Between

Where Ego Was, "We" Shall Be. A Conversation with Alberto Prunetti on Working-Class Literature

edited by Nicole Siri

Abstract

This interview with Alberto Prunetti focuses on his work both as a writer (*Amianto*, *108 metri*, *Nel girone dei bestemmiatori*), and as the editor of Alegre's "Working-class" series and one of the organisers of the Working-Class Literature Festival (Campi Bisenzio, March 31st — April 2nd 2023). One of the most relevant voice's in Italy today on the topic of working-class literature, Prunetti explores here some questions on literature, class struggle, and trying to find one's own voice.

Keywords

Working-class literature; Italian contemporary literature; Working-class literature festival; Alberto Prunetti; Asbestos

Between, vol. XIII, n. 26 (novembre/November 2023)
ISSN: 2039-6597
DOI: 10.13125/2039-6597/5985

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This interview arises from a dialogue held at the University of Siena on April 5th 2022[1], during a seminar on biographical writing. The reflections that emerged on that occasion were then further developed and enriched in the light of the most recent developments in working-class literature in Italy.

First of all, I'd like to ask you about your "working-class trilogy" (Asbestos: The Story of a Tuscan Welder, Down and Out in England and Italy, In the Circle of Blasphemy[2]*). In particular, I wonder how you would describe the*

[1] I thank professor Riccardo Castellana, who organised the Seminar on biographical writing at the University of Siena, and, by kindly inviting me to discuss with Alberto Prunetti on that occasion, made this interview possible.

[2] Alberto Prunetti's "working-class trilogy" has not yet been fully translated into English. There is no complete translation of the first volume, *Amianto. Una storia operaia* (*Asbestos: The Story of a Tuscan Welder*); however, there are two

relationship between fiction and non-fiction within it, and how that relationship evolved over the years, as the volumes of the trilogy progressively took shape.

At the beginning of Asbestos *you write: "I wish this story hadn't really happened. What's that expression? A product of the author's imagination. But instead, reality knocked on the doors of these pages"; and also: "imagination filled the holes like cheap stucco, helping to reshape certain episodes in order to better tell the story of a life and death". The photographs that accompany* Asbestos *often show the authenticity of even the most minute anecdotes that are told (this appears to be the purpose of the photograph of the trawl, for example). This is not so much the case with* Down and Out in England and Italy*, where there is a disclaimer: "This is a work of autobiographical fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places and events are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental" (even though you add a wink at the reader: "Sort of").*

The relationship between truth and fiction is once again different in the third book, In The Circle of Blasphemy*, where you play with the idea of a Tuscan welder in dialogue with the most important poet in the Italian literary tradition, Dante, and offer a partial, contemporary comic integration of his* Inferno.

With my Trilogy, my aim was to talk about reality, but I never felt obliged to adhere strictly to the poetics of realism.

In *Asbestos*, adherence to reality is stronger, but you can also see a progressive detachment from literal faithfulness to the facts. I would say that in *Asbestos* I was obviously telling a true story, but I was using the strategies of fiction to tell it. Overall, fiction played a small part, which has

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partial translations of the first and last chapters from the 2014 edition. See A. Prunetti, "From *Asbestos. The story of a Tuscan welder*", translated by O. Stransky, *New England Review*, 41.2 (2020): 29-38 and A. Prunetti, *Like Steve McQueen*, translated by W. Shutt, *Asymptote Journal*, online (url: https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/alberto-prunetti-amianto-una-storia-operaia/, last accessed on Nov 17th, 2023). A translation of the second volume, *108 metri. The new working class hero*, was published in 2021 by Scribe UK under the title *Down and out in England and Italy*. There is no English translation yet of the third volume, *Nel girone dei bestemmiatori* ("In The Circle of Blasphemy"). Prunetti's trilogy has been fully translated into Spanish and Greek. *Amianto* has been translated into Catalan and French. A French translation of the second volume, *108 metri*, is forthcoming. In the present interview, quotations are taken from the English editions where available; in all other cases, they have been translated by the editor and proofread by Dr. Sergio Knipe, whom we thank for his work.

mostly to do with the dramatic staging of facts. I didn't write a completely faithful account of my father's life: I pushed the emotional load, I dosed the moments of respite, I selected episodes from his life, sometimes I deliberately misplaced them. I moved some of them, for instance. I'll give you an example: I knew that I was conceived in Casale Monferrato, but in the book I learn this from my mother at a tragic point in the story.

In *Down and Out in England and Italy* there is the weird and obviously fictional inclusion of Baroness Thatcher's ghost. This Lovecraftian fictional element, though, serves to talk about the monstrosity of capitalism, which is a very real thing. So it was ultimately a fictional device meant to deal with reality.

The last book of the trilogy is the most complex one from this point of view: it is clearly the most fictional one, with its introduction of the Circle of those Damned by Work into Dante's *Inferno*.

As for the disclaimer in *Down and Out in England and Italy*, I would say that my strategy is similar to that of Vitaliano Trevisan in the last lines of *Works* (where he writes: "Anything that could incriminate me is the product of the author's imagination") and of Cash Carraway in *Skint Estate. Notes from the Poverty Line* (where she writes: "Some names, places and times have been changed to protect the guilty"), and that this kind of strategy is typical of working-class literature.

Having said all that, I think the moment in my trilogy when I strayed furthest from reality was when I wrote that I was good at playing football.

When a story is told, especially when it is a true story and someone else's story, there are of course facts, there are the fictional adjustments to the facts, but there is also a part of reality that is deliberately left out. Obviously, the act of writing always implies a selection, but this selection does not only exclude irrelevant details (those details that are not considered "functional to the narrative"): there is also a set of intimate things that one chooses to keep to oneself.

It seems to me that this problem is addressed subtly in a passage in Asbestos. *Describing Renato's last days, you say that at one point you decide to take a photograph of him, and then you change your mind:*

> *As soon as I clicked the shutter, I regretted it, and decided to keep the camera without ever developing the negative. From that moment on, the film remained in the holder with its image inverted, like a worker's sacred shroud that will never experience the outrage of the last chemical attack. […] It would have been very easy for me to print that 6x7 photo, I wouldn't even have had to take such an intimate negative to a photography studio. I could have just*

> *gone downstairs to Renato's garage, which was a cellar one day, a workshop the next, or a developing and printing lab, or a welding lab, or whatever else came to my mind or my father's. It would have been done, just like that. Instead, I decided that there would be no more exposure to chemical agents, not even for Renato's picture: the mystery of that photograph will remain forever wrapped in the darkness of that damned roll of film.*

Photography is a recurrent theme in Asbestos, *and, as we have mentioned, it is generally used to prove that what is being told "really happened". This is the case not only with the photographs that are attached to the book, and which document the protagonist's work history, but also with the anecdote about Renato's photograph with the singer Nada at the beginning of the book. No one believed Renato when he said that he had met the famous singer, but then, years after his death, a photograph is discovered: in a way, this anecdote is a mirror image of that of the undeveloped photograph at the end of the book. It seems to me that the episode of the undeveloped photograph is used to convey the idea that there is a story to be told, but also that there is an equally important intimacy to be protected, that not everything necessarily needs to be put on the page and exposed, as victim narratives tend to do. I imagine that you had to deal with this issue several times while writing* Asbestos, *and I think that the resulting balance is one of the things that make the strength and greatness of your book.*

I wanted to ask you if these are actually questions you've asked yourself, and what criteria you use to decide what to tell and what to keep to yourself. Among other things, you were in a peculiar position. Usually, when someone writes a biography, they have to deal with the heirs, who decide what can be made public and what should remain private. When you wrote Asbestos, *you were at the same time a writer telling a true story with a militant purpose, and Renato's son and heir: you were always aware that this was at the same time a story that involved you personally, but also someone else's story ("This is the story of a man who has the same surname as me and the same birthday as me, but is not me").*

First of all, photography is a working tool for me. I have trained as a photographer, and, especially when I was doing reportages, I would take photographs to help me reconstruct scenarios, atmospheres, colours, and so on.

Photography plays an important role in *Asbestos*. Whether they are archive photos, or photos from the family drawers, all the pictures have great value. Renato's factory photos show the reality of the career path I describe, and the premature ageing of his body.

As regards the anecdote of the photograph that I chose not to deve-

lop, it deals with the problem of refusing to expose oneself completely, to expose the saddest and most obscene parts of one's history. I only realised it later, but it has to do with a risk inherent in narratives that tell the stories of the vulnerable: the risk of having to lay bare one's miseries and traumas (be they illnesses, existential disasters, or gender violence) in order to tell one's story.

On the one hand, telling one's own story is a form of re-appropriation: writing about the violence that one has suffered allows one to obtain at least some sort of poetic justice, a form of emotional compensation, and perhaps it can also become a denunciation that goes beyond one's own situation, and speaks of something that is experienced globally. However, there is also a risk that, once these stories reach a middle-class audience that reads them from a position of comfort, they will end up contributing to the demonisation of the lives of the poor: the middle-class audience can come to think that "if the middle class lives in different conditions, it is because they deserve it, because they are the makers of their own happiness". This risk is very much present in narratives of vulnerability. It is perhaps less perceived here in Italy, but in the UK, in Britain, many writers (often working-class women and victims of gender violence) are questioning whether it is right to keep feeding their bruises to a middle class audience.

With regard to the choices I had to make in writing *Asbestos*, the main issue for me was this. I chose to tell the story of my father, who was dead and had no chance to respond. Writing his story was a way of feeling that he was somehow still alive, and that his voice could be heard. On the other hand, while writing this story, I had to interact with other people: my mother and my sister. People who are alive, and with whom I have a relationship. I had to ask myself: what right do I have to tell their stories? In other words: how could I, of all people, who always say that we must speak for ourselves so that others do not speak for us, tell my mother's story?

This was crucial because my mother explicitly denied me this right: she explicitly asked me to be kept out of my books. This is, of course, a legitimate decision. But I have also often come across readers — I would say, especially second-wave feminists — who have asked me where my mother is, who have complained about the absence of the female figure in my stories. So I have to start by clarifying this: my mother is in the background because she asked me to be. I respected her wishes.

I negotiated her presence in my books, and over the years she allowed me to represent her a little more. Eventually, in the latest edition of *Asbestos*, I was able to include a picture of her and Renato. She is also drawn on the cover of the Spanish edition of *In the Circle of Blasphemy* (*El circulo de los*

blasfemos). But this negotiation was difficult. In my opinion, this is the other side of the expectations of bourgeois middle-class readers, who want to see everything.

I respect my mother's wishes: for personal reasons, she doesn't want to appear so much in my book. I don't necessarily agree with all of her reasons. I would like to be allowed to tell more of her story, but I respect her wish to remain out of the picture.

Just over a month after the release of the third edition of Asbestos*, I feel I must ask you to talk about the book's ending, which you have been revising over the years.*

The first edition (Agenzia X, 2012) ended with a passage in which the son, a "precarious cognitive worker", turns to his father and, in the "family lexicon" derived from Luciano Bianciardi's Il lavoro culturale*, alludes to the illusion of the social elevator. While the father's generation could believe in it, the son contrasts it with the image of a ladder that is climbed laboriously and, ultimately, in vain:*

> *These are the last words that I would like to say to him: dad, I did take a bag of marble dust up to the second floor. But the bosses have already looted the accounting office and there is nothing left for us, the children of the workers who tried to climb the stairs. They just took the piss out of us,* Maremma schifosa.

In the second edition (Alegre, 2014) you added another chapter, "Like Steve McQueen", as a conclusion. This chapter stands out from the rest of the book because, through "a strange cinematographic projection", a montage which — as you yourself explain — follows the logic of a dream, rather than that of a linear narrative, it inverts the relationships between memory and the imagination, on the one hand, and documents on the other.

Like Steve McQueen creates a climax leading to an angry conclusion in which the "working-class heroes" return "all together, to settle the score".

In the latest and very recent edition of Asbestos *(Feltrinelli, 2023), the order of the elements in the ending is once again inverted: the chapter "Like Steve McQueen" is retained, but the ending of the first edition is restored to its position in the epilogue.*

I wanted to ask you if you would be willing to explain some of the considerations that led you to this rethinking of the book's ending. I am reminded of a saying by Pasolini, who once wrote in one of his tragedies that "everything that does not end, ends according to the truth".

In the first edition (Agenzia X), I angrily cursed the major way in which the protagonist, his generation and his social class had been ripped off, and the broken social elevator that only seems to go down. I ended with a very Tuscan swear phrase, "Maremma schifosa".

During the year and a half of presentations that then led me to the 2014 reissue (Alegre 2014), I felt the need to include new material in the book, and so I wrote its most fictional chapter, "Like Steve McQueen", a sort of cinematographic projection, a miracle in which a group of characters from all times and places are evoked. The point of this chapter is that these characters achieve a sort of poetic justice: since this justice does not come from courtrooms, these metal-cowboys have come to settle the scores with the bosses.

Now, with the Feltrinelli reissue, perhaps I felt the need to return to that curse. It is a partial return to the conclusion of the first edition, as the chapter "Like Steve McQueen" remains in the book. The 2012 epilogue has been split in two, with the last two pages of the final chapter of the 2012 edition moved to the very end of the book, after "Like Steve McQueen". This is not the only change in the Feltrinelli reissue: I have also reworked other episodes, but it is the most substantial choice made within the new edition. It is explained, I think, by the need to return to having a curse at the end of the book.

I would also like to ask you some questions about the work you are doing with the "Working class"series that you are directing for Alegre, the organising of the Working Class Literature festival together with the GKN factory collective, and your recent essay Non è un pranzo di gala *("It's not a gala luncheon", 2022).*

First of all, it seems to me that one of the most crucial and recurring questions in this complex and collective work is the one that Cash Carraway sums up with the phrase "trying to find your voice as a marginalised citizen". It is a central theme of Skint Estate*, her extraordinary memoir, which can be seen as, among other things, a long reflection on the fact that – to quote her again – "pain is hack". The risk is that marginalised people may end up trapped in narratives that ultimately work against them, even if they are the ones speaking. All of Carraway's prose, it seems to me, is a long reflection on this problem, and an attempt to develop an antidote to these rhetorical traps. Similarly, the GKN factory collective writes in their collective diary* Insorgiamo *("Let Us Rise Up"): "But it's time to stop talking about these people. We're not here to say how bad they are. If we talk about how bad they are, we have already lost our battle. You do not argue about the nature of a vulture". In the essay* Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze describes some rhetorical and relational mechanisms that can perhaps be applied to working class narratives and the context of power relations into which they are inserted.*

He argues that any rhetorical operation that has a"pedagogical" aim – i.e. that is aimed at reaching an agreement between the parties involved – can end up in a set-back: one can find oneself asking for recognition from someone who, by definition, is neither willing nor interested in granting it.

It seems to me that Cash Carraway's book, the GKN workers' collective diary, and your essay all distance themselves from this risk by assuming from the outset the idea of a fundamental irreconcilability, by taking conflict as a starting point. What I want to ask you, I guess, is how you think working-class literature should position itself in order to be able to speak out in a really effective way, without falling into the rhetorical traps of the victim narrative.

I began to reflect upon this theme in the last years of my activism. I read a number of memoirs, mostly British, but some French, which dealt with wounds, scars inflicted by capitalism and patriarchy, memoirs of working-class women who had suffered gender violence. Both Cash Carraway's and D. Hunter's works (*Chav Solidarity* and *Tracksuits, Traumas and Class Traitors*) — the best-sellers in Alegre's Working-Class series as of today — are very interesting for this very reason: I can't say that they manage to avoid victim narratives, but at least they deal with the problem of victimhood, of the gaze of those who read these stories from a position of comfort, with the risks of misery porn and the poverty safari. The latter is a typical format of Channel 5 broadcasting in England: feeding stories of proletarians to a wealthy London audience. Working-class literature cannot be the literary translation of this kind of format, which is a neoliberal format: but it does run this risk. Indeed, the book industry is well aware of the success of this format and tends to place working-class authors in the same position. The question, then, is how to avoid this. Carraway does it with humour, questioning the reader, cornering them, sometimes titillating them, and then — figuratively — slamming their head against the wall. Hunter has a harder, more argumentative strategy. I think I stand halfway between the two, between humour and invective.

The Working-Class Literature Festival is a moment when we establish the rules, we set the boundaries: in this context, it is easier to tell our own stories, and to set the conditions under which our stories are valid.

I must say that the important events in the book industry have not been very welcoming to us so far. I attended the Salone del Libro with D. Hunter, and that was the only time in which we had any kind of recognition in a very important context. In general, we still tend to be excluded from these contexts, so we're not particularly worried about not being able to speak on our terms in a mainstream context yet.

We are working on the new edition of the Working-Class Literature Festival. We hope to be able now to establish relations with other countries, with working-class literature in other languages.

I think it is important to reflect on the conditions under which the Working-Class Literature Festival was created, and our opponents' reactions. Our festival did not only take place within the literary field: it happened within actual class struggle. We learned from the newspapers that when the owners of the ex-GKN industrial plant heard about the festival, allegedly they had a hostile reaction to the fact that we were organising a literary festival inside an industrial plant. We need to reflect on this: why is a literary festival more frightening than a street demonstration?

Perhaps this is because the latter is expected from the workers, but they are not expected to be able to work on the imaginary. When they do — they organise a literary festival in a factory, opening its doors to a different and wider public —, the bosses expect only a few working-class people to show up. Instead, a huge number of people showed up: researchers, middle-class people, and teachers mostly from the Florence area, but also from much further afield — all these people were very interested in our festival.

What happened at the festival was that there was actually a re-appropriation of words and voices. There was a moment when we thought about inviting great actors to help promote the event, a proposal that came from the Alegre publishing house. We didn't succeed, for various reasons — some couldn't come, some didn't answer… — so we did our readings and performances with the voices of the GKN workers. Something superlative came out of it. Ultimately, in hindsight, it all worked out: if famous actors had come, everyone would have thought it was them who had brought all those people into the factory to talk about literature. Actually no, we showed that it was the workers who had done it.

So yes, we must try to make our voices heard, not to have them stolen, not to have people speak for us, and then end up speaking in our place. This must be the peculiarity of working-class literature: to tell your story, so that it is not told by others.

Another point that seems to me to be recurrent is the attempt to undermine, in various ways, the conventional means of consuming literature: the book written by an individual and designed to be read by a multitude of individuals in the silence of their rooms.

From the theatrical adaptations of Asbestos *(if I am not mistaken, you put Renato's famous car on stage) to your reflections on the factory collective, which, in contrast to the writer working alone, works collectively on the construction*

of a new imaginary, to Cash Carraway, who in the "Author's Note" urges us to read Skint Estate *aloud: "The words written on these pages were not intended to be read in silence. So please say them out loud whenever you can — preferably to someone who doesn't want to hear them", you all somehow seem to be exploring the various ways in which literature can be enjoyed other than privately.*

Yes, I think that the consumption of a cultural product in solitude lends itself more to a bourgeois context than a proletarian one. In his *Aguafuertes asturianas*, Roberto Arlt writes that in Spain he saw groups of workers who met in the evening, after work, in artisan workshops and read novels aloud. They would read a chapter, discuss it, and then continue reading. It was a practice which allowed an exchange between the literate and the illiterate, because reading aloud allowed the illiterate to enjoy these novels.

Something similar happens with theatre. There is a very strong tradition of popular theatre in the Florence area: every 'Casa del popolo' has its theatre. Performances are a truly effective means of artistic communication, thanks to their immediacy.

In fact, we have organised several staged readings and theatrical adaptations of working-class novels. This was a fundamental element of the Working-Class Literature Festival itself, and also of the events leading up to the festival. We organised a series of events in the Florence area to raise interest in our work, and we hope to do this again next year.

Having said that, I was unfortunately unable to bring my father's old Audi on stage, which still works perfectly even though it's 33 years old: it wouldn't fit through the door of the theatre where we went on stage with the adaptation of *Asbestos*, *Like Steve McQueen*. Maybe there will be a way to get it on stage in an outdoor event.

However, I would say that yes: working-class works can obviously be read in solitude and silence, but I deeply encourage any collective form of fruition form, any pratice that allows the "I" to become an "us".

Can you already tell me something about the next edition of the Working-Class Literature Festival and your next plans? How is working-class literature doing today, both in Italy and around the world?

The last few years have been very positive. Obviously, the glass is always half full and half empty at the same time. When I think of the situation in Britain, it seems idyllic compared to Italy. But if you then talk to the Brits, they will rightly complain about many things that could be better.

This comparison also reveals certain paradoxes. In Britain there are a huge number of very interesting works that break through into the mainstream, become bestsellers. TV or cinema adaptations are sometimes made out of them. Here we don't have comparable bestsellers, but we have been able to join a popular mobilisation. The two traditions are somewhat different. In Britain, people proudly claim to belong to the working class — sometimes, a working-class background is claimed even by people who are not really working class, but romanticize their belonging to the working class. In Italy, working-class background is somehow less perceived, the identity component is not as strong. But it has a much stronger political connotation.

As of today, I would say that since 2019, and perhaps even a little earlier, a lot has happened. In Spain, there was Luisa Carnés' *Tea Rooms*, which became a *longseller*, and then also a TV series. In France, many important works have been published — the crowning achievement being the Nobel Prize for Annie Ernaux. In Britain, Douglas Stuart won the Booker Prize for *Shuggie Bain*. And then there's Sweden, another country where there's a lot going on. I am working hard on this front, despite the language barrier: I can already anticipate that at the second edition of the festival we will hopefully have a delegation consisting of a Swedish author and a scholar who are part of the magazine *Klass*.

One of the ideas I'm working on is to give the second edition of the festival a geographical dimension. After all, in the first edition we dealt with the genealogies of contemporary working-class literature. This time I'd like to explore its geography: have people from France, from England, from Sweden. All this is still work in progress, though.

As for Alegre's Working-Class series, we will soon be publishing a new translation of a narrative essay on class violence in the United States. There will also be the debut of a writer, herself from a working class background, who will tell a story set in the Florence area and directly linked to the GKN mobilisation. We will also be publishing another English novel, which I am translating as we speak: *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* by Anthony Cartwright, a brilliant novel set in the Midlands during the Thatcher years.

Let's keep working, now that we have momentum, and see what we can build. Our priorities are, on the one hand, to be able to enter the mainstream and, on the other, to create connections between various national scenarios of working-class literature. Our aim is to build a working-class imagery: an imagery of solidarity and conflict, an imagery that is able to warm the hearts of people and nurture their consciences.

How to cite this article

Siri, Nicole, "Where Ego was, 'We' Shall Be. A Conversation with Alberto Prunetti on Working-Class Literature", *Images and representations of work in literature and visual culture*, Eds. V. Serra – R. Calzoni, *Between*, XIII.26 (2023): 195-207, www.betweenjournal.it.

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The Article

Date sent: --/--/----
Date accepted: --/--/----
Date published: 30/11/2023

How to cite this article

Siri, Nicole, "Where Ego was, 'We' Shall Be. A Conversation with Alberto Prunetti on Working-Class Literature", *Images and representations of work in literature and visual culture*, Eds. V. Serra – R. Calzoni, Between, XIII.26 (2023), 195-207, www.betweenjournal.it.