

CRISTINA GIORCELLI

Claudio Gorlier: *In Memoriam*

I have been asked to write this short tribute *in memoriam* of Claudio Gorlier, not as a former student of his – as is usually the case in our world – but as an affectionate friend and a physically distant, but otherwise close fellow Piedmontese. First of all, I would like to thank Francesca Balestra: I consider her invitation to write this piece a sad, but great honor. It is also a hard task, however, since the depth of Claudio's learning, his widespread accomplishments, his extraordinary sense of humor, and his charming gift of eloquence are difficult to convey in just a few sentences.

I met Claudio when I was one of Giorgio Melchiori's students at the University of Turin. Having graduated in English a decade or so earlier with Federico Olivero, Claudio – when his duties as a high school teacher of English were over – would join our class to exchange views with Melchiori (and lavish information on those of us who happened to be hanging around). He would arrive in a red convertible, at full speed, and park just in front of Palazzo Campana (those were the days when such a luxury was still allowed!). Melchiori, shy, reserved, and hugely knowledgeable, was fascinated by Claudio's open and warm personality, by his multifarious intellectual interests, and by the many personal acquaintances he had acquired, first hand, of U.S. writers and critics. All of them were at the cutting-edge of the American literary scene in those years, and all of them were appreciative of Claudio's acute intelligence and enticing *savoir faire*.

As American Literature had not yet entered the Italian academic system, Claudio had decided to explore it as a freelancer, as a sort of sensitive and culturally sophisticated devotee. At the same time, however, he was already a personality to be reckoned with on the city's cultural scene: he was writing for newspapers and magazines and would often take part in cultural debates on programs broadcast by the RAI. Not by chance, he was later turned into "l'americanista Bonetto" by his friend Carlo Fruttero

in *La donna della domenica* (1972) (and how proud he was to have inspired such a character!). For us, undergraduates, he made American literature so familiar and vivid that some of us chose it as our major. In the mid '60s, he was appointed to one of the first university chairs (if not indeed *the* first) of American Literature in the country.

In his scholarly research, one of Claudio's characteristics was his vigilant and constant attention to the social and political milieu in which the literary works under his scrutiny were rooted, together with his capacity to interrelate them to what important thinkers as well as lowbrow writers were producing at the same time. In other words, in order to ponder and explain the *raisons d'être* of the writings under discussion, he would plunge his reader into their (carefully selected but still) complex intellectual context. Another of his specialties was that of being culturally at home both with the puritanical brahmins of New England (as in his magisterial *L'Universo domestico. Studi sulla Nuova Inghilterra del XIX secolo* [1962]) – and to this end his Piedmontese, and therefore essentially Calvinistic, background was of assistance – and with the American humorists from the East to the West coast (*Gli umoristi della frontiera* [1967]).¹ At the time, his deep and wide-ranging analysis of the peculiarities of the specifically American brand of humor was new even for Americans. This study definitively showed that, by employing the kinetic qualities of the vernacular, those frontier humorists contributed to forging the American language as a distinct variety of English. In addition, Claudio pointed out that American humor combines the pleasure of the telling (and of listening to oneself while doing so) with a love of punning, while tending towards the absurd, the grotesque, and the *noir*. From this point of view, once more Claudio drew on propensities at home: as we know, Turin is the Italian capital of magic, the esoteric, and the *noir*.

Claudio, however, was also capable of reaching beyond geographical boundaries: while ethically and culturally he was profoundly Piedmontese, spiritually and intellectually he was profoundly cosmopolitan; if Turin was his springboard, nothing less than the world was within his scope. Extremely well read and cultivated, not only did he have a profound knowledge of American, English, French, and Russian literatures, but as the years went by he turned his inquisitive mind toward Australian,

Canadian, and African cultures (and with what gusto he announced that he was learning Swahili!). And yet, every time he came to Rome, whatever the season, he would go back with bronchitis. Considering that the temperature in Rome is usually (at least until recently) six or seven degrees Celsius higher than in Turin, he was always surprised (and a little perplexed) that I, a Piedmontese, could enjoy the city as much as I do. But then I would reassure him of my regional loyalty by talking about “our” Juventus: and here he was unbeatable as he knew everything there was to know: past, present, and ... future!

Eccentric, because he was genial, restless, because he was unconventional, Claudio had an independent soul. He once told me an epigram that I have treasured, and that I pass on to our younger colleagues: “No offspring of a university professor is born scot-free!” This is perhaps why, although he served at several universities in Italy (Venice, Milan, Turin) and abroad and, consequently, taught thousands of students, he was affable to all, but really attached only to a few.

Notes

¹ For reasons of space I cannot make specific mention of Claudio’s scholarly essays, excellent translations, and innovative anthologies.