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Giuseppe Prezzolini *The Man and the Clouds*





He was restless and paradoxical – a “conservative anarchist” as he was wont, not without a touch of self-satisfaction, to define himself; “a cultural impresario”, “a broker on the literary stock exchange”, according to Russo’s caustically critical remark – though even this implied recognition of many qualities. Yet this is perhaps the best way so sum up, albeit very briefly, Giuseppe Prezzolini the man, writer and journalist and his multifaceted character.

For Prezzolini was a diligent and committed witness to a whole century of events as well as a protagonist – and not only in the field of literature – of the first part of the 20th century in Italy. Indeed, it may be said without fear of contradiction that very many Italian cultural developments that followed, right up to the nineteen-eighties, were associated with his fruitful activities as a disseminator of ideas and indefatigable cultural organizer.

Prezzolini was born in Perugia on 27th January 1882 – his father came from Siena – and from the beginning of the century the young man took an active part in Italian cultural life, contributing to the main journals of the day, including *Il Regno*, and founding and editing *Il Leonardo* (1903-1907) and *La Voce* (1908-1914).

A key to the understanding of the young Prezzolini’s thoughts, writings and actions lies in the fact that he joined forces with Giovanni Papini; for, apart from the bond of profound and sincere friendship that united them, the two intellectuals were joint editors of *Il Leonardo* and together fully committed to all the cultural debates of those times, which saw them nosing out, publicizing and following up any ideas that were in the air, ever ready to explore any source of information in their passion for intellectual adventure, and always prepared to demolish, revive, provoke or astound with some sudden, sensational exploit, or perhaps action verging on the paradoxical. The early Prezzolini’s polemical, aggressive attitude – and a tone that was often deprecating – made him the exponent of an extreme form of individualism, of the glorification of life

lived to the full, of an aestheticism that inclined towards transfiguration, in marked contrast to the positions adopted up by the supporters of realism and naturalism.

In this, he gave full rein to his interpretation of the reaction to Positivism and to the science-worship that had been in evidence during the 1890s and was becoming more clearly defined at the beginning of the twentieth century: on the one hand, through the revival of the idealism promoted by Croce and Gentile, and on the other through the widespread propagation of aestheticism and D’Annunzio’s superman ideas. Like many young men who were beginning their cultural activities during those years, Prezzolini was greatly attracted by d’Annunzian and Crocean models – which very often overlapped, while being quite different in themselves, to which, however, he added quite another trait that was to emerge ever more clearly in subsequent years: the pressing and effusive need to influence the present, to play a part in transforming it, in setting ideas and reality in motion.

At the same time, he contributed towards an almost mystical conception of art, construed as the quest for a beauty that would reveal “a life imbued with depth and serenity”, “pushing” this antipositivist tenet in his intellectual makeup to such a degree that it tended to become a far-fetched, irrationalist “appeal to the inmost forces of personality versus reason”. To him, through his study and the proposals of the German mystics, and interest in theosophy and occultism, goes the credit, together with Papini, for exerting an active influence on Italian culture that played a part in making it less provincial by introducing positions and formulations already adopted by the more advanced decadents, making known “unknown men and doctrines” and drawing attention to “subjects and studies too often shunned”.

A vital factor in Giuseppe Prezzolini’s cultural and intellectual development were his meetings with Benedetto Croce, which took place in 1908. The Prezzolini who emerged from this encounter was certainly more

Previous page:  
**Prezzolini seen from behind in a yellow jacket**, aquarelle by Luciano Guarnieri, 1982

Left:  
**Little Giuseppe Prezzolini in the days when he was living in Sondrio**

mature, more moderate, and less bent on exhibiting himself, but especially more aware of the “sense of history and the possibility of forging a link with society”: a Prezzolini who, trusting in the demiurgic action of culture far from the madding crowd, as befitted the role of the enlightened *élites*, concentrated more and more on his determination to make intellectual conscience the driving force for transforming the world.

All these impulses converged in *La Voce*, the journal that Prezzolini edited from 1908 to 1914, except for a brief period in 1912, when Papini was the editor. «To deal with all questions that are reflected in the intellectual, religious and artistic world; to react to the rhetoric of the Italians, forcing them to take a close look at their social predicament; to train ourselves to solve minor matters and small problems, so that we may be better prepared for the important ones; to prepare the ground where the life of the spirit is to live and flourish»; - these were, in short, the objectives clearly stated by Prezzolini in one of the first issues of the new periodical.

Gradually abandoning his original position based on the model of the d’Annunzian letterato, Prezzolini then devoted himself to founding a new culture whose artistic products were more original and less taken for granted, and at the same time paid increasing attention to the concrete problems of society and of the economic and political situation. From this twofold interest there stemmed a single, coherent intention, that of a more modern letterato, of an intellectual figure who had undergone change, belonged to a different social and political context, and was taken up with day-to-day situations and all their smallest, prosaic concerns, with which he grappled. He opposed the baseness and vulgarity of the politicians of the day with a proposal to head a new movement that was to involve the whole of society, like a political party.

A consequence of this strong propensity for action was Prezzolini’s total and unconditional support for intervention on the outbreak of the First World War – almost a

re-emergence of those markedly irrationalistic traits that had characterized his thinking and activities in the days of *Il Leonardo*. He had always been inclined to be a nationalist, though not without a touch of sentimentality, in the hope that Italy might win for itself a “place in the sun” that would lend undisputed credence to the superiority it manifested in the intellectual sphere. It was during this period that he gave up *La Voce* and began to co-operate with Mussolini as a correspondent of *Il Popolo d’Italia*. He enrolled as a volunteer and, after a brief stay in Rome, applied to return to the front after the defeat at Caporetto.

Prezzolini’s attitude to Fascism was much discussed, in some ways controversial and, in some people’s opinion, contradictory. In fact, much controversy was engendered by the fact that he pretended or was presumed to be an impartial observer, though in taking up this position he at the same time showed a marked sympathy, not to say friendship for the Duce.

What most people interpreted as ambiguous behaviour may probably be explained if we remember that the attraction he felt for Fascism and his inclination to embrace its ideals and policies inevitably ran counter to his innate and spontaneous desire for independence, which could certainly not be appeased during the dictatorship. Prezzolini, to whom any form of blackmail was alien, must have recognized as an ignoble barter his chance to express an opinion at the cost of forfeiting his independence. And that is why he never joined the fascist party and decided to leave Italy.

Such was the strange and inevitable destiny of a man who fought shy of any labels, who refused to be counted among the fascists, nationalists, reactionaries, conservatives, liberals, or anarchists, and who never identified himself with, nor belonged to any group, ever remaining just “Prezzolini”. He therefore had to pay the price for being “afascist” – as he defined himself, in an interview on Italian-Swiss television in January 1982 – in this way, thereafter, earning himself implacable enemies and harsh criticism for refusing to belong anywhere. «I have never

voted, nor belonged to a party, and have prided myself on siding with persons of genius and character. Character and genius those were the things that mattered to me. I did not care whether someone was a catholic, a protestant, or an atheist ...».

And what mattered to him, the mission that he identified as being that of intellectuals vis-à-vis fascism in his letter to *Rivoluzione Liberale* dated 28th September 1922 was «that of [...] clarifying ideas, emphasizing values, and – leaving aside all strife – rescuing a heritage of idealism, so that it may again bear fruit in the future. Every cobbler must stick to his last».

To live by one's work, as an affirmation of pride, independence, and dignity – these were values that he considered superior to

ness, without concern for the consequences: «[My brother], who was always attracted by society, heeded other people's views, while I recoiled from this and delighted in contradicting others».

After 1923, Prezzolini was given various assignments in Paris and New York, where he took up permanent residence from 1929 on. First of all appointed visiting professor at Columbia University (1929), and then Director of Casa Italiana (1939-1940), and, lastly, Professor Emeritus (1948), he was busily employed as a cultural mediator until the end of the Second World War. Beginning in 1953, he spent brief stays in Italy, not leaving the United States for good until 1962, to go and live in the Province of Salerno, at Ravello and Vietri sul Mare.



intelligence itself – transparent honesty and rejection of any petty conspiracy: these characterized his behaviour throughout his life. «Two of Prezzolini's qualities above all won me over: his integrity and his character. He always got to the point, without any beating about the bush or misgivings. He was relentless and lucid, [...] prickly and caustic, he always enjoyed saying and writing what he thought», is Indro Montanelli's judgement.

For the rest, Prezzolini himself, in the first pages of his autobiography *L'italiano inutile\**, chose to emphasize that, ever since he had been a child, he had taken pleasure in expressing his opinions with brutal frank-

Prezzolini during  
his stay in Paris  
(1925-1928)

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\*Literally: "The Useless Italian"



## Prezzolini, *Lugano and Switzerland*



After six years, in February 1968, Prezzolini left Italy and moved to Switzerland. His decision to do this was probably a difficult one and a step that he had to force himself to take, as we read in the entry dated 14th February 1968 in his *Diario 1942-1968*: «it is too late for man of eighty-six to change his residence and life-style. I have been forced to do this. In Italy, I no longer feel I know where I am. I need a country where *yes* means *yes*, and *no* means *no*, and not one where, as in Italy, *yes* and *no* mean *perhaps* or *neither yes nor no*».

Dissatisfied and disappointed by the situation in an Italy where he felt out of place, he therefore looked for somewhere else to live, somewhere more suited to his character, and found it in the peaceful environment of a small flat in Via Motta, in Lugano. He took up his abode here in order to continue to devote himself, with renewed vigour and with the argumentative drive he had always possessed, to his work as a publicist and writer. This somewhat secluded dwelling was probably the ideal sort of privileged observation-post for a man like him, who felt the need to have an accurate picture of Italy and the world and to be able to describe it in the fullest freedom and detachment, uninfluenced by local rhetoric or party demagoguery.

This was perhaps the main reason why Prezzolini's stay in Switzerland became increasingly positive as time went by. On the banks of the Ceresio he must have felt completely at his ease: so much so, indeed, that Lugano became for him the country of his adoption.

«My baptism took place in a way that I consider almost a miracle and certainly mysterious. Here, in brief, is what happened. At the end of one of my little lectures, I was given a kiss by a lady. I did not know her. She did not say anything to me. But I felt that she represented the whole of Lugano. She was one of a group of other women. She was very beautiful. But when she kissed me, I had the wit to say: "Now I regret being ninety years old"; she then disappeared amid a flurry of skirts. I do not know who she was. I was unable to ask her. She was like some

apparition, and I wondered whether there existed in Lugano certain impish spirits who liked to play jokes on foreigners. It is not usual, when one is ninety, to be given a kiss by a respectable woman who has been sensitive to one's words.

«But the worst part came afterwards, and I am sure it was no fault of hers. Because I was then assailed by a series of misfortunes, seizures, heart attacks, sciatica, and attacks on my physical and mental well-being, with a feeling that I might die, which I have always had, and this prevented me from searching for that lady who had been the harbinger of so many upsets, silences, and dreams. [...] Of all my 'contacts' with foreign civilizations, that of Lugano has a special place in my heart, like some enigma. But it turned me into a citizen of Lugano».

That is what he wrote on 17th June 1978 in the *Gazzetta Ticinese*, a local magazine in which, every week, he produced a column whose title spoke volumes: *La bruschetta*\*. For these contributions exhale the typically Tuscan flavour of his irony and rudimentary wisdom, as in the phrase «the sharp pungent flavour of garlic and the softer delicacy of health-giving olive-oil» of the "bruschetta".

As the place where he lived must have appeared to the eyes of old Prezzolini, and how it meant for him the peace and serenity he had found at last, is revealed by the piece published, again in the *Gazzetta Ticinese*, on 6th October 1979, which was certainly more than just a brilliant and original description of a piazza, its city, and its inhabitants.

«The sun rose this morning, unmasked by any clouds. "This evening", I said to myself, "there's going to be a show in the Piazza". [...] The piazza in the centre of Lugano, which is the most important of its various piazzas, and is called Piazza della Riforma. [...] In the Piazza della Riforma, when the weather is good, a great celebration is held in the afternoon. Foreigners, citizens of Lugano, and people from other parts of Switzerland are invited.

\*A piece of toast flavoured with garlic and olive oil, typical of Tuscan cuisine.



«The 'festa' is celebrated in five cafés or 'chiese', some of which are so close together that only the waiters can pick out customers from their cafés. It is an occasion for much conviviality and a fine sight.

«In the meantime, lots of onlookers cross the piazza, walking hurriedly as though to give the impression that they have something urgent to do. I believe that they have come to see this sight, for I notice that they all take a look at the little tables, overflowing with drink and animation. That is why I call Piazza della Riforma on fine days *Lugano's playhouse*. On these days, a jolly company of amateur actors personify liberty, plenty, greed, and the pleasure of company and conversation. Few of them smoke, but occasionally one sees a cloud of bluish smoke rising from a table and dispersing, after twisting around a few times through the air – and that sums up what happens. For nothing ever happens. These are well-behaved people, who hardly ever raise their voices, young lovers who are content to hold hands, married couples who, being used to holding hands by now, contemplate their spouses with an attitude of vague possessiveness, and, lastly, solitary individuals who sit there meditating on their experiences. Someone may even thumb through a newspaper, held erect on one side by a stick, spreading it out before him to read the day's news. Generally, those who read are Germans, or at least people who know the language. I have seen the occasional person reading, one after the other, the five daily newspapers published in this peaceful town, but those pages are far more full of resounding voices than all the streets in the vicinity.

«The five cafés add up to a crowd that feels like an orchestra, though without any conductor. This mass of people consumes goodness knows how many litres of beer and goodness knows how many kilos of various kinds of chocolate [...]. They do not realize that they are *on stage* and that we who are poor cannot join them except on rare occasions. About ten Swiss francs are sufficient to gain access to the company. But the show is free for the entertainment of passers-by, who emerge on all sides, because a lot of streets lead on to the piazza from the north,

south, east, and west. [...] For Lugano's piazza is a great theatre that never announces its performances. Its actors cost nothing – on the contrary, they have to pay to gain admission [...].

«Naturally, visitors to Lugano should remember that this theatre in Piazza della Riforma is not mentioned in the guide-books, does not announce its performances (each of which is different from the next), and that its only infallible poster is the sun, as it rises in the morning on a calm lake amid majestic mountains.

«What scenario could be more beautiful? What improvised acting more successful? There is no danger of any bombs being thrown. Even the anarchists have written for Lugano a beautiful song whose words and rhythm are full of popular appeal: *Addio, Lugano bella...*».

It is impossible to draw a picture that is both short and comprehensive of Prezzolini's active participation in the life of the town of Lugano, or to sum up in few lines his many articles on the Canton Ticino, Switzerland, and their problems that appeared in the columns of many newspapers – both Swiss and Italian – during the years he spent there.

However, it is worth recalling that, ever since the beginning of the century, Prezzolini had made frequent contact with intellectuals and exponents of the culture of those parts of Switzerland where Italian is spoken, and that he was especially interested in the moral and cultural situation in Canton Ticino. Thus, Lugano appears for the first time among Prezzolini's papers in 1907, in a letter from Giuseppe Rensi, then editor of the Lugano journal *Coenobium*, only to recur more and more often between 1908 and 1915 in his correspondence with Rosetta Colombi, Angelo Oliviero Olivetti, Eduard Platzhoff-Lejeune, Arcangelo Ghisleri, Francesco Chiesa, Guglielmo Canevascini, and Teresa Bontempi.

It was the latter, an elementary-school teacher and kindergarten inspector, who played the essential part of mediator between the then editor of *La Voce* and Canton

Ticino. As editor of the journal *L'Adula*, the official organ of Italian culture in Switzerland, Bontempi raised the question of the cultural identity of the Italian-speaking regions of Switzerland, an identity that she supported and championed – in a tone that was “perhaps overwrought” and whose destiny was “certainly ill-fated” – against the increasing threat of foreign infiltration.

Prezzolini fully supported these claims and took the trouble to publicize them with a series of contributions on the subject in the pages of *La Voce*. Especially worth recalling are the articles *The redemption of Ticino* (18th July 1912), *An Italian University in Canton Ticino* (25th July 1912) and the special issue of 18th December 1913, entirely devoted to the Italian-speaking Swiss canton.

What emerges from these pages is above all the firm conviction of the Italian nature of the Ticino, unambiguously and uncompromisingly defined as “Republican Italy” and “an offshoot of Italy”. This was, then, a part of Italy beyond its frontier, about which Prezzolini added: «its traditions are Italian not Swiss, and the years of its reawakening (1814 and 1830) are the years of Italy’s reawakening. Its heart beats with heroism when heroes’ blood courses through Italian veins. And again, in 1848 and after, when men from the Ticino fought for Italy!» (*The redemption of Ticino*, in *La Voce*, 18th July 1912).

Thus Prezzolini makes his position clear: the “redemption” of Ticino must be regarded as the realization of a cultural identity rather than emancipation in a political sense. «They say: the Ticino is an unredeemed country. Unredeemed certainly, but in a different sense from that in which we use the term. It is not a country to be annexed: neither has Switzerland redeemed it, having accepted it as a canton that was previously a subordinate territory; nor can Italy redeem it by making it an Italian province. The Ticino is an unredeemed country, because it has to redeem itself of its own accord. There is no true redemption except that obtained from within, by solitary endeavour. The Ticino must redeem itself, on its own. [...] It has no intention,

nor must it be induced to achieve union with Italy but, for such intentions not to manifest themselves, the language, Italian culture, and Italian people must be treated with due respect in Switzerland: Italians must not be the last of the confederate peoples. [...] Only by reawakening [...] awareness that the highest level of culture is as necessary as the intermediate and the lower, as trade and industry, so that a country may have a soul and be respected by the others will it be possible to repair the Ticino’s malaise. The Ticino must reconnect with Italy the veins and arteries of culture that no frontier can ever break; that, through to the very heart of the Val Leventina, there may course a flow of Italian words and thoughts and pictures. And this campaign for Italian identity must find concrete form in a demand, in sacrifice, in action, linked with a tradition». (ibid.)

Following these campaigns of his in favour of the Ticino’s Italian identity, Teresa Bontempi and Guglielmo Canevascini, in July 1914, invited Prezzolini to Lugano, to talk on the subject of *What Italians think about the Canton Ticino* in a lecture of which no precise documentation can be found among the Prezzolini papers, nor any news item in the local press of the day. Six years later, on 7th March 1920, Prezzolini returned to the Ticino, this time at the invitation of the Scuola ticinese di Coltura Italiana for another lecture entitled *Italian Publishers*.

After that, until 1968, we no longer find any significant contacts between Prezzolini and Italian-speaking Switzerland. «The far-off days of his Florentine journal [...] had perhaps been remembered (by him) with some uneasiness, sixty years later, although, to tell the truth, there was absolutely no reason for remorse. On the contrary, recalling those days, which were full of adventure and would never come again, having been culturally and historically superseded by so many other events, must have rekindled [in him] mixed feelings of curiosity and nostalgia». (*Adriano Soldini*)

*Prezzolini, the Valtellina and the Banca Popolare di Sondrio*



**Giuseppe Prezzolini and Piero Melazzini**

in a photograph that appeared in the *Notiziario della Banca Popolare di Sondrio* in December 1980

If Prezzolini's links with Italian-speaking Switzerland were so close and richly documented by so many of his writings on the subject, the same can hardly be said of his links with Sondrio and the Valtellina. Nevertheless, on this subject too, there are some significant references and episodes worth recounting.

In fact, Prezzolini spent more than two years of his childhood in Sondrio, where his father Luigi, a typical conservative monarchist of the end of the nineteenth century, was Prefect from 12th June 1887 to 30th September 1889, a "cultured prefect" – as he is defined in one of the opening chapters of *L'italiano inutile* – and a friend of Carducci's, who incidentally came to see Prezzolini at his house in Sondrio on the occasion of one of his visits to the Valle Spluga.

Since those days, except for rare occasions to which reference is made further on, and which were quite fortuitous and of limited interest, Prezzolini's ties with the Valtellina had been severed. They were re-established almost ninety years later, at the instance of the Banca Popolare di Sondrio. Thus, on 23rd August 1976, in a letter in which Piero Melazzini, then General Director, invited Prezzolini to contribute to the Bank's *Notiziario*.

A week later, on 1st September 1976, Prezzolini answered Melazzini's letter saying "delighted to send you an article", followed by the question «but of what kind? I was in Sondrio as a small boy [...] but my memories would be of little interest – indeed scarcely enough for an article».

However, the piece, which appeared in the *Notiziario della Banca Popolare*'s December 1976 issue, was just a memory. It is the article of a man of ninety-five, recalling moments and episodes of long long ago, whose concrete details had all been lost in the mists of time, yet were incredibly clear and lucid in their significance. The Sondrio of his childhood is seen as a refuge, a return to the few true certainties of life; a juncture and a place on which to dwell, to take in, at a single glance, the beginning and end of a long existence, of life's journey, in full

awareness of its profoundest values.

In his letter of 12th November 1976, which accompanied the manuscript, Prezzolini states with sincere modesty: «I just jotted down whatever came to mind about a certain recollection I have of Sondrio. It's childish stuff. If you don't like it, return it to me please, because I was in a hurry and did not keep a copy. [...] I don't know whether you'll like it. But it is proof of my honest resolve not to let you down. I hope I have not abused your trust in me».

«*What does the word Sondrio remind me of?*

First of all, it reminds me of my first love. [...] There was a garden, which seemed to be mine, where I acquired my first impressions of seeds, flower beds, the time for sewing and the collection of more seeds for the next year. [...] Then, there was the noise of a river, which I heard referred to as Mallero, beside which there was a path over which, in the summer, trees grew that may have been plane trees [...]. A big canal, which separated the garden (from the other side, which was surrounded by low walls with railings) from someone else's property, where I could not go, because there was a big water-wheel that kept me out [...]. I do not now remember at all what there was on the other side of the canal, which rushed along until it reached some point that I did not know [...]. But beyond that canal, I saw somebody one day who smiled at me and encouraged me to talk. Who that little girl of my own age was I cannot say, but I think that at home I was told she was the daughter of the miller, from whose castle water issued forth after having caused the wheels to turn that ground the grain to make the bread that we ate. What I do know is that the little girl spoke to me and made me speak. [...] In those days I did not know what it was, and cannot say it was love, but certainly it was my first interest in a human being who was not taller than me (like my father), or smaller than me (like the cat), to whom I could neither give an order nor obey, but who nevertheless took an interest in me. Were her eyes blue? Were they green? Were they brown? I did not notice, because, at that age, everything that happens seems a miracle, and one pays no attention to it. It is

Manuscript of  
What does the  
Word Sondrio  
remind me  
of?, Prezzolini's  
first article for the  
*Notiziario della  
Banca Popolare* in  
December 1976

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Vorrei davvero dare un nome a quella  
bambina della sua età, ma non voglio inventar  
nulla di questa storia fragile, che sembra levitata  
come una tela di ragno, nel vento della quale  
sei, sei, sei, sei di 95 anni, ancora quelle  
immagini d'una bruna con un nastro di  
colore azzurro, le gambette nude, e un sorriso sul  
volto che pareva solo il benvenuto al v. g. u.

Sono certo che lo ~~partito~~<sup>rispetto</sup> quando mi parlo.  
Era bionda? era bruna? Non me ne ricordo.  
Ma fu la prima donna a cui parlai, con un  
certo senso nuovo di parlare e un'attitudine  
differente ~~dalla~~<sup>mia</sup> per qualche cosa di misterioso.  
Non era la cuoca, non era il guardame, non  
era la governante: non era un cane, né un  
gatto, né una gallina, con i quali avevo fatto  
conoscenza. Non era una bratella, non era una  
padre, non aveva nessuna potere sopra di me.  
Ma fu la prima volta che sentii quel qualche  
cosa di misterioso che si fa meraviglia  
e desiderio. Che cosa?

Il fondo non c'è stato nella  
differente nella mia vita. Più certo, più  
preciso, più immediato, più sottile, più  
coerente, più spaventoso (allo svelto)  
ma insomma sempre quello nel  
fondo di quella mia prima avventura con  
l'altro sesso, avvenuta in Soudano  
verso il 1887. Fa ridere questa data  
come fosse la pubblica capione d'un editto,  
o di una battaglia, o d'una incoronazione;  
ma per la mia memoria più importante  
di tante altre storie che mi ho dovute  
imparare a scuola o per mettere in  
un certo ordine imparziale gli esenti  
di quello che si è così via accadute.

È accaduto? Per me non erano  
salvo di quella ~~coerente~~ città.

Giuseppe Pizzolmi

an age at which miracles often happen and, afterwards, unfortunately, one gets used to them and good at getting them to happen, and so they are no longer miracles, even though we continue to call them that. [...] It was the first *woman* I had spoken to, with a certain feeling of novelty to be talking to someone different from me for some mysterious reason. [...] It was the first time that I had felt something mysterious that fills one with wonder and desire. What was it? After all nothing different had happened in my life. Something more certain, more precise, more immediate, more fragrant, more intense (at times), more frightening, but nevertheless something underlying my first adventure with the opposite sex, which happened in Sondrio in about 1887. [...] Did it happen? The only thing I'm sure about is that little girl».

Prezzolini would have liked to “give that little girl a name” without “making anything up in this delicate little story”. And precisely for this reason “people who wanted to find out I had done something wrong went to investigate” – as he himself related in the course of the interview on television already mentioned – and found that the little girl's name was Maria, that her father the miller was a certain Perego, and that the mill (that “castle” that stood up out of the water) was fed by the Malleretto, which flowed behind the garden of Palazzo Martinengo, which at that time was the Prefecture where little Prezzolini lived. From an article by Rosalia Seregni published in the *Eco delle Valli* on 12th April 1977, we learn that «Maria [...] died less than a month ago, at the age of 95» and that, for many years, she had been President of the Dame di San Vincenzo, and «was remembered by the people of Sondrio as something of a charitable institution, and that she had been very zealous and somewhat authoritarian – an active doer of good deeds».

A few days later, on 19th April, Prezzolini expressed astonishment at the discovery of the “little girl on the Mallerino” and added: «Unfortunately that dear person has died and now remains only in my mind and in my story. Such are the surprises of a man who has lived too long. I am sorry not to

have been to Sondrio in recent years. I wrote to the Prefect asking whether I could visit the place where the Prefecture had been when I was a child».

His desire to return to the Valtellina was repeated several times by Prezzolini in the course of correspondence with the Banca Popolare. In one of the first letters, dated 27th November 1976, we read: «I had a number of times thought of visiting Sondrio, returning to Lugano via the Engadine, as I had often done as a boy with my father in the horse-drawn coach, which was the only kind of transport there was; but, as with so many other plans one has, this too fell through, and I'm afraid it will remain one of those unfulfilled wishes, because I now no longer feel like travelling». Prezzolini insisted with Melazzini that he wished to hold a public meeting at Sondrio. But the fear that this might in some way endanger the precarious state of health of a man who was now almost a hundred years old made the then General Director, with the greatest regret, abandon the idea of the meeting and limit Prezzolini's involvement with the Banca Popolare to the publication of a few articles in the Bank's magazine.

Probably the sentimental recollection was not Prezzolini's only link with the city of Sondrio. Being an Italian who had been forced into voluntary exile, he perhaps saw in the Valtellina, which was of course Italian, but somewhat isolated and hidden away, the symbol of his need for “independence” from an Italy that he had bitterly criticized because he loved her so.

Since his childhood, Prezzolini's contacts with Sondrio had been very few and far between. Going through the index in the Prezzolini Archives at the Cantonal Library in Lugano, one seldom comes across place names in the Valtellina.

The first reference goes back to 29th May 1904, the date of two picture postcards (of Grumello Castle and the Bridge at Ganda), that the philosopher and pragmatist Giovanni Vailati, at that time a teacher at

the Royal Technical College of Como, sent the then joint editor of *Il Leonardo*.

More substantial and significant, however, was the correspondence between Prezzolini and Augusto Monti, a teacher at the “Giuseppe Piazzi” high school of Sondrio and the author of writings concerning conditions in schools at the beginning of the century, published in *La Voce*. In one of Monti’s 14 letters and postcards, sent between 14th April 1913 and June 1914, we find a very informative note on the relations between the two intellectuals and the state of cultural life in Sondrio at that time: «Dear Prezzolini, I have received *La Voce*: I had been expecting it yesterday, and was disappointed when it didn’t turn up. What can I say? Here one just has to make do between two deliveries of *La Voce* by commenting on the last issue and anticipating the contents of the next». (Monti to Prezzolini, 20th January 1914)

Lastly, there are the in some ways curious two letters that Arturo Bau, a second lieutenant in the Carabinieri and at that time stationed in Sondrio, wrote to Prezzolini on 1st and 8th February 1919. Expressing esteem and gratitude to the writer, Bau asked him for his authoritative opinion as to the possibility of publishing some of his wartime recollections and memoirs from the front.

After that there was a long gap. Contact, as we have seen, was not resumed until halfway through the seventies with an exchange of correspondence with the Banca Popolare and its Director Melazzini. Relations went beyond mere professional dealings over the Bank’s *Notiziario*, being markedly friendly in tone and in time developing into a deeper friendship, mutual esteem and sincere gratitude. The papers here contain many references. For example, the letter dated 24th December 1978: «Dear Melazzini, may I call you simply by your Christian name, as a friend, and leave out your titles?» and again on 31st May 1979: «In short, since I write few letters, keep this as a souvenir of someone who felt gratitude towards you. In the world of literature in all countries, gratitude is not all that common».

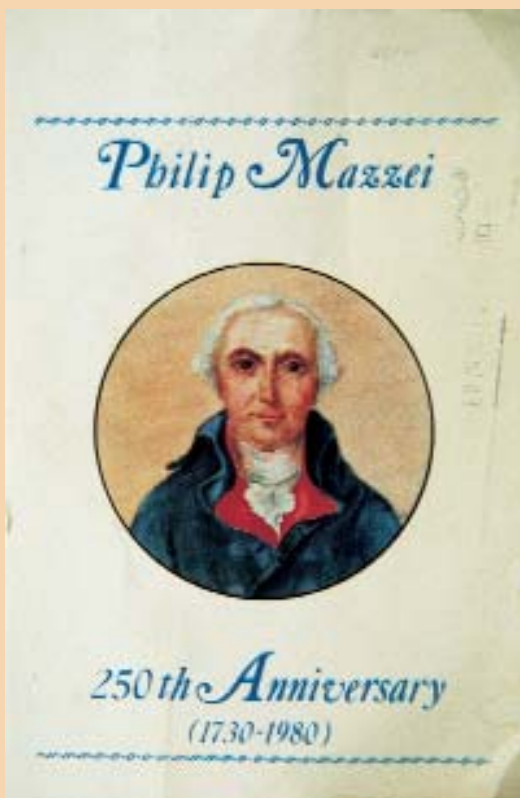
Melazzini received frequent invitations from Prezzolini to visit him in Lugano, at his flat,

where “meals are simple, the wine is Tuscan, and conversation is free” (31st May 1979). Melazzini came twice, first in October 1977 and then in July 1979.

It was during that second visit that Prezzolini made the Banca Popolare a most interesting publishing proposal. The idea was not a new one, but originated from a dream – somewhat strange, as many dreams are – to which Prezzolini refers in his letter dated 24th December 1978: «Last night I dreamt that I had agreed with you to set up in Sondrio a small ‘highly selective’ publishing house – we would print only 1,000 copies, containing rarities: for example, my correspondence with Moravia over a period of six or seven years, which is now kept at the Cantonal Library and has only been published by an American magazine that no one has heard of. When I woke up, it occurred to me that it might a good idea to tell you about this dream – which might well be fulfilled if I were not to be 97 years old in a month time».

In the event, the Moravia-Prezzolini correspondence was not published by the Banca Popolare di Sondrio, but, in 1982, by the publisher Rusconi. The Bank’s *Notiziario* did, however (August ‘79, December ‘80, and April ‘81), print three other articles by Prezzolini, taken from the *Bruschetta* column in the *Gazzetta Ticinese*, and which followed the three previously published in issues No. 12, 14, and 15. Prezzolini was always sincerely grateful for the Banca Popolare’s magazine, referring to its “dignity of form and choice of writers” (1st September 1976) and «speaking of it [...] in glowing terms. He was not so much interested in letterati as such as in the men themselves and their works. In you [Melazzini] he had, in his last years, found a new friend who indirectly carried him back to his adolescence», Prezzolini’s son, Giuliano, wrote on 13th August 1985.

The last letters that passed between Prezzolini and Banca Popolare di Sondrio go back to the beginning of 1982. On the occasion of the writer’s hundredth birthday, on 27th January, the General Director sent him a greeting, acknowledged with thanks in a postcard dated 3rd February. Not long after,



Back and front of the last postcard written by Prezzolini to Piero Melazzini on 3rd February 1982. He had just completed his hundredth year and died five months later.



on 14th July, Prezzolini died at his home in Lugano.

Those who knew him recall the enviable lucidity and inexhaustible vitality that were still with him when he died at the age of 100. Up to the very end he had taken an immediate and keen interest in politics and social and cultural events. His friend Giovanni Spadolini remembered him with the following words: «Prezzolini's memory was astonishingly vivid; he would recall anecdotes and events with disarming precision. I can see his desk, piled high with papers, notes, and various editions of his books, bearing witness to a life during which he had continued to work tirelessly».

It is not easy to sum Prezzolini up in a few lines, to summarize his character as a man and an intellectual, without leaving out any aspects of his complex, many-sided personality and of his activities, so unflagging and varied.

Perhaps the best way is to turn to him and his writings. There is one in particular, the last to appear in the Banca Popolare di Sondrio's *Notiziario* in April 1981 entitled *Stars or Clouds?* The clouds are a metaphor for human existence, for life as desired and lived by Prezzolini, always in quest of a hundred and one possibilities and an infinite variety of experiences, enjoying their singularity and almost savouring and exulting in their marvellous, unique flavour.

«I love the clouds and the way they appear on fine days, because they have *more imagination than the Stars*. The Clouds are poetry, the Stars are prose. Clouds have lives, like men, each with a different destiny, varying from a small power-puff, which appears timidly, to a large dark cloud that spreads out across the sky like a mattress and seems to assert its will against all the efforts of the sun. [...] The Clouds [...] are fantastic: they appear and then slowly unfold and warn us of the fate awaiting our happinesses –which also have a hold over us; next they may fragment, or dissolve, or, come apart, and so warn us that nothing lasts, nothing is eternal, and *tout passe, tout se casse*. [...] But Clouds! Each one has its own unrepeatable

story, for my eyes to watch, which will never be seen by anyone else who conjures up a thousand other events from those shreds of steam, which take on a hundred different shapes and suggest a thousand more by the moment; and they fill me with envy and seem to be inviting me, like them, to accept their destiny, which is transitory, but so varied, with its thousand different faces and bodies, and a thousand possibilities. And they always seem to be pursuing an ideal without ever finding a definitive form, and then, as though half-crazed and resigned they dissolve, and in the twinkling of an eye are gone, never again to be found in the sky».

Regarding the problem of religion and faith, which is never solved because of lingering doubts that refuse to go away, there is relevance in Prezzolini's enquiry into the mystery of death, which, at the end of a very long life, was his "companion at every moment", occupying his thoughts every day.

Again it is the Cloud that, rather than a metaphor, represents for him a refuge, the ultimate aim of a transfiguration. In October 1962, an article appeared in *Il Borghese* that was almost the premature will of a man who, although a non-believer, was never content merely to discover common-place truths, but always needed a heaven above.

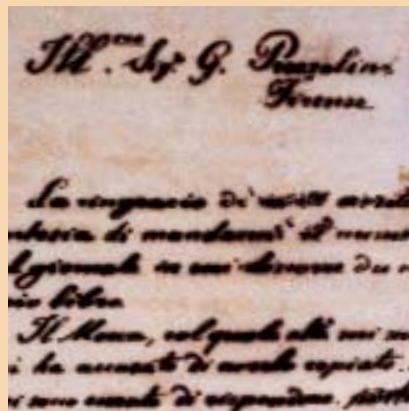
«Now when you see a little cloud wafting slowly across the sky, and stopping to look down on the world, now becoming a little thicker, now a little thinner, now with a fringe, now with a firm, clear outline, think that perhaps I have turned into that cloud, having escaped through a door or a window in the house, or through a crack, like the smoke from a cigarette, and am now recovering a distant innocence ...».

Pier Carlo Della Ferrera

Unless otherwise stated, the chronological references to quotations, placed in round brackets, concern letters from Giuseppe Prezzolini to Piero Melazzini.

The author of this article acknowledges with thanks the help given by Diana Rüesch of the Prezzolini Archives at the Cantonal Library, Lugano, the Sondrio Prefecture, and the "Pio Rajna" Civic Library of Sondrio.

*A letter from Vilfredo Pareto to Giuseppe Prezzolini*



Pareto correspondence includes a copy of a letter headed “Céligny, 17th December”- see index entry 95, register 13, in the collection of the Banca Popolare di Sondrio – written by Pareto to Prezzolini when the latter was little more than twenty years old. The letter, marked “Personal”, is a reply from the economist and sociologist to a letter to him from Prezzolini accompanying the latter’s article *L’aristocrazia dei briganti* (“The Brigand Aristocracy”) published in the magazine *Il Regno*, in its issue of 13th December 1903. In it Prezzolini claims to base the “Italian quality” of his thinking on that of Pareto and Mosca who “in their works have provided the scientific and philosophical justification” for the practical work that he was engaged in with his friends and colleagues.

*G. Prezzolini Esq., Florence*

*Thank you for your kindness in sending me the issue of the journal in which you refer to my book.*

*Mosca, with whom you pair me, has accused me of copying from him. I have not troubled to reply because I have not the time for such futile matters and, above all, because anything I have in common with Mosca is merely drawn from a heritage common to all. The theory that a country is always governed by a minority, like that regarding the succession of élites, are as old as the world. Whereas Mosca may be ingenuous enough to think they are his own - much good may it do him - I declare myself to be without claims of any kind to them. Dante himself, as one might expect of him, described the succession of élites and, poetically, notes that God*

Decreed the appointment of a general  
 mistress and guide  
 charged to see, when time was right,  
 that worldly wealth  
 change from race to race and with no  
 single dynasty abide,  
 and who therein would overcome  
 all human guile and stealth;  
 So that one race dominion hold,  
 while another in power wane [...]  
 Her changes one another succeed,  
 without reprieve,

spurred to haste by Necessity;

*And in many other passages, such as:*

**Seldom from the stock of human goodness  
 grow branches just as sound  
 etc., etc.**

*I have taken absolutely nothing from Mosca. Rather, I have taken a very great deal - and I have said as much, openly - from Jacobs and from Ammon, as well as a little from Lapouge. Scholars, for that matter, may see how, to some extent, I dissent from them and what I have contributed, for which reason I regard the publication of my book as not being a waste. That suffices me and I do not wish for more.*

*Turning to a different matter, I note that the journal you sent me is a nationalist one. By now I have entirely given up all involvement in active politics and devote myself just to science. I regard social phenomena much as I would chemical phenomena. Allow me, for this reason, just a few words on the nationalist phenomenon, it having been brought to my attention in this way.*

*They are assisted in the course they pursue by the fact that no hope of any great success lies in opposing socialism, which is a faith and a religion, with another faith and another religion. Nor shall I repeat to you what, as to nationalism, I wrote in *Systèmes socialistes*.*

*Conversely, in the specific case of Italy, there is a stumbling block to which those concerned, I imagine, must have given some thought. The example of the war in the Transvaal shows that a war today would cost five billion or so, at least. Italy does not possess so much money, nor, for a long time, will it. There will, therefore, be no war outside Europe, while a war within Europe would cost even more, and Italy cannot undertake that on its own. So, if in their journal they give prominent space to the idea of war and expansion they take a route that leads to an impasse. There is a danger, too, in always referring to war without ever declaring one, of looking like a chorus in an opera : “Let’s away!”, it sings, without mak-*

*ing any move to go. War and expansion may be uppermost in our thoughts, but utterances about them must be few - as with matters holy.*

*On the other hand there is a task - one you can really get your teeth into - in heaping ridicule on humanitarianism, tolstoyism, and on other inanities destructive of present middle-class society. In Florence they have a fine tradition to follow, the one going all the way back to "Fanfulla" at the time of Avanzini and Collodi.*

*Only in Florence, not just because of the language but also because of Florentines' sharpness of wit, can such a journal be launched.*

*Living abroad, I have reached the conclusion that if as yet we Italians, at least in part, have stood back from the frenzy of conversion to the "isms" the merit lies mainly with our sense of the ridiculous. But that sense has to be cultivated and in so doing, I believe, a rich harvest may be garnered. What, through one ploy, has been wrought by works like Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* you can undo, through another, by justly deriding such inanities and, once the veil is lifted, revealing humanitarian idols in their loathsome nakedness. Had that been done in time, perhaps the "good judge" in France would have had fewer imitators in Italy. It is through art, and through literature in particular, that the most stinging attacks should come. Our good middle-class citizen, about to go soft over a prostitute or thief, will stop short, assailed by the suspicion that he commits a folly, when stung by the raucous laughter of those who see things as they really are.*

*That, I may add, is the way to attract readers and "Fanfulla", in the old days, flourished so long as it steered that course.*

*One more thing, and then I shall have finished. I do not know why you say you disagree with me in describing the new aristocracy as brigands. I have never said otherwise. Indeed, I have explicitly warned that an aristocracy might be an aristocracy of brigands. Most aristocracies started out that way. Similarly, we are not the least in*

*disagreement in holding that "the aristocracy that might emerge would merely be a copy of today's middle class, except with some of the clichés changed and a few odd superstitions in place of others". That precisely is my own view, and in *Systèmes* I expounded it.*

*Change in Italy is less advanced than in France or Switzerland and for that reason the middle class there is less diseased than in those two countries. If, however, its downhill career is not checked, it will continue its descent and will plumb the same depths as the French and Swiss middle classes. The same holds true for the English middle class. See if events do not bear this out.*

*I only really understood this phenomenon after being able to observe it from the outside. In Italy it partly escaped my attention because it is, as I just said, far more hidden than in other countries or, to be more exact, it was so when I was in Italy. In 10 years it has come on a lot and now the phenomenon it very plain to see.*

*Forgive me for this long letter.  
Yours devotedly,*

*Vilfredo Pareto  
Céligny (Geneva) Switzerland*

The letter reproduced here comes from the collection, held at Lugano's Biblioteca Cantonale e di Storia Patria, which includes 14 letters from Pareto to Prezzolini and reveals fairly clearly all the divergences, difficulties and misunderstandings with which, throughout, their cultural relationship was fraught. An insight is provided by the observations of Giovanni Busino, who identifies the reasons for what might, with good reason, be viewed as a relationship that was never a success: «One thing, however, is certain: there was no meeting of minds as between Pareto and Prezzolini, in either a literary or a figurative sense. Nor could there have been. In the eyes of Pareto, Prezzolini was a practical man, a cultural organiser, a disseminator of ideas and, as such, was constantly in search of new and different ideas. Prezzolini, accordingly, is

hardly ever quoted in Pareto's works, concerned as they were only with what never changes. In the eyes of Prezzolini and Papini, Pareto's works were important to the extent that they vindicated the political and cultural design to which they had devoted their energy. Pareto's theoretical constructs were of little interest to the Florentines, whose sole concern with the former was their ideological usefulness and their immediate practical implications. [...] Pareto and Prezzolini had little in common. They deceived themselves into thinking they could travel part of the way together. But they very soon realised that each had to go his separate way alone. Pareto pursued his lonely, rough-hewn path through the social sciences. Prezzolini, on the other hand, continued buzzing about, like some "solitary" bee, among cultural flowers of ever more bewildering variety».



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