

Ottava Rima in Bensonhurst

Joey Ski (December 27, 2007)



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In a social club in Brooklyn, the lost poetry of a Sicilian contadino is heard again.

Brooklyn's Castel del Golfo Social Club is one of New York's unique culture venues that you won't find listed in *The New Yorker* or *Time Out New York*. Granted the place is a "members only" organization where men who immigrated from Castellammare del Golfo (Palermo province) gather nightly to play cards and drink espresso. The association's calendar is marked by its annual religious procession in honor of the Madonna of Succor in August. These are just the kinds of mundane activities many come to expect when hearing the now coded phrase "Italian-American social club," and fans of a certain cinematic genre hearing the adjective "Sicilian" added would be inclined to embellish their imagination with dark and mysterious thoughts of the illegal and the violent.

Instead, Bensonhurst's Castel del Golfo Social Club is a bastion of the arts and its members connoisseurs of verse in ottava rima. It is a cultural haven where former contadini, fisherman, and artisans and now aging landscapers, retired seamstresses, schoolteachers, and businessmen gather to revel in that the quintessential Sicilian poetic meter.

I've been familiar with the club since the early 1980s, when I began documenting the art of poet and wire sculptor [Vincenzo Ancona](#) [3]. On December 1st, I had the good fortune of attending one of the club's many poetry readings dubbed "Sicilia Poetica." The evening was curated by poet, barber, and vice president of [Arba Sicula](#) [4] [Antonino Provenzano](#) [5] and realtor and community scholar Giuseppe Turriciano. Joining me in the audience were Sicilian-American actor [Michael Badalucco](#) [6] and screenwriter Brandon Cole (Mac). The night was dedicated, in part, to the work of contadino poet Vito Monticciolo and was an element in the ongoing cultural retrieval of this unique artist and his verse. The program brochure offered a brief biography (in Italian) of Monticciolo, that I have edited and translated here:

The poet Vito Monticciolo was born in Castellammare del Golfo on April 28, 1891 and died on February 8, 1974. Monticciolo was a contadino and his best poetry exalts the bucolic life. He did not attend school but the young Monticciolo was an autodidact, writing and reading for his entire life. He had memorized Torquato Tasso's "[Gerusalemme Liberata](#) [7]," Ludovico Ariosto's "[L'Orlando Furioso](#) [8]," and a good part of Dante's "Divina Commedia." But his great love was Sicilian poet [Giovanni Meli](#) [9] and he was familiar with all of Meli's works.

Unfortunately, Monticciolo's poetry has been lost. After his death, no one thought to collect his



writings. All that remains is a cassette recording made by Provenzano and Turriciano, and those poems Antonio Turriciano, who, having a formidable memory himself, wrote down.

Provenzano told the audience in Italian that Monticciolo was a common man, who dressed somewhat shabbily but who possessed a wit that repeatedly challenged the town's signori and spoke truth to justice with his trenchant verse. Provenzano was kind enough to email me these two verses by Monticciolo along with Calogero Cascio's translation for this blog post:

"Ode a Don Caloriu Finuri"

Cu e` chi avi favi a siminari,
issi ni Don Caloriu Finuri.
Avi lu cori granni quantu un mari,
pari lu patri d'ogni zappaturi.

Ma quannu sparti, senza esaggerari,
si pigghia la sulami 'stu signuri,
e si 'na fava c'e` di differenza,
spicchia la fava e sinni pigghia menza.

"Ode to Caloriu Finuri"

Whoever has fava beans to sow,
go to landowner Caloriu Finuri.
His heart is as big as the sea.
Every hoer's father he appears to be.

And when harvest is done and he halves the goods,
truth be told, even the scraps he claims.
But it's when he cuts in two the last fava bean
that you know, a more generous man,
this town has never seen.

It is important to note that western Sicily, where Castellammare del Golfo is located, was historically one of the poorest and most neglected regions of Italy. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, as well as the repressive and violent mafia, were rampant well until the 1960s. An articulate and sympathetic writer of the working poor, Scottish author Gavin Maxwell lived in and wrote about this area during the 1950s dedicating a chapter of his book *The Ten Pains of Death* (1959) to Castellammare. Maxwell painted a harrowing portrait of the agricultural and fishing laborers by allowing people to speak for themselves about their daily lives, their beliefs, and their circumstances, often transcribing dialect poetry and song. It is those social conditions that situate the caustic counter-hegemonic force of Monticciolo's improvised verse. As Provenzano notes in the emailed translation: "The above two verses made Caloriu Finuri a household name and a permanent object of ridicule."

We were all glad to hear that Provenzano and Turriciano are working diligently to make this lost poet's work available to a new audience, retrieving the cultural practices of the Sicilian agricultural working poor from a social club in Bensonhurst.



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