



BOOKS

The Poetic Gutter Slang of Rome

By ERIC ORMSBY

Outwardly his life is one of stinging respectability. He is the devoted husband of a wealthy widow, a doting father, sometime functionary in various governmental ministries, president of a high-minded literary academy, and the author of various elegant and inoffensive poems in the tame manner of the day. But secretly, he composes hundreds of coarse and cynical sonnets, all in the pungent patois of the Roman streets.

He writes these compulsively. In a single year, he produces no fewer than 391 sonnets, more than one a day; over the six-year period of his greatest activity — between 1831 and 1837 — he completes some 1,950 of his scabrous little

The streets and byways of Rome, in a particularly turbulent period of its history, surge through these impeccable sonnets.

songs. He writes for the desk drawer; only one poem is published in his lifetime. In his will, he stipulates that they be burnt unread after his death but this seems an afterthought. Earlier he'd bragged, "I am resolved to leave a monument that shows the common people of Rome as they are today."

This unusual sonneteer was Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (1791-1863). If his eccentric "monument" to the people of Rome resembles some bird-bespattered gargoyle more than any heroic bronze, his "Roman Sonnets" nonetheless represent one of the uneasy glories of modern Italian literature. To turn such poems into English would seem an impossible venture: How to reproduce not only the ripe gutter slang Belli employed but do so within the chastely classical form of which he was such a master?

In "Sonnets" (Oneworld Classics, 177 pages, \$15), English poet Mike Stock succeeds surprisingly well both in respecting Belli's original form, rhymes and all, and in conveying the full range of his exuberant vulgarity. Mr. Stock provides the original Romanesco text on facing pages, an excellent essay on Belli's life and times and a good bibliography of previous attempts to translate him — most notably by the polyglot English novelist Anthony Burgess and the great modern Scots poet Robert Garioch, 12 of whose suave versions he includes in an appendix.

Most of Mr. Stock's translations are, frankly, unprintable here. Belli is not merely obscene but lavishly so. He once said, "My pur-

GIUSEPPE GIOACCHINO BELLI

Sonnets

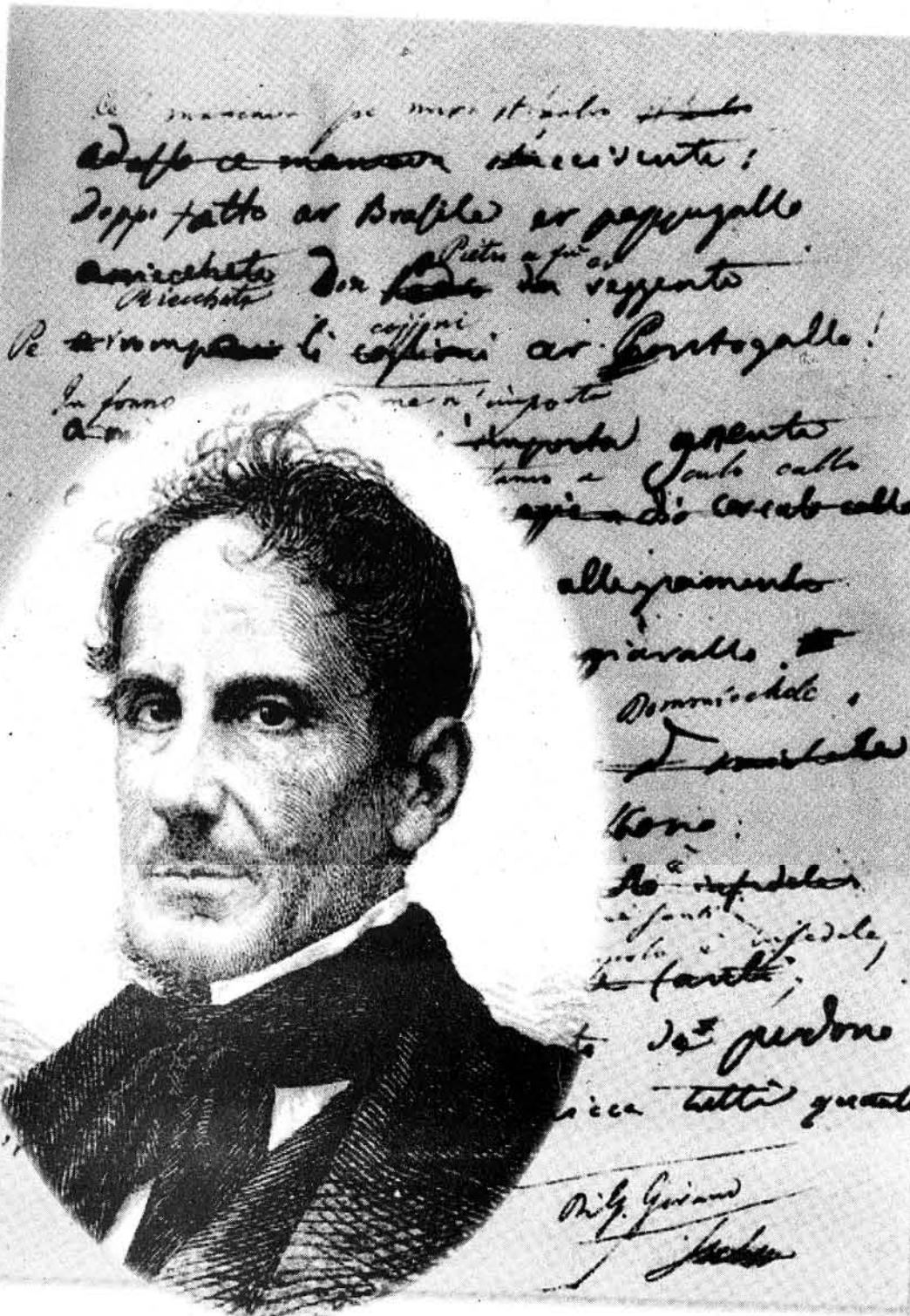
pose is to set down the words of the Roman just as they issue from his mouth," and he stuck to it. His sonnets are a cacophony of voices: Midwives, cobblers, baristas, petty thieves, lawyers, whores, actors, and shabby clergymen all have their say in his stanzas. Although Belli himself wasn't above fawning on high Vatican officials for favors, he took particular pleasure in giving vent to Roman anticlericalism, with especially lurid swipes at the pope.

Amid sonnets in praise of the virtues of lard or the problems of an apartment overrun by cats, Belli offers occasional philosophical ruminations, such as the following discourse, set in the mouth of a café proprietor:

The people of this world are much the same as coffee beans inside the grinder's mill: one's first, one's later and one's later still, but all are going down towards one doom. They often chop and change, the bigger beans jostling the smaller ones and jockeying, they cram themselves against the metal thing that crushes all of them to smithereens. And that's how people live within this world, all mixed together by a fateful hand that turns them over — round and round they swirl — and as they're turning, whether slow or fast, they sink towards the bottom clueless and go tumbling down the throat of death at last.

This is Belli at his most cynical and fatalistic, but it's how a jaded café owner might view the world, glimpsed through the dusty funnel of his whirring grinder. Beneath the obscenity and the frequent despair of the sonnets, especially those in the rough voices of the Roman poor, Belli struck another, more vibrant note. He created a kind of "human comedy" made up of voices in vivid soliloquy. The streets and byways of 19th-century Rome, in a particularly turbulent period of its history, surge through these impeccable sonnets, even if the sordid arias they sing would never be set to music by Verdi or Puccini. But the true protagonist of the poems is the Roman dialect itself, caught in the flitting instants of its utterance.

Perhaps this is the real reason why Belli kept his thousands of



SONNETEER Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (1791-1863) kept thousands of his sonnets locked away in his desk.

sonnets locked for years. Not because of their obscenity or blasphemy, but because they made blatantly public what had always been strictly private. He took the inflections of intimate disclosure, unwritten, reserved for family and friends, and set it to the classical measures perfected by Dante and Petrarch. Dante, five centuries earlier, had composed a treatise on "The Eloquence of Vulgar Speech," defending the use of Italian over Latin as a literary language. Belli took the notion further, cobbling his monument out of all the scraps and tatters of common speech. It is a subversive monument but one that still chatters with life.

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Down & Out in 1970s New York

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

Late in Irini Spanidou's new novel, "Before" (Knopf, 212 pages, \$23), the heroine, Beatrice, an editorial assistant at a publishing house, despairs of having to attend an obnoxious author's book party. "As for her prose," she observes of the just-published author, "it was somberly plain and sturdy — something like sackcloth, but with a tighter weave. Her novels had a dour realism that Beatrice would respect if the effect were not merely dreary."

This devastating assessment is cringe-inducing for the reader since it applies so precisely to "Before" itself. Ms. Spanidou in-

face of their victimization, seems complicit with the kind of pre-feminist ideology both authors explicitly reject. Ms. Spanidou's prose, both over-emotive and under-descriptive, also echoes Ms. Gaitskill's, but "Before" lacks the structural virtuosity and convincingly poetic language of "Veronica."

"Before" also feels like a recapitulation of Ms. Spanidou's last novel, "Fear." There is a similarly

IRINI SPANIDOU

Before

COMMENTARY

What's Your One-Year Plan?

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Goldin, said her client "would really stress that she doesn't expect anybody to spend a year growing their own food... She thinks if you can put parsley in your window box you're making a good start." Nor, she claimed, did Ms. Kingsolver extend her eat-local pledge beyond the allotted year. "She grows her garden, and they eat from their garden, [but] this was an experiment," Ms. Goldin said. "It was a gimmick, and it made a great story."

However, Ms. Kingsolver, tracked down by her assistant in the potato patch, put things differently. "It's no longer an experiment," she said. "It's the way we live. We couldn't go back to eating jet-lagged food."

For Ms. Kingsolver, at least, the exercise paid off. "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" has sold 120,000

The one-year experiment also appeals to a culture that believes in (or at least wishes for) spiritual renewal on the cheap.

copies since it was published in May, according to Scan, and word o ues to drive sale Sunday, the boo from no. 13 on Times hardcover The other auth Kingsolver's larg not been so luck sold 5,000 copi published in Apr and "Not Buyin sold a modest t 10,000 copies — their anti-consu is being listened headed.

The editor of "mony Books, ; Crown, John Gl didn't think the s Kingsolver's bool "We see James a ence as slightly Ms. Kingsolver's the real life of the trade paperback,"

But how many v aus can the ma Beavan's book w 2009, at which p himself late to t feast. Ms. Oswal she acquired "N last fall, the tenc sented itself.

"If I was lookin now, I would be and forced to thi about it," she said that Colin, in a w create the trend blog, "No Impac appearances on "America," "He is dience and becon ty, so by the time out he [won't b

FICTION

In Swan's Way



dancing with rage," leaves the concert hall with Kate, who happens to be an old friend of his sister's.

Their first drink together heralds the best of what's in this book. Kate, not needing to like the per-