

Remembering Michele

I never thought I would write these lines to remember Michele Vallaro, who suddenly passed away from us just a few months ago. He was the first teacher I talked to when I entered the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Turin a few days before classes began; it was the fall of 1983. That young researcher would be an important part of my life as a student, a teacher, a scholar, and a human being. As I moved into a new world of knowledge, Michele's expertise and wide-ranging culture illuminated my academic path, then my professional career.

In academic circles it is common to identify yourself as a disciple of someone, and many times I have wondered whether Michele Vallaro was my mentor. Several people in my life have taught me something very valuable, both personally and professionally, and Michele was one of these. What I most acknowledge to him, apart from his teachings in the area of Arabic studies, is that he gave me his trust. When I was about to enter the classroom for the first time as a teacher at the University of Turin, he told me: "Now you can do it yourself." Those words, pronounced in front of the ajar door, beyond which were my first students of the Faculty of Arts, gave me that encouragement which novices need, especially when they are timid by nature.

He supervised my dissertation and doctoral thesis with a meticulous attention to detail. I remember that we spent endless hours in his office checking step by step the translation of a novel, which was the subject of my dissertation work in the late eighties, and in the two-thousand years, during my PhD programme, we made long phone calls discussing on sociolinguistic topics. Even though his lines of research were mainly in other fields, being a curious person he was interested by the subjects I was working on as well. As a result, fiction, modern Egyptian society, Egyptian dialect, and sociolinguistics became good topics of conversation for us.

He was profoundly knowledgeable about the Arabic language, about which I often sought his advice or asked him questions. When Maurizio Bagatin and I proposed to him in the last few years to put together a grammar which would collect all his "notes," as he called them (they were actually very in-depth), he responded enthusiastically, showing increasing enthusiasm as we were unable to keep up with the material he was sending us. Now we feel a responsibility to carry on his important legacy.

We have crossed paths several times in our professional life, and yet I want to remember him in carefree moments, driving his sports car, among the autumn-colored Piedmont countryside, or in a typical restaurant in the hills of the Langhe, over a glass of wine or while he kindly gives me a gift: an assortment of artisanal chocolates, a bottle of champagne, or a course in German language. Michele

leaves a void that cannot be filled. As I reflect back over the past, I am full of nostalgia and grateful for the time we spent together, and regret for the things we could still have accomplished together and the very many others he could still have taught me.

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Following Michele Vallaro's passing, suddenly occurred a few months ago, I experienced several moods and feelings, different in nature but all equally very intense. From the initial shock, due to the disruptive force of a completely unexpected event—I had talked to him on the phone not long before—I moved on to the dismay of a serious loss, then to the awareness that a cycle of life, mine as well as of many other people, was closed. This is an impression we usually go through when we separate from someone very close to us, with whom we have shared a long stretch of our existence or who has impacted deeply our lives.

Well, Michele was for me all these things put together, since our first meeting back in 1990 in his office, located at that time in the old headquarters of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the University of Turin. Starting from that first conversation, the awareness of a certain affinity of interests, thought and attitude towards other people has been increasingly defined, also by virtue of a common past that I would discover only later. In fact, Michele and I were born in the same hospital of the same district in Turin, albeit many years apart; we attended the same primary school, and, like him, I was often a guest in the Leones' house, whose householder was a friend of Michele's father. In this family environment I heard the very first stories about him as a child, before Michele himself told them to me. I am convinced that all this, in addition to the teacher-disciple relationship which lasted, rather increased, well beyond the achievement of my degree, helped to grow the profound esteem between us.

There are many reasons why I wish to express all my gratitude to him. He was the supervisor of my degree dissertation, regarding which he enthusiastically accepted the topic, even though it was somewhat distant from his specific interests. Although he was not also the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, his prompt and methodical suggestions were fundamental for the final drafting and for making it a publication. Moreover, immediately after my graduation he involved me, together with two other

young Arabists, in a project whose ultimate goal was to be a full Italian translation of Ibn Ḥaldūn's *Muqaddima*. Unfortunately, this publication has never seen the light, but the long and meticulous work carried out together allowed me to learn a certain know-how, which I would later put to good use, as a teacher, in an Arabic literature class at the University of Bergamo, as well as in an article of mine devoted to that work. Talking about his skills as a scholar and passionate researcher, I would certainly recall the relevance he used to give to details without losing sight of the whole. Precisely this dual vision of reality, punctual and comprehensive at the same time, enabled him to see beyond the surface of things and to get where others often didn't get. In addition to allowing him a full understanding of the examined facts, whether they were linguistic or of other kinds, this attitude ensured him an almost total independence of thought. Still with regard to his academic activity, there were not a few occasions in which Michele invested his trust in me, calling me to collaborate with him, both during his time in Turin and after his moving to Enna. It was indeed in Enna that we inaugurated the Arabic language and literature courses for the local University, together with colleagues such as Lucia Avallone and Manuela Giolfo. This experience gave me the opportunity to share a good deal of time with Michele, so that I could know more about some of his most intimate traits, his interests outside the academia, his passions, and even some of his idiosyncrasies.

In the last period, his activity focused on the writing of a progressive grammar of the Arabic language, starting from some of his notes that he wrote for his Arabic language classes. He had welcomed the idea, originally proposed by Lucia Avallone and me, to take up this material, integrate and publish it. In order to do that, he had once again decided to avail himself of our collaboration, involving us in long and enriching discussions, bibliographic and literary inquiries and method choices to assure the cohesiveness of the work. In hindsight, I believe that it was for me the highest point of a harmony of thought and an intellectual exchange timidly reached year after year through consistent observation and learning. The project has come to an abrupt halt due to an inscrutable divine plan, as Michele would have commented. Our hope, Lucia's and mine, is to worthily complete it.

However, the sense of gratitude is not addressed only to the scholar, but also and above all to the man. After all, Michele was Michele in every circumstance. He used to say that he was not a professional of the Arabic studies, but rather an *amateur*, in the proper sense of the word, that is, one who finds the main reason for carrying out a certain activity in personal delight. So then, alongside the academic discussions, one could talk to him about everything, thanks to his large erudition, subtle irony, love for art and literature, especially poetry, but also for classical and popular music, opera, old movies, good food and good wine. During our trips by plane or car, telephone conversations and lunches in some restaurant carefully chosen by him, I enjoyed innumerable intellectual solicitations that could range

seamless from theology to Petrolini's theatre, from Dante's verses to those of Pascoli and Kavafis, passing through Pound and Eliot, from Mozart to Verdi, to the songs of the twentieth century.

On several occasions Michele wrote recommendation letters or assessments of my work in which he didn't spare praise and compliments (perhaps not always fully deserved).

I realize that by drafting these lines, for the first time I am doing something similar for him, in the hope of not being completely inadequate for the task.

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