

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
April 4, 2013

Hosts: Tom Slavin and Carol Fox

Novel: *Christ Stopped at Eboli* by Carlo Levi

Papers:

Biographical: Jill Mushkat

Critical: June Salm

After the usual preliminary refreshments and conversation, President Leon Cabinet called the meeting to order at 8:25. Guests John Parkinson and Donna Jackson were introduced. No committee reports were delivered, but Leigh Fabens noted that members should sign up with Toby Siegel to make contributions to dinner for the Annual Meeting; minutes of the March meeting were read and approved.

This month's biographical paper was presented by Jill Mushkat.

Carlo Levi was born in 1902 in Turin, Italy, to well-to-do parents, both physicians. His maternal uncle was a leader of the socialist movement in Italy; Levi embraced political activism as well as a career in medicine. Art and literature were also both important to him, and are entwined in his work. He lived in Paris from 1924-28 and in 1939-41, with his political exile for anti-fascism between the two. He died in Rome in 1975.

Levi was an antifascist activist. For being antifascist and also Jewish, Levi was exiled to Lucania, in Aliano, the town that became Gagliano in this book. Upon release from that exile he went to Paris and wrote his first book, *Fear of Freedom*, in 1939. During WWII he hid in Florence, to avoid being swept up in the Nazi deportation of the Jews. While in hiding, he wrote *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. The success of this, deemed his best work, was followed by several other books which were somewhat less successful. The focus of his life, fighting against fascist rhetoric and the official culture of Italy, are the main themes of his work. Levi was also very active as a visual artist.

The Italian version of *Christ Stopped at Eboli* has several introductions, including comments by Italo Calvino and Jean Paul Sartre, which evaluate Levi as “an ambassador of the everyday world” and a “strange contradiction, at the same time the most Roman of Romans, yet always finding himself as if at home with everyone.”

June Salm delivered the critical paper.

June began with a memory of Italian immigrants who frequented “the lot” near her childhood home. She knew then only that these folks were shabby and poor, and made very efficient use of their land—and that their children were

headed for vocational rather than academic high schools. This did not prepare her for later travel to Italy and the richness of Italian culture—both past and present.

Levi's stories of Eboli recalled to June her memories of her poor immigrant neighbors, who were living out the dream of coming to America described as characteristic of the less-than-cultured people of Aliano. For those in Aliano, America rises as a mythic capital, even though the life of the Italian-American immigrants of the time was as grim as that of the peasants who did not emigrate.

Various individual characters depicted in colorful detail by Levi present the village as “in the hands of school masters” and populated by vivid, magical, fantastical people and animals. The village's church and priest are “sorry affairs”—as are the town's two doctors—and Levi finds particular acceptance among all of these remarkable people. History (heavily influenced by mythic characters) is an important element of local folklore. In the town, Levi relieves the tedium of his days with painting and the company of his dog, along with various festivals and spectacles that take place from time to time in the town's culture.

The book is about a visit to a foreign land which broadens the visitor—who also becomes a strand in the fabric of the town, to which he donates medical care and which he promises (ineffectually) to revisit upon his release from exile.

June decided not to provide questions for discussion but to throw discussion open.

Readers commented on the simplicity and beauty of the writing and language. One noted that it was remarkable that upon Levi's return to Turin, his former home had become somewhat foreign because he had changed—and that **he** was upon his return now a foreigner because he was suspect as a political exile. Yet, Aliano was **not** really part of **his own** Italy but rather an outland—more foreign to him than France. While we tend to think of each nation as somewhat homogeneous, this was not characteristic of European countries until after the World Wars, to some extent. Levi makes this clear in the way he shows that people who have been to America are somehow elevated. It is notable, Jill said, that in the early 20th century there was not really even a common Italian language—dialects were not even mutually understandable, to a significant extent.

Is this really a novel? Not really—more of a memoir, though written with “a novelist's touch.” It is more successful than Levi's other works, several agreed. Someone asked about the 1979 movie based on this book, as to whether it has a coherent narrative line. Those who had seen the film said it is very similar to

the book. In both, the title is important, reinforcing the idea that Christ's influence never reached as far as Aliano.

Several readers remarked on the contrast between the homogeneity of wide swaths of the USA and the lack of such uniformity between various rural areas in different parts of European countries. Though the book is in some respects not novelistic, still it is ethnographic and has a political and social position—and Levi expands the characters to fill gaps in the cultural outlook. He made his point—people from different ethnographic segments **are** different in important ways. The peasant's Italy with its own mythology, is, as the book suggests, a significantly different culture from classical Italy.

Another issue raised was Levi's portrayal of women. Levi's mother and sister were both physicians—and since Levi was born in 1902, this goes back into the early 19th century. Thus, in Levi's Italy it was normal for women to be in power, even if “behind the throne” of a man.

Jill had read the book both in English and in Italian, and was asked to comment on any distinction between original Italian and English versions. She remarked that the translation is very well done, in that the translator captured the artistic element including the first sentence about narrator's arrival in Gagliano. The writing is very lyrical, and the lyricality of it is captured in the translation.

It was noted that this section of Italy was not supported by the central government, so these people/characters lived with the myths they had at hand. People who are ignored in any culture are forced into violence sometimes, like the brigands who became heroes in the southern Italian culture. Such outlaws become like the army of the poor; in Gagliano, they are stultified and do not rise up, but perhaps they are likely targets for revolutionaries (or brigands) who may stir them to action at any time. The author acknowledges the distinctions of class and rank in the village, but never becomes offended or sentimental about these distinctions. His descriptions are therefore not only refreshing but challenging.

Scholars have compared the poorest parts of Italy to the poorest parts of India, both in poverty and in the enormous corruption—absentee landlords, tax fraud, everyone exploiting the poor (as for example by the “goat tax”)—as tends to happen everywhere when corrupt government develops tradition of exploitation.

Someone asked whether Levi's exile was really as free as the novel suggests? Others noted that Levi **was** in prison before he was sent to Gagliano—but his exile was of a type for political prisoners—a kind of house arrest—he couldn't leave there, even though it may look superficially unlike a prison. And he really is under substantial supervision, both in town and in the next town over.

The question arose as to how relevant the book is in present-day Italy. Some contemporary Italians, at least, feel that Levi's portrait of southern Italy is not kind. Levi had an idealistic notion of communism. that it would provide a universal caring for all groups. In any case, Larrrt Siegler's 1955 copy of the book bears the inscription: "this is not the real Italy!"

Some elements of this story are typical of any rural people who leave and come back to their homes in the rural settings. The resignation of the peasants, so weighty and deadening, is characteristic of depression and despair which can afflict poor people anywhere. This is emphasized in the context of Mussolini's attempt to create a new version of the Roman Empire, developing national unification around Il Duce. There, the southern part of Italy was never a welcome element—and even still, Italian government seems always to be trying to "modernize" the south.

Formal discussion ended at 10:00, with members continuing individual conversations through the closing round of refreshments and on their way out into the evening.