

VOGUE

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VICTOR
SEALE



the
PRIME
of
LIFE

IGGY POP,
JOHN WATERS,
GIORGIO ARMANI,
MARTIN AMIS...

UNDEFEATED

A passer-by hails him with "Thank you for *IL GIORNO PRIMA DELLA FELICITÀ*", ("The day before happiness"), his latest novel. Slightly sheepishly,

ERRI DE LUCA

says: "Fortunately, that doesn't happen very often".

Born in 1950 in Naples, half-way through a "minor" century and on the shores of an equally minor sea, he was a stonemason for 20 years before publishing his first novel, "NOT NOW, NOT HERE", in 1989.

His prose style – taught, unpretentious, defiant – resembles the man.

Self-taught and an outstanding mountain climber, he knows how to balance on lofty ridges, where the air is rarefied and where nothing unessential is said.

BY VIRGINIE LUC
 PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHAN CRASNEANSCKI
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UNDEFEATED
 VOICE HOMEN INTERNATIONAL

Cashmere sweater
 HERMÈS
 Cotton shirt
 DOLCE & GABBANA
 Wool trousers
 ENZO
 Wool hat
 MAISON MARTIN
 MARGIELA



What is time? How does it show itself to you?

Time is a technique for making appointments with yourself. I try to be punctual, to arrive on time, and not make people wait. And I force myself to have that sense of looking forward to things that is essential to any guest, and to leave when your presence is still welcome. So I try to stop myself in time. My unit of measurement is a day, which begins, not when I wake up, but with the first line I read.

And that first line is in the Bible, isn't it?

Why turn to the Book each morning?

The first line I read each day is in ancient Hebrew, the language in which the revelation of monotheism was first expressed. In its original format, the language is still incandescent. I frequent it daily, and it has become like physical intimacy to me. I begin by reading sentences that flow in the opposite direction to ours, from right to left. This generates a friction between my eyes and the letters. Outside, on the other side of the window, the night is still dark, and when I finish reading, day is starting to break.

Is time an enemy or an ally?

For many years I worked as a labourer in the construction industry. During that time I got to know a workmate of my own age. He had previously been in the Casabianca, and had policed demonstrations. During those years, I was an activist on the revolutionary left. We went back over the times when we faced each other as street-fighting enemies. At first, there was a rush of hate, but then we smiled at each other. Passing time had allowed two enemies to become friends.

You talk of "writing time" as "time saved".

Saved from what? Futility?

My hands gave me my dignity. They fed me. After a day on the construction site, I would fold up my thoughts at the slow pace of this hand. I used to write at night to catch the day before it was lost forever. The act of writing had the power and the ambition to counterbalance my day as a labourer, sold in exchange for a salary. It was a form of stubborn resistance against the grind of labouring. In my body, it rekindled the last spark of energy and in so doing legitimised the rest of the day. All had not been lost. It was the exact opposite of work. A time of celebration.

Why do you write?

I tell stories about things that have happened to me and around me. I hardly make anything up at all. I talk about the lives and people I have come across in the past. Naples and its inhabitants gave me the cues for pace – sighs of relief, outbursts of rage, fits of chesty coughing and gusts of laughter, and all that salt air swallowed in silence. When I'm writing, I'm still with them all for a second time, because we all meet up again and no-one is missing. I do not have the gift of faith and I won't embarrass anyone again in an afterlife. So I embrace them as I write. I don't resuscitate the past,

I don't have the power. I conjure it up.

Is writing a form of prayer?

Not for me. I don't have heaven to turn to. I am of my time just as a story is of a book, and when I reach "The End" it will not sound like "Amen". A prayer always knows who it is addressed to, not my writing. Isn't it addressed to your reader, by inviting him or her to enter the book's space-time continuum?

At the point when I'm writing a book, I'm not talking to a reader. I mumble it to myself. It's a whispered story, where the sentences are as long as the breath needed to say them. I'm still within myself and the people I'm talking about. The reader only comes later, when I stop, right at the end.

Do you feel nostalgia for time gone by?

I am totally lacking in any sense of nostalgia. I do not want to return to any stations back along the line, to any embrace, or any sunset.

What does death mean to you as a mystic and atheist?

I do not see myself as a mystic at all and I fall short of being an atheist, I'm simply someone who doesn't believe. I exclude divinity from my own life, not from that of others. An atheist is someone who deprives the other of that possibility. That said: death is punctuation mark, two dots, one above the other "i". And then nothing.

What is happiness like?

For me, there's happiness to be experienced in many instants, in the first cup of coffee after waking, in the Hebrew word that resounds in my empty head, in my body as I'm negotiating a difficult stretch on the rock-face, or in the first flower on the almond tree, blossoming in the depths of winter. Happiness is a fragmented thing for me, experienced day-by-day, and never to be put off till the next. There are also solemn states of happiness, but they come with pitfalls and they can carry you along with them. They disrupt hierarchies of importance and priorities, and as such they are, literally, states of happiness that subvert your existence. They can also demand life itself. I've experienced such states and I advise against them. But whether great or small, they are not the basis of a person or a life. The words "The pursuit of happiness", enshrined in the American constitution, are no more than a poetic flourish inside a legal code. When the powers that be start to talk about happiness, I catch a whiff of war.

Is the time of maturity synonymous with wisdom?

Is wisdom synonymous with renunciation?

Certainly not. On the contrary, maturity should allow us to take more considered risks, face down more clear-cut challenges. If not, then maturity equates with withdrawal. In the Old Testament, we find the "Wisdom of the Heart". That's where it should be. Otherwise, wisdom is no more than calculation, a commercial totting up of assets and liabilities. Maturity has to lean out over the parapet, to measure itself with the void. —

