

PERSONAL PORTRAIT OF GIORGIO LEVI

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Giorgio Levi has two great fortunes: he has a noble smile and he survived a heart attack. These are the important facts about his personality, and they are so evident that there is no need for this modest portrait, which does little more than stating the obvious.

I should perhaps start by sketching my relation with Giorgio, so that my point of view is clear: I owe my life to him. In 1991, he gave me a PhD position, at a point where I was despising myself and what I had studied before. Of course, a PhD could have been the *coup de grâce*, but it turned out to be what I needed to get back to life and to a more balanced judgement. Giorgio wanted to advise me just after being in a talk I gave, without knowing me before, and without me asking him for a PhD. He must have guessed.

The PhD affair between Giorgio and me had as much to do with personal relationship as with science and research. At the end of my studies, I left Pisa, and I never went back to Italian academia. However, Giorgio and I have had frequent personal and professional contacts ever since. I think that my detachment from Italian academia makes for a dispassionate portrait, as much as it can be about somebody who saved my life.

The first thing that everybody notices is that Giorgio talks and talks fast, all the time. This is an unmistakable mark of people from the northeast of Italy, where Giorgio was born. They are the descendants of the Venice merchants, who used to trade with all the civilisations and built wonderful cities in their homeland. Giorgio has inherited their curiosity and charm, and their passion for the sea.

When he swims, Giorgio's urge to talk stops. He swims slowly in all the seas of the world, for hours at a time, often with others, sometimes in friendly challenges, around rocks and islands, silently. I think that he is listening to the sea, maybe as he would listen to his mother. I never met her, but I saw the hand-knitted sweaters she made for him, and that he reverently wears. I imagine that when Giorgio was with her, at her house in front of the sea in Varigotti, he would listen.

Giorgio grew up among many women, and maybe this is why he is so good at speaking with his eyes and with his smile. He knows all the ways of subliminal communication. On the other hand, I have the impression that, despite his immediate empathy with everybody, he does not have many close friends, especially among colleagues. He seems to enjoy the natural solitude of the kings for his most private feelings. For sure, Giorgio is potentially seductive, so maybe this is his way to defend himself from the adoring crowds.

In the mid 1980s, Giorgio had his heart attack, and he had to have a difficult multi-bypass operation in Texas, something that only a few surgeons in the world would perform. Maybe because of that, he has a sense of urgency in his expression, something that says *hurry, there's little time*. He does not wait until tomorrow, and is justified in living more freely than he would otherwise. So many times he told me that he would likely not be alive the next year. But Giorgio's body is not failing him: quite the contrary. With the excuse of having little time, Giorgio does not save his energies, and he does not miss opportunities.

This is clear to many of us, close to him during professional occasions such as conference trips, where Giorgio is the soul and the sheer fun of each event. For example, many remember going to a conference in Valencia and being pushed by him to party for the entire week of *las fallas* with no stopping or sleeping. Like there's no tomorrow.

As an actor on the scene, Giorgio would hate not to exceed the expectations of the audience. I regret not being able to describe him as he would deserve, and the written word does not help, because Giorgio is a film character. The Italian films of the 1960s come to mind, the whole range of great directors, such as Risi, Fellini and Antonioni; and Giorgio could appear in many of their stories. There is a wall in his house that is full of films, which he studies at night, to the point that some tapes are so faint that one can only see shadows. I am convinced that films more closely represent human nature than any other art. Deeply understanding films somewhat detracts from innocence, but they suggest unexpected and interesting geometries in human relations. Giorgio is certainly not naive and he is not just an actor, but also a director.

Giorgio has a grace that derives from many qualities: intelligence, sensitivity and culture. However, I suspect that, most of all, it comes from many tormented nights of reflection. The nobleman creates art, fights boredom, explores new freedoms, elicits emotions; Giorgio is indeed noble and does a bit of all these things. The stories around him are intriguing, passionate and emotional: never dull, never cold. I am grateful to him for bringing some art to all of us.

I do not want to give the impression that Giorgio's grace is only spiritual. It is much more than that, and it can manifest itself in very earthly ways. I had the good luck of being in Pisa at a peak of creativity. Actually, that exuberance would have been too intense for the very cerebral Italian directors: they would not have been good at portraying it. It was a *movida*, a sensual frenzy, the reaction to some bleak tyranny that came to an end a minute before I arrived. The source of the energy was unmistakably Giorgio, who, of course, was not contenting himself with instigating the revolution. As all the great leaders do, he leads by example, and examples we had, many of them. This was a film for Almodovar I think, no doubts.

With his grace and smile, and with fresh flowers on his desk, Giorgio brings to research many young people, boys and girls in equal proportions, which is a rare thing indeed in our still male-dominated little world. He has done more: he created, in Europe, an entire scientific community where women are prominent. In fact, it was natural for me to marry one of his students, Paola Bruscoli, who is also a colleague.

Actually, I still have visions of corridors in the Pisa department, where door after door opens on rooms full of smiling girls, like in a Fellini dream. The feminine presence in Pisa has always been special, and something that, unfortunately, I have never seen again anywhere in the many places where I have been. Thanks also to the favourable environment, Giorgio developed a rare understanding, and he once revealed to me *the true nature of women* (which I cannot repeat here).

While Giorgio is noble of spirit, his wife, Giulietta, has the blood of the Italian monarchy in her veins. The traits of the royal family shape her attractive figure. It seems to me that Giorgio and Giulietta play their parts in a beautiful story (no, not a Fellini one), but I do not know it, and I would not dare to tell even if I knew.

As should be clear, there is a bit of Ulysses in Giorgio, and then, of course, there must be an Ithaca. Giorgio's house is a former country home, bought and renovated when he first came to work in Pisa. It has a garden with flowers, cherry trees, cats and dogs. The hospitality and warmth of the house are the sign of a culture that extends far beyond the suffocating bounds of our profession. There is a tasteful exposition of family relics and artefacts that Giorgio and Giulietta collect while travelling. Many

times I have seen Giorgio looking for the finest porcelain and art with the same energy he devotes to partying. And there's more: he puts exquisite knowledge and skill into cooking. Some of my fondest memories are dining at Giorgio and Giulietta's house, where I was always greeted with a *mojito*, made with fine rum brought from the last trip to Cuba.

This brings me to one of the aspects that I most appreciate in Giorgio, his taste for *épater le bourgeois*. Try to picture the following, exemplary situation (maybe Buñuel could do a good job at it). The scene takes place during one of my visits to Italy, after I left, around 2000. I am dining with my family at Giorgio's, and his family is there as well. We drink our *mojito*, and then we move to the beautiful dining room, with antiques, the finest china, family furniture, a sword. We have relaxed conversation (and Giorgio has the lion's share of it, of course). Francesca, his daughter, asks: *Dad, these meatballs are fabulous, why are they red?* Giorgio: *Because the crap I used to make them contained a lot of blood.* Francesca: *Nice, give me some more.* And the conversation proceeds. (This, for me, is Italy at its best.)

I always thought that Giorgio limits himself a bit too much about this aspect: he could be more daring and shock the middle class more, and do so outside his circle. But, in many ways, he sees himself as a bourgeois. I think that, actually, he attributes weight to social class, perhaps without admitting it even to himself. If this is the case (and it's certainly not a capital sin), then he should look at himself as an aristocrat, in the good sense of the word. Maybe in the sense of somebody that loses control more, that needs less structure and discipline. Because, despite his seeing all angles of a scene, all the possible provoking developments, eventually reason and norm prevail in Giorgio. He is ten minutes early at every appointment, and he does not miss a plane. I often thought that he is a bit like Marcello Mastroianni in the fountain scene of *La Dolce Vita*: he eventually enters the fountain, but Anita Ekberg has to insist.

I am grateful to Giorgio for his political ideas, which helped me form my own convictions. There was a time in Italy when the so-called socialist party was seducing many *rucola* eaters and intellectuals with its apparent dynamism and social innovation. This was, as later became clear, one of the worst incarnations of Italian political corruption. Sometimes, I entertained the thought that Giorgio could have been a prey, because these 'socialists' were appealing to the curious people in a hurry, like Giorgio could have been. Many good people fell into the trap, but Giorgio did not; he has always been a moderate left-winger, *comme il faut*. (Or, should I say: *noblesse oblige*.)

Come to think of it, I do remember one political disagreement between us. This was the major issue of whether Gianni Agnelli was elegant or not, and my problem was that Giorgio thought that he was. I hope that Giorgio changed his mind on this issue, which I think has to do with the fountain situation that I was mentioning before.

One lesson that I tried to learn from Giorgio is how to be a good PhD advisor. I have seen many that believe in the authoritarian *Doktorvater*: the macho military model. It does not work well. Maybe a good way to call Giorgio's model is the *doctoral mother*: advising like an Italian *mamma*. Cooking for the students, too. This is a very good idea, and I adopted it with my students, even if I am not as good a cook as Giorgio is. But these are little things.

As I said, I owe my life to Giorgio, and not just because he made me do research, but also because his judgement, in a certain, nontrivial scientific situation, proved to be right. My research area turned out to be different from what Giorgio had in mind for me, but at the crucial time when my ideas were about to become coherent, Giorgio understood before anybody else what I was doing, and he gave me his approval. That meant a lot to me, and his encouragement helped me overcome the substantial initial difficulties that my ideas encountered.

Before joining Giorgio's group, I thought that research had necessarily to be the rat race that it mostly is. However, Giorgio gave me a concrete example that *other things* beyond the race matter more. I cannot be grateful enough for this, and so, for being a model. There is no hope that I can be like Giorgio, one reason being that I come from the northwest, and so, for me talking is painfully difficult. However, such things that are not against my nature I can learn. One thing that I am now becoming convinced of is that, indeed, we should live like there's no tomorrow.

This portrait describes many aspects of Giorgio that everybody knows, but there is one important thing that should be, nonetheless, written solemnly: scientists and teachers like Giorgio are very rare and *essential*. All the more so in these times of increasing specialisation and dominance of the managers. Research looks more and more like a professional sport where the players are doped, hyper-performing machines, and, often, headless chickens. We need scientists, like Giorgio, that have an extra dimension beyond technical proficiency: an all-round culture and leadership that bring people together and give them perspective and opportunities. This goes much beyond scientific merits (which Giorgio has in spades, of course).

In conclusion, I think that Giorgio is a necessary scientific leader and a larger-than-life model. His genius is having been able to create and to keep together a large community, thanks to his curiosity, superior culture and empathic ability.

Most important, personally, is that his smile has stayed with me since we first met, and for that I love him.

As is natural, this portrait is meant to be a bit of a celebration. Then again, Giorgio, like everybody, is not only entitled to celebration: he also deserves punishment. Well, the rest of this *Festschrift* is devoted to that.