

Two Studies in Sanctity

Roma, by Aldo Palazzeschi; translated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1965. 216 pp. \$4.50.*

A Passage Through Fire, by Jean Montaurier; translated by Irene Uribi, *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965. 350 pp. \$5.95.*

THESE TWO NOVELS, Italian and French, offer very sharp contrasts of setting, style, narrative method, and technical competence, but they have a common theme, which is the tension between the ardent Christian and the far from Christian world he must inhabit this side of the Second Coming. It is not, however, quite the same world to each of the novelists. In Signor Palazzeschi's case it is the corrupt, cynical, hedonistic world that subsists at the very center of Catholic Christendom; for the Abbé Montaurier it is the small-souled, spite-ridden world of a French provincial canton. Signor Palazzeschi is one of the most distinguished of contemporary Italian writers (if such a term may be properly applied to one who is now past his eightieth year), equally celebrated for his poetry and his fiction. The author of *Comme à travers le feu* seems to have been virtually unknown even in France before the book was awarded the *Prix Catholique*.

Roma is by no means as well articulated a novel as *The Sisters Materassi* (*Le Sorelle Materassi*) by which Palazzeschi is best known to American readers—a story, set in the author's native Tuscany, of two infatuate spinsters who are reduced to beggary by the charming and heartless orphan nephew they have adopted and spoiled. But *Roma* exhibits more fully Palazzeschi's special gifts of indulgent humor and lugubrious irony and the swift, mordant strokes of characterization that stop barely short of caricature. These last are best illustrated in his descriptions of some aristocratic guests at a dinner party given by a family of rich *arrivisti*:

Count Gelsomino di Lucera . . . although over seventy, did not seem more than fourteen years old. A tired, plucked, squeezed-out teenager, his complexion almost white, his head like a pool ball, he agitated his small, translucent hands nervously while talking. The Duchess of Ascoli had a little blonde wig that looked

like a basket of bibb lettuce fallen over her skull. . . . Baroness Costanza wore a high skirt, a dinner jacket with white shirt and black tie, and she had an inch and a half of salt-and-pepper hair cut short at the nape of her neck. She never went to a hair dresser but sat with great satisfaction in barbershops among men whom she intimidated. She was big, sturdy, with awesomely wide low-heeled shoes, a monocle and a whip with which she trained mastiffs at her villa. [Her gigolo, Ali] had the most golden blond hair one ever saw. . . . The skin of his cheek was a velvety light pink, his eyes were blue, large and beautiful. . . . The least cause was enough to upset him, the most unlikely; clashing shades of color, a draft, the handle of an umbrella or a doorknob, the presence of a disagreeable person. . . .

Roma has hardly much in the way of a plot. The story, such as it is, develops around the tall, somber person of the Prince di Santo Stefano, an elderly widower who lives in great austerity in two rooms of his crumbling palace. The rest of it has been let to poor tenants who return enough in the way of rent to pay the taxes and provide a meagre diet for the prince and his two faithful servitors, a flat-footed factotum called Checco, who plays a sort of pure-hearted Sancho to his quixotic master, and an elderly virgin portress called Bice, who wears what in modesty she can of a male wardrobe bequeathed to her by a priest who had nothing else to leave. Every morning at half past five a barber named Orazio comes to shave the prince, and having done so returns to his bed with the feeling of having been somehow sanctified by the experience. "Checco, Bice and Orazio hardly got any pay; the honor of serving him was their compensation, the greatness that rubbed off on them."

Of the prince's ancestral furniture almost nothing remains except a prie-dieu, a pair of crucifixes—one of them brought home by an ancestor from the Crusades—and a golden canopied throne on which in other times visiting popes would deign to seat themselves. The prince's days, after morning mass, are spent at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, except on the ceremonial occasions when he changes his customary black and threadbare suit and celluloid collar for the brilliant archaic uniform and sword of a Papal Chamberlain or of a Knight of Malta.

His eldest daughter, inspired by his example, has entered a convent and has become its abbess. His second daughter has married a Neapolitan nobleman of rank and poverty to match her own; together they lead a completely parasitic life

among the international set, moving from resort to resort, trading the glamour of their names and titles for the hospitality and subsidies of very rich social climbers. A third daughter, Norina, has married into a wealthy and upstart family named Sequi, only to find herself bored and unhappy; she is her father's favorite, "his last mundane joy, his last tie to the world"; he cherishes her visits and strives to prolong them. His only son, the Duke of Rovi, has become a high-class gigolo, living luxuriously on the largesse of doting women. The prince is formal with the abbess, tender with Norina, cold to the others.

Interspersed through the story are Palazzeschi's poetic, sometimes rhapsodic, vignettes of Rome and the Romans. For him the city—which is something quite apart from the Rome of the tourists, the diplomats, the archeologists and the foreign pensioners—is full of infinite variety and contrast; his admiration of the easy adaptability of the inhabitants to every change of circumstance which has enabled the city to survive all the convulsions of history is well-nigh boundless. It is they rather than the saintly Prince di Santo Stefano or any of the other identified characters who provide him with a collective hero for his tale.

The early chapters coincide with the darkest days of the war—with the American landings at Anzio, the frightful bombings of the Roman suburbs, the armistice with General Badoglio, the re-occupation of the city by the Germans and the hunting down of its Jews by the Gestapo. The prince turns his palace into a sanctuary for Jewish fugitives, giving orders that none be turned away. He collects bedding for them, feeds them with provisions sent by Norina from the well-stocked larders of the Sequis, and through his daughter, the abbess, and other ecclesiastical connections finds them safer refuges from terror, transportation, and death. Yet later when the duke, his son, announces his intention to marry a rich Syrian-Jewish dancer the prince is outraged. Christian duty toward the persecuted is one thing, family honor another. When the son contemptuously charges him with hypocrisy and condescension, of exacting a price in sanctimonious homily for every spoonful of soup, he replies sternly:

As a Christian I offer my strength to right an injustice, no matter who is involved. My conscience told me to help them, save them without one thought for my own safety or my very life. This house was made into a Jewish camp, exactly. They slept with their children on

those steps which popes used to climb. I am ready to do so again every time injustice is done to them. . . . [But] I don't have to explain to you why you shouldn't marry a Jewish woman. Nor do I have to remind you that there have been neither Jews nor dancers among the women of our family. . . .

And when the unwelcome daughter-in-law presents herself at the palace as the Duchess of Rovi he so far forgets the obligations of Christian forbearance as to kick her downstairs.

In a poignant interview Norina tells her father of her determination to have an adulterous liaison, though she has not decided who the lover is to be. Her motive, it appears, is not so much lust as vengeance on the husband who has been neglecting her for other women. It is her notion that just as his infidelities have made him more desirable in her eyes, so her own may have a like effect on him. As matters stand,

once in a while my turn comes, and he doesn't do it because of duty or to humor me or because I entice him in any way. . . . I don't feel like a wife to him any more; it's more like . . . belonging to a cooperative. [Yet] if my husband were a serious, quiet man, working at his desk all day long, or reading works of science or religion—can you imagine what a bore it would be? . . . I know it's a contradiction, but deep down I like the wrongs my husband has been doing me.

Shocked and distressed by this strange confession, the prince is unable to dissuade her. Later when she tells him that the sin has been accomplished in deed as well as in design, his exhortations to repentance and expiation are futile. She intends, she says, to repeat the sin with the same lover and perhaps a dozen others, although it has already made her want her husband all the more. Evidently Signor Palazzeschi believes that in the course of his long life he has learned more about feminine paradoxes than are dreamed of by moralistic males.

At the ceremonies attending the proclamation of a new dogma (the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) in the Holy Year of 1950, the prince in his chamberlain's uniform is stricken by what seems to be a brain hemorrhage and dies tranquilly a few days afterward. He is shaved for the last time by Orazio, dressed for the tomb in a Franciscan habit by the faithful Checco. Nowhere does Palazzeschi better demonstrate his powers of irony than in this account of the funeral and its aftermath. The prince has left instructions that the circumstances of his burial

shall be no less austere than those of his life, prohibiting music and flowers and prescribing that his coffin shall be conveyed in the cheapest vehicle to be found in Rome. This turns out to be "a dirty, rundown cart drawn by a nag whose ribs could be counted one by one." It is followed by an impressive procession of civil officials, high-ranking prelates, members of religious orders and lay societies, Knights of Malta in full uniform, and annoyed and uncomfortable representatives of the highest Roman aristocracy in mourning dress. It is early November and a bystander estimates the value of the furs worn by the female mourners at more than a billion lire.

The new Prince di Santo Stefano is welcomed in papal audience as a penitent prodigal, given his father's office of private chamberlain, promised a speedy annulment of his marriage to the Jewish dancer. Signora Sequi undertakes to find him a suitable bride from a family which has made a huge fortune in the manufacture and sale of laxative medicines, Checco, released from his fealty, all his worldly belongings tucked under an arm, mounts the hundred steep steps of the Ara Coeli to realize his long-cherished dream of becoming a friar of St. Francis, reciting the Apostles' creed as he climbs. At the summit he pauses for a last look at the city. "Roma, Roma: young and decaying, poor and billionaire, intimate and lewd, narrow and boundless!"

A Passage Through Fire puts us in a very different atmosphere: we have exchanged the Roman sunshine for ashen skies, chill rains, penetrating sea winds. Here there is neither humor nor irony but a fierce intensity, sometimes mixed with deep bitterness, sometimes with exaltation. There are occasional passages of great beauty and some that border on incoherence. The novel has been compared to the work of Georges Bernanos, by whom the author seems to have been much influenced, and the greater part of it takes the form of a journal kept by a country curé. Even stronger perhaps are the influences of Léon Bloy.

The priestly protagonists—for there are really two, though they seem at times to be merely older and younger reflections of a single personality—are pure evangelicals cast in a mold at once apostolic and Jansenistic. Their aim is the complete sanctification of souls in Christ crucified, but they perceive more hope of salvation in outright sinners or even in Freemasons and Communists than in practicing and pharisaic Catholics. They are impatient of theological subtleties, of the new cults of political action and social militancy and of all concessions to snobbery and prejudice. One

surmises that they would not have been much impressed by the Prince di Santo Stefano, and might have cited the Pauline maxim that a poverty of goods unaccompanied by poverty of spirit profits nothing. At best perhaps they might have classified him on the strength of his sermonizings as "traditionalist." "Traditionalism," one of them explains, "is an automatic distributor. You pull down the handle and the answer falls out, wrapped and ready for immediate consumption."

The narrative pattern is intricate and may seem to some rather clumsily contrived. A peasant-born priest who values candor above tact has managed to offend some powerful personages of his diocese and is exiled to a small fishing village in the South of France. In a nearby town he finds a kindred spirit in a rural dean whose bluntness, open preference for the poor, and adherence to the letter of the Gospels earns him the enmity and obstruction of the lay pillars, male and female, of his congregation and of some of the clergy, among them a worldly, bridge-playing confessor of nuns. On Christmas Day the dean announces that he is giving up his parish, though he has not received permission from his bishop to do so. The curé takes him to his presbytery. The diocesan authorities, fearful of scandal, make no objection. The dean, since he was reared among fisherfolk, readily adapts himself to the new situation and spends most of his days at sea in the boats with men who love him.

The following pages are largely devoted to the curé's meditations on the dean's position. Do the ardor and purity of his faith and the hypocrisy of his adversaries justify his disobedience to a superior? Various clerical visitors, including the Vicar General and a Thomistophile Dominican, come to argue the case. Mysterious and possibly supernatural characters move in and out of the tale—an old woman who comes to help with the housework and cooking and identifies herself only as a "suppliant"; a Mephistophelian doctor "with a heavy body, a purposely countrified gait, clumsy and good natured, the body of a shrewd, crafty peasant, a cattle trader who . . . will stay at the auction. . . until the animal is sold at the highest price and the buyer congratulates himself on having been cheated." The description and the scene that follows are strongly reminiscent of *Sous le Soleil de Satan*.

After the curé has recovered from a difficult illness he sets out with the dean on a journey to his native Auvergne. Then the dean, in whom an emotional and spiritual crisis has been steadily mounting, forsakes him and goes on alone. The

curé, desolate and agonized, offers himself as a sacrifice to save his friend from final despair and apostasy. The sacrifice is accepted: in a sudden illumination that comes to the dean as he prays beside a medieval statue of Virgin and Child in an ancient church it is revealed to him that he and his adversaries have suffered from the same spiritual insufficiency. "I didn't love them. That is why I was no stronger than they." The friends are briefly reunited. The curé returns to his presbytery to die; the dean presumably is reconciled to obedience.

Whether a reader's interest can be sustained throughout the length of a book of such high-pitched intensity and passion must depend no doubt on the nature and depth of the reader's own religious experience. A word, however, needs

to be said about the translations; that of *Roma* is lively, slangy, and at times rather coarse; that of *A Passage through Fire* is colloquial but never coarse, yet it does occasional violence to English idiom. What for example is to be made of such a paragraph as this?

For once I was poor, once I was just a poor man, once they saw me wearing only my poor man's rags, my pride, my freedom, my joy in being a free man, they aimed at too painful to give them up. And the music of the words I had sure that they held me in contempt.

It is possible of course that a careless printer has pied up the lines and that an equally careless proofreader has neglected to correct them.

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY



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How Paris Was Spared

Is Paris Burning? by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965. 376 pp. \$6.95.*

PARIS, most beautiful of the world's large cities, survived capture and liberation in World War II with only minor scratches. The French capital was surrendered without a fight in 1940. The freeing of the city in August, 1944, might well have been accompanied by shocking destruction of its historic monuments and wide vistas. The French Communists, a strong element in the underground resistance movement, were dead set on touching off an internal revolt in Paris, without waiting for German evacuation as a result of Allied military pressure.

And from his East Prussian headquarters, appropriately called "The Wolf's Lair," Adolf Hitler was issuing a series of peremptory, almost hysterical orders for the defense of Paris at any cost, for the extermination of all insurgents, for the demolition of the bridges over the Seine and the many masterpieces of classical architecture which have long made Paris a magnet for foreign visitors. But Paris was not for burning, even though "Is Paris Burning?" became a sinister *leitmotiv* in Hitler's messages to the German command in the city. The proud Arc de Triomphe, with its view to the Place de la Concorde, the Eiffel Tower, the Invalides, the Louvre, the Chamber of Deputies, the Vendôme Column and the crowning glory of Notre Dame still stand unscarred and untarnished.

How Paris was at once liberated and saved from serious damage is the subject of a vivid, thoroughly researched book by two journalists, American Larry Collins and Frenchman Dominique Lapierre. The authors have traced and interviewed hundreds of participants in the stirring events of 1944, French, Germans, Americans, generals, privates, former resistance activists, Parisians of both sexes who lived through the sporadic fighting and rejoiced when the bells of the churches of Paris pealed out as a signal that deliverance from the German yoke had come on August 25th.

Hitler had appointed a hardbitten veteran general, Dietrich von Choltitz, Commandant of Paris in the belief that he would unhesitatingly carry out the demolitions and destruction which *der*

Fuehrer envisaged as part of the defense of Paris. The easy capture of Paris in 1940 had been Hitler's moment of supreme joy. If this prize had to be given up, it should be yielded only as a mass of rubble and ruins.

Von Choltitz had distinguished himself in the capture of the large Russian base in the Crimea, Sevastopol, and had also ordered the bombing of Rotterdam. But, placed in supreme command in Paris, with mines and explosives set for massive destruction, Von Choltitz wavered, hesitated and finally used the services of the Swedish Consul, Raoul Nordling, in sending a message to the allied forces, urging them to come quickly and thereby settle the problem.

The work of Messrs. Collins and Lapierre probes for motives and backgrounds; but what impelled von Choltitz to act as he did remains something of a mystery. Part of the explanation may be found in the fact that he was not a fanatical Nazi thrown up by Hitler's revolution, but an old-line aristocratic professional soldier. An interview with Hitler in his headquarters had convinced him that Germany, with a madman for a leader, had lost the war. He did not desire the fame, or infamy, of the Greek who destroyed the famous temple of Diana at Ephesus.

From the standpoint of General Eisenhower, the liberation of Paris was not a Number One military priority. He was anxious to capture the city by a double enveloping maneuver which would avoid fighting in the streets and also make possible the pursuit of the retreating Germans to the Rhine and beyond. But these military considerations had to give way to political when the Communist wing of the resistance took the organization of a revolt in the city into their own hands. As one of their leaders, a Colonel who operated under the pseudonym of "Rol" put it: "Paris is worth 200,000 dead." Had the Communists been able to take over the city themselves they might have hoped to exert a decisive influence on the composition of the postwar civilian government, since France had always been governed from Paris.

The Gaullists in the resistance were pulled along into the uprising, but were willing to negotiate a cease-fire with von Choltitz, who accepted such an arrangement and turned down the ruthless proposal of one of his air generals: to devastate with air bombing the parts of Paris under insurgent control. But the Communists refused to observe the cease-fire. The result was a touch-and-go situation, with sniping and street fighting in various parts of the city, but no serious perma-