

“A Great Love, a Great Pain”: Saba’s Lesson on Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici

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ABSTRACT

*Umberto Saba (1883–1957) visse i decisivi anni della sua riscoperta come poeta e autore centrale nel panorama di rinnovamento culturale dell’Italia del secondo dopoguerra tra Firenze, Roma, Milano e Trieste. Proprio mentre si trovava a Roma e a Milano ebbe importanti contatti editoriali: nel giro di pochi anni uscirono *Mediterranee* (Milano, Mondadori 1946), le *prose di Scorciatoie e raccontini* (Milano, Mondadori 1946), la terza edizione del *Canzoniere* (1900–1947) (Torino, Einaudi 1948), il fondamentale saggio *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (Milano, Mondadori 1948) e venne avviata la pubblicazione dell’opera omnia, in quindici volumi (Milano, Mondadori 1949–1959). In questo periodo, Saba entrò anche in contatto con grande parte della poesia di quegli anni, in particolar modo con due poeti allora appartenenti a una generazione ben più giovane, Vittorio Sereni (1913–1983) e Giovanni Giudici (1924–2011), nelle cui poetiche molto agirono la lezione e il modello sabiani.*

*Umberto Saba (1883–1957) spent the years of his rediscovery as a central poet and author in the panorama of cultural renewal in post-war Italy living between Florence, Rome, Milan and Trieste. Indeed, precisely when he lived in Rome and in Milan he had important editorial contacts: in that period, he wrote and published *Mediterranee* (Milan, Mondadori 1946), the *prose of Scorciatoie e raccontini* (Milan, Mondadori 1946), the third edition of the *Canzoniere* (1900–1947) (Rome, Einaudi 1948) and the fundamental *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (Milan, Mondadori 1948). In the same period, he also started the publication of his complete works, in fifteen volumes (Milan, Mondadori 1949–1959). Saba also encountered a large part of the poetry of those years, in particular two poets then belonging to a much younger generation, Vittorio Sereni (1913–1983) and Giovanni Giudici (1924–2011), in whose poetics Saba’s lesson and model were very influential.*

I DO NOT CLAIM ANYTHING NEW IF I ARGUE THAT, IN RE-ESTABLISHING contact with some of the leading authors of Italian literature of the twentieth century and of the most recent contemporaneity, it is almost imperative to ask ourselves with curiosity what kind of relationship is there between

literary facts and biographical data, and in which way does it unite and at the same time distance life and literature. There is no author more than Umberto Saba who is ready to be investigated along this singular fault line that comes to be created between life and writing; indeed, Saba was at the same time the promoter of a modern and innovative “honest poetry” (SABA 2001, 674) and a great mystifier of himself and his own history, at least in the fundamental self-critical book *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (1948) and in the novel *Ernesto* (written in 1953, but published only in 1975). Saba also succeeded in transmitting to young generations of poets — from Sandro Penna to Vittorio Sereni, from Giovanni Giudici to Giorgio Caproni — his teaching as much on the literary plan as on the biographical one. To better understand the influences of Saba on at least two of these poets of the second part of the century, Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici, it is useful to focus on the years (1946–1957) spent by the poet in different cities of Italy, beside his native Trieste,¹ in particular Rome and Milan, real driving centers of the cultural reconstruction of Italy after the Second World War, together with Turin and Florence.

I. A Wandering Poet — Trieste, Florence, Rome, Milan

On the day after the signing of the Cassibile armistice, the 8th of September 1943, Saba is forced to leave Trieste and to take refuge in Florence. Here he spends one of the most depressed periods of his life, anguished by the fear of being denounced by some fellow citizen and consequently handed over to the German authorities.² At the same time, he is concerned about the fate of the

1. The city of Trieste preserves a special role throughout Saba’s life, also and especially in periods of distance: “In Trieste where, when I can’t sleep there, I am with my thoughts every night” (SABA 2001, 90). In *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, Saba admits immediately he is “very attached to his city” (SABA 2001, 114).

2. Saba was son of a Jewish mother and an “Aryan” father (SABA 2001, 114) and therefore susceptible to strong discrimination in the aftermath of the promulgation of the fascist Racial Laws (1938), as demonstrated in the petition from Saba addressed to Benito Mussolini himself, to obtain a waiver from the application of those laws (see BERNARDINI NAPOLETANO 2010). To mislead the authorities, Saba and his wife “wandered from one dwelling to another, to make their tracks disappear in case someone has come to know of their presence” (MATTIONI 1989, 131). Saba himself mentions it in a letter addressed to Vittorio Sereni and dated 19 November 1947, when he says: “[. . .] I had to remain silent

war, at that moment particularly uncertain and, above all, hardly predictable.³ In Florence, Saba begins to write a long and profound self-comment on his own work as poet (even if using the pseudonym of Giuseppe Carimandrei), which can be read as “the novel of a poem and also [. . .] as the novel of a life” (CARRAI 2023, V) and which will become *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (1948).⁴ Moreover, in Florence Saba frequents some intellectuals and poets with whom he has a close dialogue, such as Carlo Levi and Eugenio Montale. On the day after the liberation of Florence from the Nazi-fascist troops (11th of August 1944), it seems that Saba begins to recover from his black mood,⁵ but his depression increases even more with the end of the year, so that Saba moves to Rome in early 1945.

In Rome, Saba, though always afflicted by economic difficulties and various kinds of worries, starts recovering himself. In this period, he begins to write his *Scorciatoie*, which he publishes hand in hand on “La Nuova Europa” and which will later give shape to the book *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (1946). In the second half of the year, then, *Il Canzoniere 1900–1945* finally comes into print, the drafts for which Saba had worked since March of the same year, and that represents a fundamental first stage⁶ in the overall arrangement of his poetry. At the end of the year, then, generally dissatisfied with the editorial appearance of the volume printed by Einaudi, Saba resumes working on his *Canzoniere* and, at the same time, tired of Rome, he moves to Milan, where he hopes to migrate also his wife Lina, whom he left in Florence at the beginning of the year and who is now in Trieste.

for seven years [. . .] and I spent [year] one hidden a little here and there in 11 houses of Florence, always with the fear that they come to pick me, the Lina of the *Canzoniere* and my daughter, to lead us in tanks to torture and gas chamber” (SABA–SERENI 2010, 72).

3. To better understand the general disorientation caused in Italy by the events of the 8th of September, with the consequent outbreak of the civil war, see PAVONE 2006.
4. *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* is certainly, with all its limitations, a fundamental resource for understanding the poetry and poetics of Saba, since it represents «the most extensive and complete analysis conducted by the poet on the motivations and forms of his doing» (SENARDI 2012, 142).
5. Once again, in the letter to Sereni of November 1937, Saba recalls: “[. . .] I am very bad, and never less in '44 in Florence, I wanted so much to die” (SABA–SERENI 2010, 70).
6. It is the second important stage, if we consider that the equally important but less successful edition of *Il Canzoniere (1900–1921)* appeared in Trieste in 1921.

In Milan, at the end of 1945, Saba corrects the drafts of *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, which will appear in the series of Lo Specchio Mondadori in January 1946, and collaborates with a radio program, even if for a short time. Here, Saba is a guest of the Almansi family, in a small house, where he sleeps in the room with the little one of the house: Federico Almansi, for whom he soon begins to develop a strong sentimental attachment.⁷ Since the heating system is not available at home, Saba accepts, in order to work better, the generous offer of Raffaele Mattioli, who grants him the use of a room in the Commercial Bank as his own office. During this period, Saba works on a number of commissions for Mondadori and begins writing the poems of *Mediterranee*. He stays in Milan throughout 1946, attending, besides the Almansi and Mattioli, Vittorio Sereni and his wife Maria Luisa, Sergio Solmi, Alberto Mondadori, Giansiro Ferrata. That summer, the first national recognition of its poetic value finally arrives, when it receives the Viareggio prize, even if at the last moment it was awarded *ex aequo* with the novel *Pane duro* by Silvio Micheli,⁸ and therefore halved.

At the end of 1946, due to financial difficulties and his inaptitude for the life of the journalist, Saba was forced to return to Trieste, where he resumed his profession as bookseller. However, his visits to Milan, very frequent during 1947, are not interrupted, due both to editorial and poetic needs and to sentimental motivations, still linked to the figure of Federico Almansi.⁹ In the summer of 1947, Saba finishes writing *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, and then devotes himself, during the rest of the year, to the poems that will later compose *Epigrafe*, a collection destined to be published posthumously. In 1948, during a precarious economic stability thanks to his library, Saba took an active interest in the fate of Trieste, publishing an article entitled *Se fossi nominato governatore di Trieste* in the “Nuovo Corriere della Sera”. In this period, Saba, whom it would be “simply absurd” to think as a “politician” (MATTIONI 1989, 139), is supporting the cause of the Popular Democratic Front for the first elections in the Italian Republic, scheduled for 18 and 19 April of that year. When he learns of the defeat of the left and the triumph of the Christian

7. For a better comprehension of this love, see Stelio Mattioni (1989, 141): “Saba’s feeling for the boy before, and now for the young man (Federico is twenty-one years old), is not paternal love, but love similar to that of Socrates for Fedon, in the sign of that disembodied yet sensual Eros which is among the characteristics of his nature”.

8. Saba recounts, not without bitterness, the days of the Viareggio prize in a letter to Vittorio Sereni, dated 23 August 1946 (SABA-SERENI 2010, 32–37).

9. For Almansi, Saba also signs the preface to his first book of verses, *Poesie* (1948).

Democracy, Saba is once again in Milan — as Vittorio Sereni tells us in a wonderful poem from *Gli strumenti umani* (1965) — and from that moment he decides to enter into a very eloquent journalistic silence. By the end of the year, however, two important publications are being published: *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, edited by Mondadori, and the second edition of *Canzoniere 1900–1947*, also containing *Mediterranee*.

In 1949, the psychological conditions of Federico Almansì worsens, so that he moves away from Saba permanently, causing him many sufferings. Shortly after, in 1950, after a complex legal dispute between Mondadori, Einaudi and Garzanti over the rights to publish his poems, Saba is being admitted for the first time to the clinic of Villa Electra in Rome, where he spends intermittent periods, much of his last years, “in order to alleviate the crises of anguish and to get rid of what had become a real dependence on morphine” (CARRAI 2017, 58). It is during one of his stays at Villa Electra that he writes, taken from an almost feverish scriptural raptus, the first three episodes of *Ernesto*, in the spring of 1953. During this period, Giovanni Giudici also entered into a relationship with Saba, visiting him at Villa Electra, in April of that year. Saba’s artistic production in his last years has been slow, while its movements are limited to the clinics of Rome and Gorizia, as well as the city of Trieste. In the last months of his life, in 1956, he asks his daughter Linuccia to burn the unfinished *Ernesto* and forgoes further editing of the *Canzoniere*, which would be published by Einaudi in a third and final edition only posthumously, in 1961.

II. The Poetic Apprenticeship of Vittorio Sereni

The idea that Saba is a kind of wandering poet who moves in an Italy in rubble is what most affects the imagination of Vittorio Sereni, who encounters Saba during his Milanese period, between 1945 and 1946.¹⁰ This is how Sereni recalls that period in a letter addressed to Saba some years later:

Ricordo il tempo il tempo in cui lei era qui, un tempo polveroso di cose in rovina, di cose che volevano nascere e subito morivano – e tra queste muoversi la sua figura come di pellegrino che veniva da paesi troppo diversi. Non so dirle e mi scusi.¹¹

10. They met for the first time in 1939 but became friends after the war.

11. SABA-SERENI 2010, 145. Translation: “I remember the time when she was here, a dusty time of things in ruins, of things that wanted to be born and immediately

And so, Saba appears again in a famous poem by Sereni dedicated to him (*Saba*) and then merged into the collection *Gli strumenti umani* (1965), which portrays the elderly poet wearing his iconic objects, “pipe beret stick”, while crossing «an Italy of rubble and dust» after the electoral defeat of 1948:

Berretto pipa bastone, gli spenti
oggetti di un ricordo.
Ma io li vidi animati indosso a uno
ramingo in un’Italia di macerie e di polvere.
Sempre di sé parlava ma come lui nessuno
ho conosciuto che di sé parlando
e ad altri vita chiedendo nel parlare
altrettanta e più ne desse
a chi stava ad ascoltarlo.
E un giorno, un giorno o due dopo il 18 aprile,
lo vidi errare da una piazza all’altra
dall’uno all’altro caffè di Milano
inseguito dalla radio.
«Porca – vociferando – porca». Lo guardava
stupefatta la gente.
Lo diceva all’Italia. Di schianto, come a una donna
che ignara o no a morte ci ha ferito.¹²

Beyond the effective closure that sinks a political and civil strike,¹³ the central link of the text is very impressive, when Sereni notices Saba’s ability to speak about himself “to others life asking while talking” and at

died — and among these move his figure as a pilgrim who came from too different countries. I can’t explain better and I’m sorry”.

12. SERENI 2020, 184. Translation: “Pipe beret stick, extinct /objects of a memory. / But I saw them animated on a man / who wandered in an Italy of rubble and dust. / He always talked about himself but like him no one / I have known that talking of himself / and to others life asking while talking / could give even more life /to those who were listening to him. / And one day, a day or two after the 18th of April, / I saw him wandering from one square to another / from one to another Milan coffee / chased by the radio. / ‘Slut - yelling – Slut’. Amazed people / looked at him. / He said it to Italy. All of a sudden, as to a woman, / who, unaware or not, has wounded us to death”.
13. The relationship between Saba and politics has already been mentioned, but it may also be useful to read a poem from *Epigrafe*, entitled *Opicina 1947* (SABA 1994, 562), and to see the reflections of Silvio Mattioni (1989, 139–40) on this subject.

the same time giving life "to those who were listening to him": a dimension of emptied narcissism, reversed from within, projected in some way into the dimension of the other.

"Like him no one", tells us Sereni, that has been attending Saba since 1939, when he met him at the home of Giansiro Ferrata, and with whom he also maintains a fruitful epistolary relationship that lasted from 1946 until 1954. From the letters of Saba and Sereni emerges the construction of a kind of apprenticeship to poetry — or a form of poetry — in which Saba immediately assumes the guise of a teacher ready to reproach, advise or (sometimes) praise the student Sereni, already author of *Frontiera* (1941) and several poems published individually in magazines, which Saba seemed to have appreciated already at the time of their first meeting, in 1939.¹⁴ Such an attitude is clearly evident here and there, in some brief hints of Saba to the work of Sereni — "I really liked your short story"¹⁵ (SABA-SERENI 2010, 28), "If Vittorio sent me a really beautiful poem (like *Via Scarlatti*) he would give me a nice gift"¹⁶ (SABA-SERENI 2010, 35) — and then also in more explicit and punctual criticism, in which the poetic-stylistic direction on which Saba tries to direct Sereni emerges better.

Let's come to some examples. With a letter dated 28 January 1947, Sereni sends Saba a short prose piece entitled *A Season of Ambiguity*,¹⁷ published on the following 20th February in the magazine "Fiera Letteraria" and which concerns Saba personally, since it is its central subject-figure. Sending him the story, however, Sereni tries to anticipate any criticism writing some lines of premise:

Il raccontino non ha pretese letterarie: solo, mi pareva doveroso che un'ora della vita di Saba (il quale non avrebbe potuto scriverne per ovvie ragioni)

14. This is what Sereni (1978, 235–6) himself reports.

15. Letter dated May 1946. The short story to which Saba refers is *Male del reticolato*, published by Sereni in the magazine "Rassegna d'Italia" (no. 5, May 1946).

16. Letter dated 23 August 1946.

17. The story, with the changed title of "Musicians Angels", is then published in the collection of prose *Gli immediate dintorni* (1962, 1982), now in SERENI 2020, 577–581. Here Sereni describes the "true story" (SERENI 2020, 581) of a summer evening in post-war Milan, where he attends some bickering between Umberto Saba and Federico Almansi. Then he sees the poet being moved by the news that the three young musicians, who cheered the crowd of the bar for the last two hours without asking any compensation, came from the city of Fiume. Then the poet gets up and invites one of the three boys to collect money from the crowd. Saba then thanks Federico for giving him such a lovely evening.

non restasse ignorata ai presenti e ai futuri. Ho cercato di raccontarla nel modo più semplice possibile: a conti fatti vorrei che fosse ancora più semplice e senza il minimo intervento da parte mia. Ecco perché temo un poco la sua ira; ma sono qui, umile bersaglio ai suoi colpi.¹⁸

And the “blows” of Saba do not take long to arrive, as it is clearly stated in a letter dated 25 February and addressed by Saba to Sereni a few days after the publication of the short story in “La Fiera Letteraria”:

Ieri a sera un amico mi portò – stranamente commosso – il numero della «Fiera» che contiene l'estiva storiella del bar e dei piccoli musicanti fiumani. Ti ringrazio, con le riserve che farò più sotto. Artisticamente è molto bello, in modo speciale la descrizione dei musicanti («I due più grandi» fino a «ansiosa frenesia»). Il brano è piaciuto a tutti: mia moglie e mia cognata, che lo leggevano ieri a sera, piangevano; la vecchia Lina (ma in queste cose il suo giudizio deve essere preso con molte cautele) lo chiamava addirittura celeste. Certo che – come ti ho detto – è assai bello, e capisco che chiunque – tranne me – possa esserne interamente soddisfatto. Sapevo già del resto che sai scrivere in prosa. [. . .] Detto questo, devo esporti le mie riserve. Esse sono di carattere personale; si riflettono però anche sul tuo scritto, e credo che, se avrai la pazienza e l'intelligenza necessarie a seguirmi, mi darai ragione. L'errore (in quanto di errore può parlarsi) è stato di non aver raccontato l'episodio come veramente si è svolto: nel qual caso il brano, invece che bello, sarebbe stato bellissimo, e, in certo qual modo, per quanto riguarda un lato almeno della mia natura, definitivo. Quando si racconta un aneddoto, e che questo aneddoto si riferisce ad una persona conosciuta e «difficile», bisogna attenersi il più possibile alla realtà oggettiva. Ogni deviazione, a destra o a sinistra, falsifica la figura che si vuole mettere in luce. L'arte, in questi casi, è di non dire una parola di più o di meno: l'autore deve completamente nascondersi nel fatto che narra: tanto più egli risalta, quanto meno devia e si nasconde nelle cose che dice. *Tu hai fatto questo*, ma hai voluto fare altra cosa ancora (sempre la benedetta letteratura): hai dato così un bello squarcio di prosa, ma hai anche alterata, con danno

18. SABA-SERENI, 46. Translation: “The story has no literary pretensions: it just seemed to me that an hour of the life of Saba (who could not write about it for obvious reasons) should not be ignored by present and future. I tried to tell it in the simplest way possible: in fact, I wish it was even simpler and without the slightest intervention on my part. That’s why I fear his wrath a little; but here I am, humble target to your blows”.

suo e tuo, la figura del protagonista. Così come tu mi presenti, sono irricognoscibile. Almeno a me che mi conosco. L'errore è nato dal fatto che di un tavolo di bar al quale sedevamo tua moglie, tu, Federico ed io, tu hai voluto farne due: e presentare al lettore me e Federico come due persone a te sconosciute. (Non capisco perché tu abbia voluto *staccarmi* da te: psicologicamente parlando, *uccidermi*. Non insisto su questo particolare, perché ti so non preparato a comprendere la mia esatta interpretazione). Così come tu mi presenti, io sono una specie di esibizionista, che si rivolge (per uno sfogo patriottico) ad un estraneo: «E voi queste cose avete voluto perderle ecc.». Ora, se io avessi fatta questa cosa, non sarei io. Inoltre perché tu, da un altro tavolo, avessi potute udire le mie parole, sarebbe stato necessario che io avessi gridato: che avessi desiderato cioè di farmi udire degli estranei. Nulla di questo, come tu sai, è vero. Non sono piccole cose, caro amico, sono cose fondamentali. Sei stato molto bravo, e solo su questo punto – il punto al quale sono necessariamente più sensibile – un poco asino. Altre inesattezze qua e là ci sono, ma non voglio apparire pedante, mettendole in luce ad una ad una. [. . .] Quando hai scritto il brano, ti trovavi certamente in un momento di grazia. Tanto più è peccato che tu non abbia avvertita la necessità di essere, fino agli estremi limiti del possibile, uno «storico». Se tu avessi reso, come eravamo quella sera, Maria Luisa [. . .], tu, Federico ed io (Federico, p. es., non aveva affatto un sorriso «ironico», ma solo un sorriso d'imbarazzo per il fatto che io, mancando in ciò di tatto, lo rimproveravo davanti a voi perché non aveva saputo vincere una «resistenza» e affrontare i ricordi che gli rendevano odioso l'altro bar, obbligando così me, che ero stanchissimo, e tua moglie, che desiderava come me sedersi al tavolo di Piazza Caiazzo, a fare un tragitto supplementare verso una meta imprecisata) il tuo brano sarebbe risultato la più buona cosa che sia stata scritta sulla mia povera e combattuta umanità. E di contraccolpo, anche letterariamente parlando, un capolavoro autentico.¹⁹

19. SABA-SERENI 2010, 48–50. Translation: “Yesterday evening a friend brought me — strangely moved — the number of the ‘Fiera’ that contains the summer story of the bar and the young musicians of Fiume. Thank you, with the reservations that I will make below. Artistically it is very beautiful, especially the description of the musicians (from ‘the two greatest’ to ‘anxious frenzy’). The piece was liked by everyone: my wife and sister-in-law, who read it yesterday evening, wept; the old Lina (but in these things her judgment must be taken with great caution) even called it heavenly. Of course — as I said — it is very beautiful, and I understand that anyone — except me — can be completely satisfied. I already knew that you can write in prose. [. . .] After having said this, I must expose my reservations. They are of a personal nature;

Saba's reproach is based on the distinction between life and literature — fundamental to fully understand Saba's poetry — that he has been working since the distant times of the essay *Quell' oche resta da fare ai poeti* (written

but they also reflect on your writing, and I believe that if you have the patience and intelligence to follow me, you will agree with me. The mistake (since we can talk about a mistake) was to have not told the episode as it really took place: in which case the piece, instead of good, would have been beautiful, and, in some way, regarding at least one side of my nature, definitive. When you tell an anecdote, and you say that this anecdote refers to a known and 'difficult' person, you must stick as much as possible to the objective reality. Each deviation, to the right or to the left, falsifies the figure that you want to highlight. The art, in these cases, is not to say a word more or less: the author must completely hide himself in the fact that he narrates: the more he stands out, the less he deviates and hides himself in the things he says. *You did this*, but you wanted to do something else (it is always the 'blessed' literature): you gave so a nice cut of prose, but you have also altered, with his and your damage, the figure of the protagonist. As you present me, I am unrecognizable. At least to me that I know myself. The mistake originated from the fact that instead of describing the bar table at which your wife, you, Federico and I sat, you wanted to describe two different tables: and to present to the reader me and Federico as two people unknown to you. (I don't understand why you wanted to *detach* me from you: psychologically speaking, *kill* me. I do not insist on this, because I know you are not prepared to understand my exact interpretation). As you present me, I am a kind of exhibitionist, who turns (for a patriotic outburst) to an outsider: 'And you wanted to lose these things etc.' Now, if I had done this thing, it wouldn't be me. Moreover, for you to hear my words from another table, it would have been necessary for me to shout: like if I wished to make strangers hear my voice. None of this, as you know, is true. They are not small things, dear friend, they are fundamental things. You have been very good, but on this point — the point to which I am necessarily more sensitive — you have been a little donkey. There are other inaccuracies here and there, but I do not want to appear pedantic, highlighting them one by one. [. . .] When you wrote the passage, you were certainly in a moment of grace. It is even more a pity that you have not felt the need to be, up to the extreme limits of what is possible, an 'historian'. If you had described, as we were that evening, Maria Luisa [. . .], you, Federico and I (Federico, e.g., did not have an 'ironic' smile at all, but only an embarrassed smile because, lacking tact in that, I rebuked him before you for having failed to overcome a 'resistance' and face the memories that made the other bar odious, forcing me, even if I was very tired, and your wife, who wanted to sit like me at the table in Piazza Caiazzo, to make an additional journey to an unspecified destination) your short story would have been the best thing ever written on my poor and battered humanity. And in return, even literarily speaking, an authentic masterpiece".

in 1911, but then still unpublished²⁰) and then also in some pages of *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere*, in whose first chapter it is said:

Saba [. . .] fu uno dei pochi poeti dei nostri giorni che si abbandonarono sempre, ed in piena buona fede, a quella grande e rara cosa che gli antichi chiamavano ispirazione. [. . .] Ed è anche vero che, dove l'ispirazione gli manca o scarseggia, Saba vale poco o nulla: è impotente a rimediare. La "letteratura" non gli fu mai un valido soccorso. Per lui, per la sua particolare poetica, la letteratura sta alla poesia come la menzogna alla verità.²¹

Despite the indications of Saba, Sereni does not change the content of the short story and does not even adjust the details that differ from the real data. In general, in fact, Sereni seems to accept without excessive counterargument the teachings of Saba,²² but then actually he doesn't apply them through corrections or textual innovations in the successive versions of the texts that he proposes or that Saba reads and comments.

It is interesting to read also the subsequent letter addressed by Saba to Sereni and dated 1st June 1947. Here Saba writes to Sereni some observations about his second book of poems, *Diario d'Algeria*, published by Vallecchi in May 1947. Many of these observations, even if in some way rearranged, will be the basis for the review that Saba dedicated to *Diario d'Algeria* and which was published in the "Corriere della Sera" on 4th December of that year.²³ In this letter, once again Saba insists on the degree of literalness of Sereni's writing, opposing it

20. The essay article, proposed by Saba to the magazine "La Voce", from which it was rejected by decision of Scipio Slataper, was found at the author's death, and then made public only in 1959. Here, "in a way that is not strictly programmatic, but rather in a 'crepuscular' perception, to be intended in terms of a postmodernism of the beginning of the century, Saba photographs [. . .] the new suggestions, themes the formal simplifications imposed by a lesser cultural control of the forms of representation" (BERTONI 2019, 46).

21. SABA 2001, 120. Translation: "Saba [. . .] was one of the few poets of our days who always abandoned himself, and in full good faith, to that great and rare thing that the ancients called inspiration. [. . .] And it is also true that where inspiration is lacking or scarce, Saba is worth little or nothing: he is powerless to remedy. The 'literature' was never a valid help. For him, because of his poetics, literature is to poetry as the lie to the truth".

22. We do not have, for example, any letter of reply to the one just mentioned, in which Sereni replies to the observations of Saba.

23. It can now be read in its full version in SABA 2001, 999–1002.

with the truth of life that the poet should always pursue, according to Saba's vision of poetry:

[. . .] se, da una parte, tu sei quello dei tuoi coetanei che ha talvolta inciso nella vita (scusa se, a questo proposito, ti ricordo ancora una volta *Soldati a Urbino*, la poesia dalla quale è nata la nostra amicizia), dall'altra, se apro a caso, come in questo momento ho aperto, il tuo libro, trovo a pag. 35 una poesia che incomincia «La sera invade il calice leggero – che tu accosti alle labbra –»; due bei versi che non dicono niente. E purtroppo di versi altrettanto, o più, belli, ce ne sono molti nel *Diario d'Algeria*. Sono le «torri alte nella memoria», per le quali i letterati italiani hanno un gusto che a me disgraziatamente manca. [. . .] Tu sai che la mia concezione della poesia è un'altra: niente letteratura (voglio dire il meno possibile; ogni nave ha bisogno, per galleggiare, di un po' di zavorra); molta vita, niente trasposizioni su piani astratti, molto invece di quella GRANDE IMMENSA RARA COSA che è la sublimazione. Ora tu alla vita, alla «calda vita» ti avvicini più di una volta (è per questo che ti ho ascoltato), ma non le sei sempre fedele. (Intendo – si capisce – nelle tue poesie.) [. . .] Tutto sommato, il libro mi piace per i momenti nei quali sei poeta (sono, probabilmente, quelli che dispiaceranno alla critica contemporanea) e mi dispiace là dove non hai avuta la forza di liberare la tua poesia dalla letteratura (e anche da reminiscenze letterarie).²⁴

24. SABA-SERENI 2010, 53–55. Translation: “[. . .] on one hand, even if you are one of your peers who has sometimes influenced life (sorry if, in this regard, I remind you once again *Soldati a Urbino*, the poem from which our friendship was born), on the other hand, if I open at random, as I have opened at this moment, your book, I find on page 35 a poem that begins ‘In the evening invades the light glass - which you approach to the lips –’; two beautiful verses that say nothing. And unfortunately, there are many verses as beautiful, or more, in *Diario d'Algeria*. They are the ‘towers high in memory’, for which the Italian writers and poets have a taste that I unfortunately lack. [. . .] You know that my conception of poetry is different: no literature (I mean as little as possible; every ship needs a little ballast to float); much life, no transpositions on abstract planes, much more than the GREAT IMMENSE RARE THING that is sublimation. Now you approach life, the ‘warm life’, more than once (that’s why I listened to you), but you are not always faithful. (I mean — you can understand — in your poems.) [. . .] All in all, I like the book for the moments in which you are a poet (they are probably those who will regret contemporary criticism) and I’m sorry where you have not had the strength to free your poetry from literature (and even from literary reminiscences)”.

Therefore, there exists for Saba a Sereni “naked and who is very beautiful”, precisely because of his being ‘historical’ and faithful to the truth, and another who is instead “too literary” (SABA-SERENI 2010, 176) and therefore false and mystifying. But, with his human and at the same time literary magisterium, Saba transmits to Sereni — who was in fact an already trained author — an amplified sense of attention to the facts of life, which begins to act, even if kept untracked, already at the height of *Diario d’Algeria*, but then exploded in *Gli strumenti umani* (1965) and in *Stella variabile* (1981), when the experiential data is progressively more and more accepted within the verse in its entirety and becomes the central nerve of Sereni’s reflection and thought, since he is increasingly attached to the things of life, finally identifying its points of reference in Montale, Ungaretti, René Char and William Carlos Williams, in addition to Saba.

III. To put Life in Verse — Giovanni Giudici and “the Master” Saba

Saba is then the first promoter, in the twentieth century, of “an autobiography that refuses all kind of titanism and refuses to assume an explicit role as a model, in order to show how each individuality is shaped by its own experiences” (BERTONI 2023, 59). This aspect of Saba’s poetics acts immediately as a reference point in the poetry of Giovanni Giudici,²⁵ who made Saba the proposal — which he immediately refused — to write the preface to his second, small collection of verses (*La Stazione di Pisa e altre poesie*, 1955). It has already been said that Giudici meets Saba in 1953, when they were both in Rome. Giudici visits him during one of his long stays at the clinic of Villa Electra. Saba was the most beloved and read poet by Giudici in those years²⁶ and, since the two entered into a relationship, Giudici does not hesitate to call him “master” and to take for true every indication, every advice that came from him. For instance, Giudici clearly recalls, even at a great time distance (in 1983, thirty years after those first meetings), the criticism of Saba to his making verses:

Delle sue osservazioni sui miei versi vorrei limitarmi a riferire la parte «negativa», per la sua applicabilità in generale e non semplicemente

25. Al di là delle evidenti influenze di poetica e di forma, «l'impressione è che di Saba in Giudici ci sia di più, e che soprattutto egli stia all'origine di molte scelte autoriali, poi oculatamente rimotivate diversamente» (Morando 2010, 56).

26. GIUDICI 1985, 205.

circoscritta al mio lavoro di allora: « . . . il libro è nel suo complesso assai notevole. Quello che ancora ti manca è qualcosa che muova di più l'immaginazione, o tocchi il cuore del lettore . . . So benissimo che queste cose non si possono né dare, né insegnare: tenendo presente che i poeti sono assai rari (i secoli più fortunati ne hanno, sì e no, cinque; compresi nel numero i minori), l'unica cosa che possa augurarti (non all'uomo, ma al poeta) è una qualche esperienza di vita: un grande dolore, un grande amore, qualcosa insomma che ti faccia fare un passo avanti dalla letteratura alla poesia. Ami tanto (beato te!) la poesia, che non è escluso che la vita ti venga incontro e ti aiuti». ²⁷

Once again, there emerges a poetics that opposes the binomial life-poetry to literature as a lie. The teaching, however, has a very deep echo in Giudici, so that, some years later, he will remember these words transposing them into a poem, in which the trembling handwriting of an old Saba comes into direct contact with the reappearance of some images or memories²⁸ of the Roman encounters between the two poets, in the mid-fifties. The poem is entitled *La via*, it states the date «1974» and is contained in the collection *Il male dei creditori* (1977):

Un grande amore (disse) un grande dolore
 Quelle *O* larghe immense e un tremolo di erre
 Capra belante e acuti fra rughe Sioux
 Di stregone bellissimo gli occhi celesti

27. GIUDICI 1985, 209. The text of Saba reported here by Giudici comes from a letter kept at the Apice Center, University of Milan, in the Giovanni Giudici Archive (s. 8, *Correspondence. Saba Umberto*, fourth letter). The letter was published in its entirety in MORANDO 2010, 67. Translation: "Of his observations on my verses I would like to limit myself to the 'negative' part, because it is applicable in general and not simply limited to my work at that time: '. . . the book is quite remarkable. What you still need is something that moves the imagination more, or touches the heart of the reader. . . Well aware that these things can neither be given nor taught: bearing in mind that poets are very rare (the most fortunate centuries have, yes and no, five; including the number of minors), the only thing that I can wish you (not to the man, but to the poet) is some kind of life experience: a great pain, a great love, something that will take you one step further from literature to poetry. You love so much (how blessed are you!) poetry, that it is not excluded that life comes to meet you and helps you".

28. Largely corresponding to those of the 1985 memorial.

Che a lui salivo per chiedere intercessione
A uno Spirito Manitù
Ogni mattina di sabato in quella stagione
Che era senza amore e dolore

Questa, o caro, è la via
Tu che ami tanto la poesia

Ma lui che invocava un'estrema
Grazia e pietà del cianuro
Passato per tanta pena
Di cosa era infine sicuro?

Il vecchio Maestro
Che in quei giorni distanti
Fantasticava a suo dire mirabolanti
Storie di un certo Ernesto²⁹

The biographical and chronological frame of the text is confirmed, in the closing finale, by the intertextual reference to *Ernesto*, the unfinished non-novel that Saba was writing just at the time of the first visits of Giudici. A memory, therefore, well settled and rooted in the memory of Giudici, recalled in various forms also in the years immediately following, in an article published on the magazine "l'Unità." in 1981 and then in the critical-memorial prose contained in *La dama non cercata* (1985). Giudici refers to Saba even into a central poem from one of the books of his "final triptych" (BERTONI 2006, 109), the beautiful collection *Quanto spera di campare Giovanni* (1993), in which appears, among other poems dedicated to poets, a dazzling *Portrait (Ritratto)* of Umberto Saba, in which there emerges

29. GIUDICI 2021, 401. Translation: "A great love (he said) a great pain / Those great huge *O* and a flickering ar / Belating goat and acutes among wrinkles Sioux / Of the beautiful sorcerer's heavenly eyes // That I would go up to him to ask for intercession / To a Spirit of Manitou / Every Saturday morning in that season / That was without love and pain // This, my dear, is the way / You who love poetry so much // But he, who invoked an extreme / Grace and mercy of cyanide / Gone throught so much pain, / What was he sure of? // The old master / That in those distant days / He fantasized, to his words, amazing / Stories of a certain Ernesto".

a strong bond, “intense and personal” (CORCIONE 2023, 70), between the poet portrayed and the poet portraying:

Il ritratto che qui vedete
Le mani schiuse nelle mani
E lo spento aspettare senza quiete
Arreso a fantasmi lontani

Lo osservano il visitatore o un amico
Domandano chi è vanno oltre
O udito il nome «ah» dicono
Ma tacciono il più delle volte

Forse curiosi al pensiero se sia
Un piccolo parente senza storia
O passione castissima di una zia
Morta giovane in sua memoria

Quasi postuma onoranza
Offrendo a quei gentili affanni
In pre-sepolcrale sembianza
L'amore sfatto dagli anni

Ma niente di tutto questo –
Perché nel ritratto è effigiato
Appena un vecchio Maestro
Messo in disuso benché amato

Che poi non si ha più coraggio
Di farlo sparire in disparte
Tradita madonna di maggio
Vacilla la fede nell'arte³⁰

30. GIUDICI 2021, 951. Translation: “The portrait you see here / Hands in the hands / And the calm waiting without peace / abandoned to distant ghosts // The visitor or a friend watch him / They ask who he is and they go beyond / Or heard the name «ah» they say / But they keep quiet most of the time // Perhaps curious to think whether he is / A small relative with no history / Or a chaste passion of an aunt / Young dead in his memory // Almost posthumous honour / Offering to those gentle cares / In pre-burial form / The love worn down by years // But none of this - / Because in the effigy is portrayed / Just an old Master / Put

In this poem, organized in quartets of alternate rhyme (rhythmically very varied), Giudici realizes a coexistence of closed forms (as in the immediately preceding collections, especially *Salutz*, 1986, and *Fortezza*, 1990) and a very free pronunciation on the stylistic plane, who recalls the first trials of Giudici, from *La vita in versi* (1965) to *Il ristorante dei morti* (1981). In substance, there is a new closeness between the "old Master" portrayed in the photograph, almost unknown yet "beloved", and the poet who confuses himself with his master, now that he's arrived to an end of life that is also end of the century and, in some way, end of the ideologies and of the story. So it is precisely that Saba constitutes "the closest example of a poetic and human parable that, in its melancholic sunset, collects a 'sublime' coinciding with the 'nothing'" (CORCIONE 2023, 71): as a circle that closes, when the poet begins to perceive the end, he reconnects with his origins, also stylistically echoing his beginnings. Such a late, yet so participatory memory is also confirmed by a third poem (*Poesia invece di un'altra*) that ends the last section of *Empie stelle* (1996). Here, starting from the memory of the funeral of Giansiro Ferrata, to whom the text is explicitly dedicated, Giudici fixes some flashes of a life now removed, of which only some crumbs of memory remain, "faces and masks" that have populated an intellectual Milan, politics and ideology now faded and distant. And then appears "the Jewish dirge of the old Saba/ Eusebio's mundane rumination. . ." now reduced to one of the "icons of astonished twentieth century" (GIUDICI 2021, 1109–1111). As in a tale of Calvino, almost for a spacetime paradox, the chronological distance is melancholy transformed into proximity and commonality of feelings.

IV. Conclusions

Therefore, despite Saba having a perception of himself as a poet misunderstood by the Italian readers, especially by critics,³¹ there is no doubt that he had a decisive influence on the younger generations of poets with whom he came into contact. It has been demonstrated here, in fact, as

to waste, though beloved // And you don't have the courage / To make him disappear in the background / Betrayed May Lady / Faith in art falters".

31. This interest is now very present, as evidenced by the recent publication of all the Sabian writings of Giacomo Debenedetti (2024), who has always been a promoter of Saba's reception even in a wide non-specialized public, and the recent rearrangement of Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (2024) of his notes and observations on the work of Saba.

well as in two of the major poets of the second part of twentieth century in Italy, Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici, although often considered two poets similar to the poetics of Montale, the literary model of Saba has been also explicit: it entered their history first by going through the biographical plan and then penetrating decisively into their writing workshops. And perhaps it was precisely that burning desire for life, that “great love of poetry” (GIUDICI 2022, 304) that Saba was able to impose on its readers to have united, along their different, yet not so dissimilar³² paths of poetry also two decisive readers and authors as were Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici.

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32. The relationship between Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici is well documented in their epistolary (see GIUDICI-SERENI 2021).

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