

Theodore James Ell



Background

Theodore Ell took a BA (Languages) with First Class Honours in 2006 and then a PhD in 2010 in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney, where he is now an Honorary Associate. His research has centred on contemporary Italian literature, particularly the poetry of Florence from the middle of the twentieth century. Theodore has been awarded a number of scholarships including one of the 2008 ACIS-Cassamarca Scholarship for research in Italy. In 2009 he was made an Academic Associate Member (*Socio accademico corrispondente*) of the Accademia Pistoiese del Ceppo.

Since 2011 Theodore has worked in editing and publishing. At the end of that year he co-founded and became poetry editor of the biannual international literary journal *Contrappasso Magazine* with writer and principal editor Matthew Asprey. The journal publishes new writing across all genres (fiction, poetry, essays, interviews, memoir and occasionally visual art) and has reached its third issue. Its contributors to date have come from Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland, Russia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, Mexico, Chile and China. Theodore's own poetry has appeared in several Australian publications.

Research

Theodore has two main research interests. First is the notion of social engagement (*impegno civile*) in literature, not only its many forms but also its pressure on writers' imaginations and practices and the problems it causes when it is invoked in critical judgement. Second is the variety of ways in which literature has taken the connection with home ground – cities, towns, farmland, wilderness, the lie of one's land – as the source of an Italian sense of being in the world, a presence that gives depth and stability to an often turbulent and uncertain experience of history. This second interest is the main drive behind Theodore's new research activity, which is turning towards questions of belonging and alienation in today's Italy.

The focus on *impegno civile* underlined Theodore's early research at Honours level and much of his PhD. His Honours thesis compared activist interpretations of history in the novels *La Storia* by Elsa Morante and *Petrolio* by Pier Paolo Pasolini. His PhD thesis dealt with poetry and investigated the response of the so-called *terza generazione* of *ermetici* to the Second World War, particularly the writings of Piero Bigongiari (1914-1997). Bigongiari asserted that Fascism was not just a political phenomenon but a dangerous habit of mind that demanded ethical vigilance in the new post-war order, with each citizen reflecting on matters of conscience as well as material change. Around his philosophical writings Bigongiari also produced a large body of poetry that voiced the emotional and psychological traumas of the civilian wartime experience. Bigongiari's efforts to adapt the cerebral and mystical qualities of *ermetismo* to this end involved a complete revision of the style of his youthful writing.

Similar work was done by Bigongiari's contemporaries Mario Luzi (1914-2005), Alessandro Parronchi (1914-2007) and Alfonso Gatto (1909-1976). If the central motive of each poet's wartime writings were reduced to a single question, it could be said that Luzi's ethically adamant and lucidly structured ruminations ask, *How do we live with ourselves?* while Bigongiari's dark and troubled collages of imagery ask *How do we survive the night?* Parronchi, contemplating the war's destructive influence in the threatened

beauty of his surroundings, forlornly asks *What times are these?* while Gatto, in depicting the tensions of the Resistance, the search for the missing, dependence on strangers and the deaths of comrades or neighbours, asks *What is it to react?* Taken together, these outlooks reflect an immense number of human situations, experienced all over wartime Europe, concentrated into one place.

Since completing his PhD Theodore has published many articles on this subject, arising from his research on Bigongiari but also referring in depth to the three other poets. Themes explored include Bigongiari's unique method of building poetry sequences by elaborating motifs and his philosophical indebtedness to Leopardi. Theodore is also at work on a monograph, *A Voice in the Fire*, which will place Bigongiari's war writings in the context of his wider career and that of his contemporaries. During a research trip to Milan in January 2013 Theodore uncovered a lost essay by Bigongiari on the problems of being classified as an *ermetico* (which even in the 1940s was a misjudged by-word for *disimpegnato*). This essay will be published in the journal *Quaderni del '900*.

The work of the *terza generazione* is also the initial focus of Theodore's interest in the sense of 'groundedness' in physical places in Italian literature. Bigongiari, Luzi and Parronchi were steeped in the history and atmosphere of Tuscany for their whole lives and much of their work is taken up with a search for origins – cultural, existential, emotional, intellectual; the source of a human presence in a landscape; of an emotional and intelligent involvement with one's own culture; of the myths, fantasies, dreams and beliefs which colour the mental life in the earliest stages of memory. For Bigongiari, memory meant the intellectual inheritance of a civilisation as much as the recollection of one's own experience, and his major undertaking in the 1950s was a study of indebtedness to both. He travelled to ancient sites in southern Italy and Sicily (Magna Graecia), Greece and Egypt, producing a large body of travelogues. Theodore has begun translating them into English as they represent a nerve centre for understanding Bigongiari as a literary personality. Theodore's translations of selections from Bigongiari's essays on visiting Magna Graecia have been accepted, in two parts, by *Modern Greek Studies*. Part One appeared in 2011 and Part Two is forthcoming in the 2012 issue. Other translations will follow.

Another early result of this interest in 'groundedness' was a two-part translation, the first into English, of letters by the Italian Enlightenment scientist Giovanni Arduino, who in 1759 proposed the system of classifying the layers of the Earth's crust that governs all modern geology. This innovation was remarkable because it owed more to Arduino's eager exploration of his native Veneto terrain, scrambling up ravines and exploring cave systems for days, than to empirical experiments. The laboratory had shown mineralogists how different rocks interacted, but it took an intuitive experience of landscape to work out their grander order.

Theodore has recently begun collaborating on translations *a quattro mani* with Dr. Marco Sonzogni of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. The first results of this collaboration, translations of poems by Mario Luzi and Paolo Febbraro, have been published by the online periodical *Samgħa*.

Current and future projects

The year 2014 will mark the centenary of the birth of the three main members of the *terza generazione* of *ermetici*: Bigongiari, Luzi and Parronchi. Theodore is in discussion with the Bigongiari estate about the possibility of publishing an anthology of English translations of his work, the first yet compiled. There is also the possibility of expanding this volume to include similar surveys of the work of Luzi and Parronchi, which may involve collaboration with other translators. This project will mark the culmination of Theodore's work on the *terza generazione*.

Contrappasso Magazine's third issue is due for release in August 2013, with the fourth issue to come in November 2013. Steady biannual issues are projected for the next several years, with occasional special numbers on themes or featuring distinct kinds of writing.

After the initial work on Bigongiari's writing on 'grounded' origins and imaginative sources, Theodore has turned to considering the idea of alienation from those sources, exploring the nature of being detached from and even in conflict with one's primary reality and defining surroundings. The first expression of

this experience that Theodore wishes to investigate is the poetry of Swiss-Italian Giorgio Orelli (b. 1921), which dramatises the sense of alienation as a muted but threatening conflict just below the surface of nature. Natural phenomena seem to transmit some kind of message to the persona behind the poetry, but these messages cannot be understood. There is a sense of wrongness, failed responsibility and disconnection from basic principles – a state of mind that is recognisable and highly meaningful in the climate of misplaced social priorities in Italy today. Theodore will present a paper on this subject at the 2013 ACIS conference in Adelaide, as an initial discussion of his reading of Orelli. Items for publication will follow in 2014.

The theme of alienation will come into primary focus after Theodore's work on translating Bigongiari and his contemporaries concludes.

AFFILIATIONS

2011-present — Honorary Associate, Department of Italian Studies, University of Sydney

2009-present — Socio accademico corrispondente, Accademia Pistoiese del Ceppo

PUBLICATIONS

Books

2014 — *A Voice in the Fire: Piero Bigongiari's Poetry of War and Survival* (Leicester, UK: Troubador). Contract signed 15 August 2012. In progress.

Refereed articles

2013 — "L'ermetismo inquieto di Piero Bigongiari," accompanying Piero Bigongiari's unpublished essay *L'ermetismo* (1943), *Quaderni del '900*. Accepted 20 May 2013. Forthcoming.

2013 — "Piero Bigongiari, 'Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence,' first English translation, with Introduction – Part Two." Forthcoming in *Modern Greek Studies*, 2013 issue. Accepted 17 November 2011.

2012 — "Two Letters of Signor Giovanni Arduino, Concerning His Natural Observations: First Full English Translation, Part Two." *Earth Sciences History*, Volume 31, No. 2 (2012), 168-192.

2012 — "'Una vita della poesia': the early influence of Giacomo Leopardi on Piero Bigongiari." *The Italianist*, Vol. 32 No. 1 (April), 1-31.

2012 — "Conflicting motifs of destruction and endurance in Piero Bigongiari's *Rogo* (1944-1952)." *MOSAICI: St Andrews Online Journal of Italian Poetry*, Regular Issue 2 (April 2012): "Poetry in Conflict" <http://www.mosaici.org.uk/?articles=conflicting-motifs-of-destruction-and-endurance-in-piero-bigongiari-rogo-1944-1952>

2011 — "Piero Bigongiari, 'Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence,' first English translation, with Introduction – Part One." *Modern Greek Studies*, Vol 15 (2011), 64-88.

2011 — "Two Letters of Signor Giovanni Arduino, Concerning His Natural Observations: First Full English Translation. Part 1." *Earth Sciences History*, Volume 30, No.2, 267-286.

2010 — “La bicicletta Bianca e altre biciclette di Iacuzzi.” [trans Manuela Mancioffi] *Atelier: Trimestrale di poesia, critica, letteratura*, Anno XV: no. 58 (June 2010), 55-62.

2008 — “Piero Bigongiari’s search for strength along the Arno valley.” *Philament*, Issue 12, “Habits and Habitat,” June: http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament,issue12_contents.htm

Translations (Italian to English)

2013 — Paolo Febbraro, “The voice said” [translated with Marco Sonzogni]. *Samgha* (online journal of Italian culture), 22 June 2013. See: <http://samgharivista.com/2013/06/22/poetry-that-doesnt-let-go-the-rhymes-and-reasons-of-paolo-febbraro/>

2013 — Mario Luzi, “Nature” [translated with Marco Sonzogni]. *Samgha*, 31 May 2013. See: <http://samgharivista.com/2013/05/31/mario-luzi-natura-nature/>

2012 — Paolo Fabrizio Iacuzzi, “Patricidio a New York,” “Atlante senza nome del giardino” and “Il soldato Beslan.” *Contrappasso Magazine*, Issue 2 – Deecember 2012, 252-265.

2012 — Paolo Totaro, “Gente di Balmain” / “Balmain People.” *Contrappasso Magazine*, Issue 1 – August 2012, pp. 178-187. See also: <http://contrappassomag.wordpress.com/2012/07/25/from-issue-1-poetry-by-paolo-totaro/>

2011 — Paolo Totaro, “Gente di Balmain” / “Balmain People.” Paolo Totaro, *Collected Poems (1950-2011)*. Sydney: Padana Press, 2012, pp. 42-49.

2008 — “Through clenched teeth” (“A labbra serrate”), “Snows and tears” (“Nevi e lacrime”) and “Particulars” (“Particolari”) by Piero Bigongiari. *Philament*, Issue 12, “Habits and Habitat,” June: http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament,issue12_contents.htm

2006 — Mario Perniola, “Silence: The Utmost in Ambiguity.” In *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* Vol. 12, No. 4 (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/2>

Original poetry

2013 — “Turning circle,” *Cuttings, Issue 1: In Real Life* (October 2013). E-magazine – see <http://cuttingsjournal.tumblr.com/>

2013 — “Alone” and “Trekks and Dancers,” *Australian Love Poems 2013* (Melbourne: Inkerman and Blunt). Accepted 4 May 2013. Forthcoming.

2013 — “The cent,” *Cuttings, Issue 0: A Cosy Catastrophe* (February 2013). E-magazine – see <http://cuttingsjournal.tumblr.com/>

2012 — “Convalescence,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘Spectrum’, 12-13 May, p. 39

2011 — “Disappearance,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘Spectrum’, 19-20 March, p. 35

2010 — “This harbour,” *Sandstone*, Sydney University Press annual writing anthology, 2010. Website: <http://www.sydantho.com>

Reviewed by Kerry Goldsworthy, ‘Spectrum,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 15 – Sunday 16 January 2011, p. 34: “Among the contributors is a poet whose name I recognise, Theodore Ell, who continues to pursue with quiet excellence his gift for poetic form and metre.”

2008 — “Cold snap” and “Pardon the scherzo,” *Cellar Door*, Sydney University Press annual writing anthology, 2008.

Reviewed by Kerry Goldsworthy in 'Spectrum,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 3 – Sunday 4 January 2009, p. 24: “the standout talent is poet Theodore Ell, whose poems [...] show a loving familiarity with the history of poetry in English as well as great confidence and skill with poetic techniques and forms.”

GRANTS, SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

2007-2010 — Australian Postgraduate Award postgraduate stipend, University of Sydney

2009 — Wentworth Travelling Scholarship, University of Sydney (October-November)

2009 — Travel bursary, biennial conference of the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies, University of Auckland, New Zealand (see **Conference presentations**)

2009 — Postgraduate Research Support Scheme grant for expenses, University of Sydney

2008 — ACIS-Cassamarca Scholarship for research in Italy

2008 — Postgraduate Research Support Scheme grant for expenses, University of Sydney

2007 — PhD Research Travel Grant, Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney

2007 — Postgraduate Research Support Scheme grant for expenses, University of Sydney

2006 — *Settimana della lingua italiana nel mondo VI*, Italian Government international writing prize

2005 — Arts (Languages) scholarship for international exchange, University of Sydney

2004 — Countess E. M. Freehill Scholarship No. II for Italian II, University of Sydney

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS (SELECTED)

16-17 November 2012 — “‘With a full but soft emotion’: Byron, Berlioz, Schumann, Tchaikovsky and the paradoxes of poetic music-making.” *Romantic Conversations: The Human, The Inhuman and the Non-Human* (*Romantic Studies Association of Australasia* postgraduate symposium), University of Melbourne

25-26 November 2011 — “Giacomo Leopardi and the stagnation of Italian revolutionary feeling.” *Reflections of Romanticism and Revolution* (*Romantic Studies Association of Australasia* postgraduate symposium), University of Sydney

13-16 July 2011 — “Alessandro Parronchi’s songs for an unfriendly century.” Biennial conference of the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies, University of Melbourne

15-17 March 2010 — “Motifs of destruction and endurance in Piero Bigongiari’s *Rogo (1944-1952)*.” *The Second Mosaici International Conference: Poetry in Conflict*, University of St Andrews UK

27-28 November 2009 — “Heartache, fear and resolution in Piero Bigongiari’s *Rogo (1944-1952)*.” Annual conference of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy, Centre for Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London UK

6-9 July 2009 — “Inward-looking sovereignty: Piero Bigongiari’s hopes for European culture after the fall of the Axis.” Biennial conference of the Australasian Association for European Historians, Flinders University, Adelaide, 6-9 July

13-14 March 2009 — “Poetry, prophecy and testimony in Piero Bigongiari’s journey through Egypt.” *Enlightening Encounters: Italian Literature and Photography Through Time*, University of Warwick UK

18-21 February 2009 — “Quaderni ermetici: Piero Bigongiari, poetic motifs and black books.” Biennial conference of the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies, University of Auckland, New Zealand

22-24 May 2008 — “Una vita della poesia: Piero Bigongiari’s early understanding of Giacomo Leopardi.” Biennial conference of the American Association for Italian Studies and the American Association of Teachers of Italian, Taormina / Giardini Naxos, Sicily, Italy

18-19 April 2008 — “Piero Bigongiari, intellectual partisan and idealistic European.” *18 April 1948: Italy Between Continuity and Rapture*, University of Reading and the London Italian Institute of Culture, UK

1-4 July 2007 — “Ignorance is risk: Pasolini and the dark side of 1968 in Italy.” Biennial conference of the Australasian Association for European Historians, University of Sydney

RESEARCH AND RESIDENCE IN ITALY

2013 Jan — Florence and Milan: research for book manuscript, *A Voice in the Fire*

- Private manuscript collection of Andrea Kerbaker, Milan
- Fondo Piero ed Elena Bigongiari, Biblioteca San Giorgio, Pistoia

2009 Oct – Nov — Florence: PhD research residency

- Università degli Studi di Firenze
- Fondo Piero ed Elena Bigongiari, Biblioteca San Giorgio, Pistoia
- Archivio Contemporaneo “Alessandro Bonsanti” Gabinetto Vieusseux, Florence

2008 Jan – Jul — Florence: PhD research residency

- Università degli Studi di Firenze
- Fondo Piero ed Elena Bigongiari, Biblioteca San Giorgio, Pistoia
- Archivio Contemporaneo “Alessandro Bonsanti” Gabinetto Vieusseux, Florence
- Archivio Alessandro Parronchi, Università degli studi di Siena
- Centro Studi Mario Luzi “La Barca,” Pienza
- Centro Manoscritti, Università degli Studi di Pavia

Aug. 2005 – Feb. 2006 — Bologna: Undergraduate exchange, Università di Bologna

- *Filologia e critica dantesca* (Prof. Giuseppe Ledda), 30/30
- *Letteratura del Rinascimento: Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto* (Prof. Maria Branca Delcorno), 30/30
- *Letteratura italiana contemporanea – Elsa Morante, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Paolo Volponi, Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Prof. Marco Antonio Bazzocchi), 30/30 e lode