

Behind the Victors

Recensione a «The Dogs of Sinai»

Robert Gordon

Franco Fortini, *The Dogs of Sinai*, eng. transl. by A. Toscano, London, Seagull Books, 2014, pp. 140.

Franco Fortini's *I cani del Sinai*, translated for the first time into English as *The Dogs of the Sinai*, was published in late November 1967, only a few months after the lightning-quick Six Day War of June 1967 that inspired it. It is a difficult, defiant work, written in the moment- "in anger, with tensed muscles and extreme rage", as Fortini put it and so it is all the more remarkable that it has retained such personal and political resonance, as well as moments of genuine lyrical force, nearly fifty years on.

The book is a collection of twenty-seven prose fragments, in which Fortini (who died in 1994) addresses the geopolitics of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the submerged histories of violence and guilt that it has stirred up in Europe, without ceding ground to the ideological rigidities of either the official Left or the governing Right, or signing up to positions either – bluntly pro-Arab or pro-Israel.

They want to "file" me. These pages are my file.

To understand the electric charge coursing through *The Dogs of the Sinai*, we need to know something not only about the politics of the 1960s, but also about Fortini's own story, because the book is shot through with an autobiographical intimacy that is rare across his extraordinarily challenging oeuvre. Following a war spent between army service, exile in Switzerland, and participation in the antiFascist

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resistance, Fortini became a leading socialist intellectual of a fiercely contrarian and intimidatingly aloof kind. He helped to filter into Italian work by Brecht, Lukacs and Adorno in the 1950s, moved close to New Left thinkers and youth movements in the 60s, and all the while produced a body of calibrated and formally controlled poetry. Cutting across this rigorous intellectual and literary labour, however, erupting like an angry wound in *The Dogs of the Sinai*, is the often disavowed history of his childhood.

Fortini was born in Florence in 1917 as Franco Lattes. His Jewish father was a sometime anti-Fascist lawyer. In 1939, the year after Mussolini's anti-Semitic Racial Laws, he converted (conveniently, if not insincerely) to Waldensian Christianity, a step on the path to his later socialist materialism. Shortly afterwards, he took his mother's surname, Fortini.

His relationship with his part-Jewish origins was, in other words, deeply ambivalent – he later wrote of the “historical scars possessed by a European and Italian and *half-Jude* intellectual” – and this is part of what gives this book its intimate intensity. In snatched evocations of his father, broken in mind and body by Fascist thugs in 1925, in strange rituals and dances glimpsed at the Florence synagogue, in awkward memories of himself dressed up in the garb of Fascist Youth but still insulted as a “dirty anti-FascistJew”, he is relentless in his honest confrontation with his callow self.

There is no pathos or melancholy to this retrospection, though: “these pages”, he notes with a typical touch of acid cruelty, “are not an appendix to *The Garden of tire Finzi Continis*”.

Instead, the evocations of youth sit alongside his dogged refusal in 1967, to the horror of his Jewish family and acquaintances, to cede to the wave of knee-jerk solidarity with Israel and to tie it to Jewish memories of persecution.

One of the book's most efficacious aphorisms is against a rhetoric of memory that was already becoming pervasive, an obstacle to political action in the present: “memory works to flatten everything”. Instead, Fortini is forensic and devastating, as he dissects new anti-Semitism alongside Cold War hypocrisies and Western media manipulations surrounding the events of June 1967. He rejects conformism on all sides and elects instead, against all instincts of buried loyalty, to stand with the exploited and damned, with the

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victims of "all the forms of domination and violence of man over man... of which the massacre of the Jews is only an example". The "dogs" of the title, he explains in an epigraph, stand for all those who trail after the victors of any war; Fortini's vocation pulled him in quite the opposite direction.

This new edition, ably translated and edited, with a lengthy essay on Fortini's political theory, by Alberto Toscano, has the striking merit to have bundled in with the book a DVD of the sober, slow essay-film elaboration of *The Dogs of the Sinai* made in 1917 by Daniele Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, *Fonini/Cani*.

Franco Fortini's correspondence with the two filmmakers, also included, shows him grappling with the same issues a decade later, much as we still are today.

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