favouring those who possess the cultural capital which allows them to develop and master such forms:

… your little rich boys used to ask you things they already knew, putting on an angelic face. And you used to encourage them: “It’s an intelligent question!” A useless comedy for all of us. Damaging for the soul of those suckers. Cruel for me as I did not know how to play the game. (p. 134)

You used to make me keep a copybook with notes to force me to learn that language by heart. And to whom would I speak this other language that I had to learn? (p. 135)

Moreover, besides the role of standard Italian as a medium of instruction in schools, within the educational and social context in which the Lettera was written, great importance also used to be attributed to Latin. In fact, in the Italian educational system, students would study Latin language and literature at the liceo classico which was considered to be a highly prestigious institution attended by the most academically inclined students. In the Lettera, this is considered discriminatory against students who do not possess the cultural background in order to learn those languages, including Latin itself, which are devoid of everyday social communicative functions and which are therefore very distant from the reality of those who, at the time, were part of the lower social classes of society:

In your school the most important subject is the one that we should never teach. You even expect to translate from Italian to Latin. But who placed a sign where Latin ends and Italian begins? Somebody, who knows who it may have been,
even wrote a grammar book for you. But it’s a vulgar swindle. For every rule it
would be necessary to have the date and the region where it was spoken in that
way. The career-oriented children accept the imposition, they learn it by heart.
They are only concerned with passing exams and with repeating the game
when they will be teachers. (pp. 123-4)

Latin was distant from the daily life of most children in Italy, including those
who attended Milani’s classes in Barbiana. The teachers of this language are
described as being ‘as solemn as priests. Custodians of the extinguished wick’
(p. 52) and the Lettera is also openly critical about the fact that in order to become
a Primary school teacher at the time one had to pass examinations of Latin. One of
the authors, who used to attend the istituto magistrale, was given the following
‘advice’:

You told me, I repeat your words: “You see, you do not know Latin. Why don’t
you go to a scuola tecnica?” Are you sure that to form a good teacher Latin is
indispensable? Maybe you have not thought about it. (p. 118)

The authors of the Lettera therefore view Latin in schools as a selective tool,
often used to exclude those who do not possess the means to learn this language and
to translate its literary texts into Italian. This is an example of how language in a
school curriculum could potentially turn into an instrument used to exclude rather
than to include, a means to discriminate between students with different
backgrounds, rather than to learn about and appreciate the linguistic identity and
the culture of oneself and of others.

3. THE LINGUISTIC CAPITAL OF THE STUDENTS OF BARBIANA

Since in the Italian schooling system of the Sixties great importance was given
mainly to high and prestigious culture, only sporadic reference used to be made to
whatever was part of the daily life of individuals from different social strata of
society. The very fact that the language of school, be it implicitly through the
standard forms of Italian or explicitly through the importance attached to Latin, was
distant to that used at home by those pertaining to lower social strata of society was
enough to make it impossible for them to engage even in the simplest form of
discourse.

In the case of Barbiana, many students had a rural background and therefore
found themselves immersed in a situation which was totally detached from the one
they experienced in their home environment. Anything which was related to rural
culture was either totally excluded from school or looked down upon. In some cases,
examples related to this field, used in textbooks or by teachers, were totally
incoherent:
If one leafs through a primary school textbook it’s full of plants, animals, seasons. It seems that only a peasant could have written it. However, the authors come out of your school. It’s enough to look at the illustrations: left-handed peasants, round shovels, hooked-shaped hoes, blacksmiths with tools used in Roman times, cherry trees with plum-tree leaves.

…

I even know the plant-shoots. I pruned them, I gathered them, I used them to bake bread. You marked the word sormenti as an error in my work. You say that one should say sarmenti because that’s how it is said in Latin. Then, making sure nobody sees you, you go to check what it means in the dictionary. (pp. 121-2)

Although, as in the case exemplified above, students with rural background were certainly aware of the misconceptions being presented in class, they would not normally find the courage and motivation to speak up.

Similar considerations are also included towards the end of the Lettera, when one of the authors recounts his experience in England. In this context, although it is not possible to compare English regional varieties to Italian dialects because of their different historical evolution and social use, the author notices that a friend of his who speaks cockney ‘is branded’. Children like him find it hard to master Received Pronunciation just like students with a rural background in Italy encountered problems with the use of standard Italian and Latin:

In London they’re worse off than in the rural areas. We were in the basements of the City unloading lorries. My workmates were English and they did not know how to write a letter in English. Often they told Dick to do it for them. Dick sometimes asked advice from me who had studied it from records. Even he only speaks in cockney.

Five metres above our head there were those who spoke “Queen’s English”. Cockney is not very different, but whoever speaks it is branded. In their schools they do not fail. They turn students to schools of lower prestige. The poor, in their schools, perfect their incorrect speech. The rich their correct speech. From the pronunciation one may understand how rich one is and what job one’s father does. (pp. 108-9)

Moreover, in the Lettera the methods used to teach and assess languages are harshly criticised, mainly on the grounds that prominence is given to prescriptive and grammatical rules, leaving little space for communicative linguistic functions, which reflect the fundamental use of language:

The French paper was a concentrated series of exceptions. Exams should be abolished. But if you set them, at least be honest. Difficulties must represent a percentage of the ones we face during life. If you include a larger number of
them it means that you have got trap-mania. It’s as if you were at war with your children. Who makes you do this? Is it for their good? It’s not for their good. A boy, who in France wouldn’t even know how to ask where the toilet is, passed with a nine. He only knew how to ask for owls, for pebbles and for fans both in the plural and in the singular. He probably knew two hundred words which were chosen as exceptions and not because they are used frequently. The result was that he hated French just as much as one could hate Maths. (p. 45)

Similar considerations are also made with regards to English as taught in Italy during the time the Lettera was written:

In the class next door there were some students of English. As misguided as ever. Even I know that English is useful. But if one really knows it. Not just by touching upon it as you do. Other than owls and pebbles. They did not even know how to say good evening. And they were discouraged forever. The first foreign language is an important event in a child’s life. It must be a success, otherwise there will be trouble. (p. 47)

Although this situation has evolved over the course of time and nowadays schools accept non-standard varieties more readily, especially in the spoken form, the powerful status of standard varieties is still very influential. This is especially evident in language textbooks and gains prominence in examination-oriented schooling systems where languages are taught mainly in order to obtain certification, rather than to allow students to express themselves and to use them as means to explore local and foreign cultures. The authors of the Lettera had a remarkable foresight as far as learning the communicative features of language is concerned:

I studied languages by listening to records. Without even realising it I first learnt the most useful and frequent things. Just as one learns Italian. That Summer I had been to Grenoble and I washed the plates in a restaurant. I immediately felt comfortable. In the hostels I had communicated with boys from Europe and from North Africa. I had returned determined to learn as many languages as possible. Many languages badly rather then one correctly. As long as I could communicate with everybody, get to know people and new problems, feel amused at the sacred boundaries of the homelands.

In the three years of medie schooling we had done two languages instead of one: French and English. We built a range of vocabulary that was sufficient to keep up any discussion. As long as no fuss was made on grammatical mistakes. Grammar comes to the fore only when one writes. In order to read or speak one can do without it. Then slowly slowly one acquires it by ear. Later, whoever wishes to do so, may study it. (p. 46)
4. SYNTAX AND LEXIS OF THE LETTERA

Issues related to languages, included in the Lettera, do not only engage with the way they are taught or with the implications that their use in schools may have on students. In fact, the style chosen in order to write the Lettera, the variety of Italian used by the authors, as well as syntactic structures often resorted to in order to create a sense of emphasis, all implicitly transmit a message of immediacy and, in some cases, outright urgency. To do so, in a number of instances, the written word of the Lettera is heavily marked by colloquialisms to the extent that it seems a direct representation of spoken forms. The Lettera’s intrinsic linguistic style is distant from conventional Italian writing and especially from those structures which are very heavily conditioned by prescriptive standard Italian, a language variety which is rarely used for everyday communicative purposes. Although the writers only resort to dialectal and local forms very sparsely, they explicitly use a language variety which is accessible to all readers. Distance is deliberately kept between this style and academic or literary forms of writing which the authors define as “the second dead language”.

The linguistic style of the Lettera is extremely direct and straightforward and often the language variety used approaches spoken Italian through the use of several discourse markers, short fragmented sentences, ellipses and deixis. This is also rendered more engaging as the Lettera is addressed to a specific individual: a teacher in a Primary school who personifies his/her profession. The direct reference to this addressee is often based on the interplay between the use of the first person (I), referring to the author/s, and the second person (you), referring to the teacher:

You will not even remember my name. (…) On the other hand, I have often thought of you, of your colleagues, about that institution that you call school, about the children who you “turn away”. (p. 35)

The Lettera, because of its intent and purpose, is also rife with irony and metaphors, the latter often containing negative connotations. This implies that, at a lexical level, terms are chosen purposely by the authors in order to convey very specific meanings. This emerges clearly, for example, when the authors refer to some of the negative teacher’s comments on their written work and when they include their reactions to them:


What use is it for the child to know this? He’ll send his grandfather to school, he’s more mature. (p. 129)

These comments contrast sharply with those on Pierino’s work, and the authors are very ironic about this, as clearly expressed in the final sentence of the extract below:
Until you get to those children touched by the gods: “Spontaneous. You are not short of ideas. Work done with your own ideas that denote a certain personality”.

Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you”. (pp. 129-130)

Pierino, who represents children of families of high socio-economic status, is “touched by the gods” and the authors cannot refrain from writing their provocative thought in reaction to the way the teacher writes her comments: “Once you’re at it, just add: “Blessed be the mother who gave birth to you””. Besides irony, such comments also transmit a sense of spontaneity, typical of spoken discourse. The same occurs when the authors vent their anger and frustration, as in the following case with reference to words said by the teacher to Gianni who, in contrast to Pierino, represents those coming from families of lower socio-economic backgrounds:

But during the exams a female teacher told him: “Why do you attend a private school? Can’t you see that you do not know how to express yourself?” “…”

At this point we wished to add the words that we wished to say that day. But the editor would not print them. (p. 43)

The language variety used to write the Lettera also reflects the authors’ feelings through the syntactic structure of several sentences. The following example, which is quoted in Italian followed by the translation in English, represents an example of how specific syntactic structures are used in order to reproduce a style which approximates spoken, informal speech:

Un professore disse: “Lei reverendo non ha studiato pedagogia. Polianski dice che lo sport è per il ragazzo una necessità fisiopsico...” Parlava senza guardarcisi. Chi insegna pedagogia all’Università, i ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardare. (…) Finalmente andò via e Lucio che aveva 36 mucche nella stalla disse: “La scuola sarà sempre meglio della merda”. Questa frase va scolpita sulla porta delle vostre scuole. Milioni di ragazzi contadini sono pronti a sottoscriverla. Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi. 11

An important professor said: “You, Reverend, have not studied Pedagogy. Polianski says that for boys, sports is a physiopsycho... necessity”. He spoke without looking at us. Those who teach pedagogy at University do not need to look at the boys (…) Finally he left and Lucio, who has 36 cows in the stable, said: “School will always be better than shit”. This sentence ought to be engraved on the door of your schools. Millions of peasant-boys are ready to subscribe to it. It is you who say that that boys hate school and love play. (p. 38)
From a semantic point of view the schoolchildren are the main focus of the above extract. They are represented through the words of a poor peasant-boy (Lucio) and they are the object of the professorone’s\textsuperscript{12} indifference. Towards the end of the extract their role becomes more prominent through the use of \textit{milioni di ragazzi contadini} (millions of peasant-boys) who all wish to unite as one voice in order to express their thoughts about schools. The focus on the role of these schoolchildren is marked through the syntactic structure of two sentences: in the first one, \textit{I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli} [literally: ‘The children he does not need to see them’], one finds a syntactic structure that does not follow the subject-verb-object sequence of written standard Italian\textsuperscript{13}. The constituent ‘i ragazzi’, which is the main focus of this utterance, is placed in sentence-initial position and is then also referred to by means of the enclitic third person masculine pronoun ‘li’ in ‘guardarli’. In this sentence the grammatical subject (‘un professorone’) is not explicitly expressed through a noun or through a pronoun, as Italian is a pro-drop\textsuperscript{14} language.

A similar syntactic structure is also found in the final sentence of the extract presented above: \textit{Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi} [literally: ‘That the children hate the school and love play you say it']. In this case the subordinate clause (‘che i ragazzi odiano la scuola’) precedes the main clause (‘voi dite’)\textsuperscript{15}. Even here ‘i ragazzi’ is placed in sentence-initial position and is anaphorically linked to the preceding sentence referred to in the paragraph above (\textit{I ragazzi non ha bisogno di guardarli}). Another feature, which is also present in the example above, regards the final segment: \textit{lo dite voi}, which in a word-for-word transliteration reads as ‘it say you’. This phrase is marked by the fact that the pronoun \textit{voi} (plural) follows the verb rather than precedes it, despite being the grammatical subject. The phrase is therefore a direct accusation towards the teacher, as the authors implicitly express the thought that “it is you (referring to the teacher) who say it (not anybody else)”. Consequently, syntactic order has an important communicative function, as throughout the Lettera the authors repeatedly stress the information which is most relevant to them by altering the position of the linguistic constituents that form their utterances.

The following example represents another instance in which syntactic structures are characterised by and organised according to communicative prominence:

\textit{Di latino naturalmente ne sapevamo poco}, literally ‘Of Latin naturally we knew little of it’. (p. 52)

In this sentence there is a typical syntactic feature of colloquial Italian, namely dislocation. Dislocation in Italian involves a reduplication of a particular constituent. The subject-verb-object order of the sentence above would read as follows: \textit{Noi sapevamo poco di latino}, ‘We knew little about Latin’. However in the above sentence a constituent, namely ‘di latino’ is placed in sentence-initial position as it becomes the main feature of the marked sentence. Moreover, it is reduplicated by the use of the partitive pronoun \textit{ne}. Since such forms are associated to spoken language
their correctness in formal written varieties of Italian is debatable. Yet today such syntactic structures are a very common feature in forms of Italian writing which are close to the spoken variety, such as informal e-mails, computer chat and even newspaper articles. It is indeed noteworthy that this feature is used extremely frequently in the Lettera, despite being written in the 1960s, and this represents a clear indication of the authors’ intent to use an informal style of writing. The authors of the Lettera often resort to such structures when they wish to stress those concepts which are at the heart of their writing.

Pronoun reduplication, in syntactic structures which are communicatively similar to the one presented above, is found in other instances in the Lettera. In the two examples below one finds two forms of indirect pronouns used simultaneously, the first person singular forms a me and m’ (mi) and the second person plural forms a voi and vi:

(1) A me invece m’hanno insegnato [literally: To me, on the other hand, they taught me]¹⁶
(2) A voi vi fa paura [literally: to you (plural) it frightens you (plural)]¹⁷

A prescriptive, normative grammar of Italian would consider such forms to be inappropriate – if not outright incorrect – in the standard written variety, although they are frequently used in spoken language (e.g., ‘a me mi piace’, literally: to me I like it). By using a pronominal form, such as ‘a me’ or ‘a voi’, together with a contracted form of the same pronoun, more emphasis is placed on the concept being expressed. Personal deixis is further strengthened by the explicit use of two pronouns thereby creating forms which, in the spoken variety, would also normally be accompanied by prosodic features, such as variation in intonation, raising one’s voice etc.

The above syntactic structures are rendered even more emphatic through lexical choices: the ‘art’ of writing becomes alive in the Lettera through the very fact that words are chosen with great care. Furthermore, derivational suffixes are used in order to convey explicit meanings: the professor of pedagogy is therefore ironically addressed as a professorone ‘a great professor’; Homer’s translations are produced ‘dalla testolina del Monti’¹⁸, with ‘testolina’ clearly carrying a disparaging connotation; the children of the rich are signorini, figlioli, studentelli.

Pierino is often called ‘creatura’¹⁹ in order to refer to the fact that these children are mollycoddled by their family from the day of their birth. On the other hand, children who have problems at school are respinti (repelled, turned away) by this institution: schools do not ‘just’ fail them but they are made to feel different and unwanted in order to avoid becoming an obstacle towards whoever, for various reasons, may have a better predisposition towards learning. School is an infezione (infection) from which successful students may be ‘breast-fed’ ‘poppare’ till when they are twenty-five years old and are therefore ready to enter the casta (‘caste’) or the razza pregiata (‘prestigious, chosen race’). One of the concluding extracts of the
Lettera is aptly entitled disinfazione (disinfection): the authors express their extraneousness from the system created in schools and the need to ‘disinfect’ themselves from it.

5. TRANSLATING THE LETTERA INTO ENGLISH

Since language use and style, together with linguistically-related reflections, are deemed to be such a central part of the Lettera, it follows that translating this work needs to take account of all the implications and connotations which result from the authors’ writing. The importance given to communicative skills implies that the authors choose their words and organise their sentence structures with specific communicative intentions in mind, as illustrated above. Translating entails the responsibility of reproducing the words and sentences in the original version in Italian as faithfully as possible, as well as conveying meanings which are vital in order to transmit the philosophy underlying the Lettera in a precise manner.

In the translation of the Lettera presented in this volume, wherever possible and feasible, a faithful, almost word-for-word approach was preferred to a more general one: the main priority is to limit the distance from the original text as much as possible.

However, translating from Italian to English involves a number of linguistic constraints which are mainly due to the fact that the source language (Italian) is typologically different from the target language (English), especially at a morphological level. For example, whereas Italian has a very rich verb inflection morphological system, which therefore implies an alteration, through suffixation, to each verb ending in agreement with personal pronouns (e.g. verb cantare [to sing], present tense: io canto [I sing]; lui canta [he sings]; noi cantiamo [we sing]), this is not the case for English which, for example, only adds the morpheme –s to the third person singular of verbs in the present tense, whilst the rest of the paradigm is unaltered. Italian, being a pro-drop language, allows the omission of personal pronouns, whereas this is not the case for English (e.g. in Italian one may simply say cantiamo [we sing], but in English one cannot omit the personal pronoun ‘we’ to express the equivalent form). Languages which are rich morphologically have more syntactic freedom. Therefore, whilst in Italian the subject-verb-object syntactic order is altered very frequently, according to emphasis and prominence which may be placed on one linguistic constituent rather than on another, this is much less common in English. This implies that certain structures, which are perfectly acceptable in forms of both spoken and written Italian, cannot be translated literally into English, as they would be ungrammatical.

Reference is made to a sentence which has already been quoted previously: Che i ragazzi odiano la scuola e amano il gioco lo dite voi, literally ‘That boys hate school and love play you say it’. A literal, word-by-word translation of the above sentence would be unacceptable in English, but, as explained earlier, since this syntactic
structure is used by the authors to reach a precise communicative goal, in a translation it is necessary to provide a faithful representation of the message being transmitted. For this reason, whenever it was not possible to translate such sentences into English by retaining an identical word order as in the original, or the same syntactic structure, every effort was made so that the communicative goal being expressed would be presented in a manner considered to be as close as possible to the authors’ intentions. The above sentence was therefore translated as: “It is you who say that boys hate school and love play”, a cleft sentence in English which corresponds communicatively to the marked syntactic structure used in the source language of the Lettera.

This is also relevant in cases of pronoun reduplication and topicalisation, discussed earlier, which would be ungrammatical if a transliteral word-by-word representation in English were to be provided.

At a lexical level, certain terms are chosen purposely by the authors of the Lettera in order to convey very specific meanings. In the translation, a corresponding term was used so that such meanings and connotations would not be lost. Yet another issue regards the use of punctuation. In many parts of the Lettera punctuation is used sporadically and sometimes also unconventionally. In the English translation the use of punctuation reflects the original Italian text as closely as possible, although because of linguistic constraints, in some instances the use of punctuation in the translation varies slightly from its use in the source text.

For the reasons illustrated above, certain extracts of the translated version include sentence structures and lexical items which may not correspond to what one might expect in formal, written English. This is a deliberate choice as it reflects the intrinsic style of the Lettera, as documented through various examples in this chapter. After all, when referring to Don Lorenzo Milani, a friend of his and a renowned Italian journalist, Oreste del Buono stated that: “Era diverso da tutti noi: spregiudicato, bastiancontrario. Gli piaceva sempre andare controcorrente. Si comportava come scriveva: senza curarsi della punteggiatura e della sintassi” (Fallaci, 1994:70) [He was different from all of us: open-minded, controversial. He always liked to go against the current. He behaved just like he wrote: without giving much thought to punctuation and syntax].

6. CONCLUSION

The authors of the Lettera clearly show that language use, as well as the languages they learned at school and the way they were taught, were very close to their heart. In some instances their powerful choice of words and their use of Italian syntax craftily match their provocative intentions and the accusations made at the teacher. They convey their message in an unconventional manner which often does not reflect, in terms of style and content, the standard written use of Italian. Their linguistic style is accessible to all and distances itself from a scholarly form of writing: the authors
adopt a communicative technique, also aimed at raising widespread awareness on
the social situation that existed in the Sixties in Italy.

Their message has certainly reached its destination if one considers that today,
over forty years after the publication of the Lettera, it is still being read and
discussed: what was reported through these students’ experience in the tiny mountain
village of Barbiana has been extensively debated and reflected upon in Italy and
beyond. It still creates a stir and has an impact on teachers, educators and
pedagogists. Don Milani himself is still a highly controversial figure: on the one
hand, he is considered to be a saintly and prophetic individual; on the other, he was
also called a ‘mascalzone’ (rascal): undoubtedly, however, the Lettera and Don
Milani himself have a major impact on whoever comes in contact with them and they
rarely leave one indifferent or unmoved.

In the final part of the Lettera, the authors ask readers to correspond with them in
order to provide feedback and share thoughts. Sadly, any such letters would have
never been read by Don Milani himself, who died shortly after it was published. One
of such letters, dated 14th January 1968, sent by a teacher of a school in Sora, in
Central Italy, shows that the Lettera reached its goal and left its mark. It is a reply
which is still relevant today and which stimulates reflection among all educators:

I am a teacher. I have read your book which, in a certain sense, is also addressed to
me (...) I recognise myself in some of your writings, I was unmasked in some of my
attitudes, exposed in some words (...) I owe it to you if, over the last few days, in my
classes, I look at those who are weakest and incompetent with a new heart, and with
a sort of, I am not ashamed to say it, astonishing fondness.

NOTES

1 The notion of standardization of languages is a complex issue, which has been dealt with in the works
of several authors (e.g. Fishman, 1972; Trudgill, 1992; Duranti, 1997). This notion will not be
discussed in this context, but it is worth pointing out that many contemporary European languages
have attained their status as a result of their use in writing, mainly after prestigious literary works and
historical developments led to the Western ideology of “one State equals one Nation”. As a result of
such processes certain languages were elevated to ‘standard’ forms, against which other varieties,
including regional dialects, are often ‘judged’ and ‘measured’. This is also the case of Italian, the
standard variety of which was largely influenced by the literary tradition that emerged in the Middle
Ages through the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Whereas the prestige of the Tuscan variety
rose, other dialects did not attain the same status and were considered to be inferior, despite being
extremely widespread and although they are still used by large communities till the present day.

2 “Means of information and of entertainment that use traditional techniques, such as periodical and
non-periodical printed matter and theatre, and means which rely on recent techniques, such as cinema,
radio and television, have exerted a double linguistic action in Italy: they have spread and
consolidated the knowledge of the common language at the expense of dialects; they have led to new
stylistic models which are intrinsically part of the techniques used to determine and transmit

3 The distinction between spoken and written form is not a dichotomous one, as clearly shown by
Berruto’s (1987, 2004) and Crystal’s (2005) works. For example, there are cases where spoken forms
are more written-like (e.g. a university lecture) and writing forms which are more spoken-like (e.g.
SMs, computer chat).
4 *Sormenti* is a local variant of *sarmenti*, ‘plant-shoots’.

5 Some students of Barbiana recount their experiences in foreign countries where they could practice the foreign language learnt at school. Don Milani managed to organise these trips abroad for them, despite the logistic problems faced at the time. This anticipates one of the aspects that today is considered vital in order to learn a second or foreign language, namely using them in practical contexts which go beyond the classroom, possibly by interacting with native speakers.

6 Received Pronunciation (RP) has been subject to extensive debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion of RP will therefore be restricted to two definitions, which are also useful in the light of the topic under study: “Great prestige is still attached to this implicitly social standard of pronunciation (...) suggesting that it is the result of a social judgment rather than of an artificial decision as to what is ‘correct’ or ‘wrong’” (Gimson, 1980: 89); RP is “widely regarded as a model for correct pronunciation, particularly for educated formal speech” (Wells 2000: xiii).

7 *Owls, pebbles and fans* refer to three words in French which, in the words of the authors of the *Lettera*, “are harder than the others. Old-fashioned teachers make students learn them by heart from the first days of school”.

8 Although over the recent years there has been an important shift in second and foreign language teaching – from a grammatical-translation approach to more communicative-oriented (Nunan, 1989) and task-based (Ellis, 2003) approaches and methods – one still encounters contexts where foreign modern languages are taught devoid of a communicative context with emphasis placed on declarative knowledge (savoir) rather than on skills and know-how (savoir-faire) and ‘existential’ competence (savoir-être), (Council of Europe, 1996: 101-108). This occurs especially in highly exam-oriented schooling systems where ‘coaching’ students takes priority over communicatively meaningful goals. As also mentioned in the *Lettera*, languages cannot just serve the purpose of being taught for their own sake without including aspects related to the culture they represent.

9 Berruto (1987: 59, my translation) affirms that, “there are no native speakers of standard Italian: in Italy nobody (if not in the case of some notable exceptions, which are very special) possesses standard Italian as a mother tongue: the standard variety is not learnt by anyone as a native language, there are no standard native speakers. The standard pronunciation is the artificial result of specific training, and as such it is reserved to specific socio-professional groups”.

10 According to the authors of the *Lettera* the gap between formal literary Italian and colloquial forms is so large that this too, like Latin, is a ‘dead’ language.


12 *Professoreone*. The augmentative suffix – *one* in this case adds an ironical and somewhat demeaning connotation to the term.

13 The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Il professoreone non ha bisogno di guardare i ragazzi*.

14 A language in which the grammatical subject may not be expressed explicitly (either through a noun or through a pronoun). Pro-drop languages are morphologically rich, especially as far as verb inflection is concerned.

15 The subject-verb-object syntactic structure of this sentence reads as follows: *Voi dite che i ragazzi odiano la scuola*.


19 This may be considered to be roughly equivalent to ‘darling’.

20 This refers to an article written by Sebastiano Vasalli, in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, on the 30th June 1992. This article entitled *Don Milani, che mascalzone*, led to widespread controversy. It is published, together with the reactions it provoked, in Scuola di Barbiana (2007: lx-xcix).
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