

Thursday, August 16, 2012



Last night I heard a public talk by Romano Prodi, who served several times as Italy’s prime minister in the 1990s and during the first decade of this millennium. (He alternated with the execrable Berlusconi, whom Prodi resembles not in the least).

He’s around seventy now, quite hale, and affably smart. Roughly four hundred people came to sit in the main piazza of Pontremoli (a town near our village of Castiglione del Terziere) to listen to their ex-leader’s take on reality, his what’s- happening-now narrative. Unlike a lot of politicians, Prodi is able and willing to take the long view, and he managed to synthesize various events of the past six decades with admirable clarity. He spoke at length about the serious problem of unemployment for young Italians, and as he did so, I couldn’t help but notice that most of his listeners were over fifty—and at the bar in the piazzetta around the corner, a dozen or so noisy young Italians were drinking themselves into serious reality-forgetfulness.

Prodi ad-libbed for quite a while. The phrase that most stuck in my head wasn’t something he himself said, but something one of his Chinese students (he’s currently teaching at an international business school in Shanghai, and is also a professor-at-large at Brown University) asked him recently, which he shared with the audience: What’s Europe now—a laboratory or a museum? Is Europe a place of forward-looking experimentation, or a calcifying monument to past greatness?

This got me wondering what sort of question I might ask Obama or Romney if I were invited to one of their intimate fundraising dinners. What’s the USA now—a functioning democracy or a politicians’ whorehouse, where the “public servant” with the most money gets to fuck whomever?

Don’t get me wrong: I’m voting for Obama, of course. But without illusions. The mess we’ve made of our body politic can be cleaned up only if there’s real campaign finance reform, and I’m

not seeing any politician on the horizon who's willing to wave that banner.



When I returned home from Prodi's talk and entered our village, I was greeted silently by several figures—some standing, some sitting—who've been here since the start of summer. They're creations of Andrea Poggipollini, a Bolognese artist who's installed them in unexpected places: on balconies, towers, walls... They seem to be pondering some large question without answer.



One figure is in a little cave, behind a screen on which light is projected; the viewer sees him only in silhouette. He's seated, grasping a glass, perhaps in a toast— to himself, to unanswerable questions? In any event, he seems unconcerned about the problem of not-knowing. Elsewhere, strewn about the village (on placards on the ground, on walls, in windows—sometimes with accompanying photos) are bits of the artist's poetry, along with other wisps and tendrils of verse written by the owner of our village's castle, Loris Jacopo Bononi, himself an accomplished poet and author.

It's altogether a clever and accomplished collaboration, visual and verbal. And it's good to come back, after an evening in the arid desert of political discourse, to this little poetry-oasis— where no one pretends to have a clue, but at least there's some moisture in the air.

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