

Memories of Fernanda Pivano, A Truly Iconic Figure

Susannah Gold (October 16, 2009)



Fernanda Pivano died in Milan in August after a long colorful life as a translator and friend of many of America's best contemporary artists and writers. A memorial service for her at the Italian Cultural Institute brought back memories of an earlier time and renewed appreciation of her many great efforts on behalf of the US in Italy.

I remember the first time I ever heard the name Fernanda Pivano. It was December 1998. I was a reporter at Dow Jones Newswires in Milan and the Benetton Family was creating a library to house Fernanda Pivano's vast collection of literary works that she had donated to the Benetton Foundation a year earlier.

When I saw the invitation to the press conference which arrived on our fax machine, I asked to go



and write a story on this fascinating woman. At the time she was 81. I remember her lively conversation and the passion that she expressed about her collection, the authors, literature and life in general. It was infectious.

When I heard that she had died this past August at the age of 92, I went searching for the story I wrote. I haven't found the story but I did find the press photos that they gave us as part of the press kit.

Pivano was such a unique figure and played such a pivotal role in bringing contemporary American literature to Italy that is almost impossible to overstate her importance. Many diverse Italian writers and artists have credited her with changing their lives by allowing them a glimpse, in Italian, of what was happening on the other side of the ocean.

Renato Miracco, the Director of the Italian Cultural Institute organized a very moving and varied evening to commemorate her life and work. Among the speakers that night were Erica Jong, the writer, John Giorno, the poet, Jonas Mekas, the film director and Mauro Pagani, a renowned artist and musician. Each spoke movingly about what she had meant in their lives and careers and about who she was.

I regretted that I hadn't heard of her earlier or followed her career in more detail when living in Milan. It was a very interesting evening and somewhat unlike most New York events. I was touched beyond words and truly entranced with her life.

A film with Fernanda Pivano, "Farewell to Beat", was also shown. In 2001, she traveled to Hemingway's grave as well as to those of her beat generation friends with the movie director. She went to the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco and generally spoke about her life then and now. Of course I got teary as she was speaking about all of her long dead friends and how much they had meant her. She had been very close with Hemingway who she said was just a gigantic person. She noted that she felt like a pygmy next to him.

Watching her speak about Hemingway or Allen Ginsburg or Gregory Corso or Fabrizio De Andre' was taking a trip to another era. It seems almost like another century. I once ran into Fabrizio De Andrè at a bar in a hotel that I like in Milan, the Hotel Manin. I remember vividly being truly excited to see him and then saddened to hear of his death not long after.

Erica Jong was perhaps the most personal in her memories of who Pivano was and how much she missed her friend and confidant. Apparently the two had been friends for 30 some odd years. She said that Pivano hated hypocrisy most of all and that her wit and satire remained until the end. John Giorno read a beautiful moving poem that he wrote for her. It spoke of her light and life and moving forward. Jonas Mekas, the avant garde Lithuanian film maker, who is 87 years old, spoke of what an influence she had been in his life as well and how she had opened the way for avant garde film in Italy holding major shows in Turin. Mauro Pagani also spoke of his connection to her, mainly through his friend Fabrizio De Andre.

In the film, artists such as musician Luciano Ligabue told her how much she had meant to him. It was wonderful to see that during her lifetime she received the love and recognition that she deserved. I can't think of a similar US "literary figure" known for their translations and friendships.

Her take on translating was also fascinating to me. She insisted that in order to be a good translator, one needed to get to know the subject, not just their works. This approach seems to have worked for her. I think I will read the Beat Generation writers and Hemingway again in her honor.

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