



Rick Vincent is an American living in Geneva, Switzerland. He is an active member of the Geneva Writers Group to which I am an advisor. Rick attended a reading of *Toscanelli* given at a cosy English bookstore in the city. Overnight, he became a passionate supporter. He placed a review in *Ploughshares* and conducted the following interview. The *NDR* first published the opening 30 pages of *Toscanelli's Ray*. Reading it there led the *Hawaii Pacific Review* to print another chapter. It seems right to initiate conversation about a novel that *World Literature* said, "takes you where no tourist trip ever can."

RV: You've published *Mother Tongue* and *The Other Side of the Tiber* (memoirs) and plenty of poetry; what was the driving force to write fiction?

WWM: I wanted to write a novel in which many characters hold different narratives in suspension, until the reader feels them as equal in importance, at least for a short time. This viewpoint, call it polyphonic, was the gift of my having lived more than thirty years outside of the US. The long tradition of novels written in English and set in Florence challenged me. I didn't want an AngloSaxon character to determine the value system

within the book. I wanted all the characters to have an equal say over the novel's meaning.

I found the metaphor when I watched a ceremony in Florence that celebrates a measurement made by a Florentine mathematician, Paolo Toscanelli, marking the summer solstice. The Catholic church was looking for a way to make Easter a fixed date all across the world. They never did succeed. In the few minutes in which the ray travels down the walls of that magnificent cathedral before dancing briefly on the meridian Toscanelli devised in the floor of S. Maria del Fiore to confirm his fifteenth century calculation, I watched my novel take form. In a way, I received the whole book then. I knew that I had witnessed a different measure for understanding a character's action. The ray touched everyone, but there was no single measure for marking their lives.

RV: TR begins with the moon beaming on Brunelleschi's dome and a beggar lying in its shadows. The narrator remarks, observing the identity card lying next to the drunken man cloaked in bark (who later appears as Otzi the stone age traveler pulled from a glacier), "Firenze. It says Florence. It can't be his." What was the purpose of starting TR in such a way?

WWM: In a novel teeming with characters, I needed an omniscient voice to guide the reader through a Florence different from that described by James or Forester or even Frances Mayes. The place had to be clearly established as well as did the theme of change. That narrating voice appears intermittently to push things on, to scold, and yes, to empathize.

RV: From the beginning, where a suggestion of "a shift as profound as what became ever so slowly the Dark Ages" is proposed, there is juxtaposition of history versus modernism. I find your book somewhat akin to Delillo's *Underworld* and Albert Bronzini with "the old neighborhood." How is Florence changing? Or are you speaking on a higher level?

WWM: Change is taking place in Florence, as it is all over the world. By entering the inner lives of my diverse characters, I wanted to suggest the infinite ways our lives are in flux and also immersed in unimaginable cultural alteration that pertains to us all, wherever we live. In order to recognize a new world, we need new ways to see it.

RV: Milli, Farina's mother, is a Nigerian immigrant whose promise for a better life in Europe is dashed when she is forced into prostitution. She tries desperately to reclaim her daughter. Yet the narrative drifts back to Nigeria to explore Milli's family. What was your purpose in doing this?

WWM: Several publishers wanted me to remove the Nigerian part. I argued that to have equality among the characters, we must be willing to see Milli's relationships formed in Nigeria. Milli's son is trying to join a resistance movement against western oil companies. That resistance took place in 1994, the year in which the novel is set. The troubling and ongoing violence in Nigeria--the most pressing now being the mass kidnappings of young

girls, carried out by Boko Haram--brings up, in another way, how we cannot close our eyes to this giant, unsettled country.

Nigerian women suffer in Italy as prostitutes. In Florence people rub shoulders with them everyday. Should Milli—had I eliminated showing her powerful roots—be treated in a lesser way than all the others in the book? My character, Irene, a Rom, a gypsy, prefigures the flood of illegal refugees, which, although they have been arriving for a couple of decades, suddenly are being noticed by journalists. Irene has a fierce, proud independence.

RV: Three year old Farina is one of my favorite characters, her innocence, her wonderment, and struggle to understand in the land of adults. She helps renew Sister Gertrude's faith after she is abandoned at the convent. What did you do to dip in Farina's head and scoop out a part of her?

WWM: Farina is the heart of the novel. It was difficult not to let Farina's story take over. I wanted readers to recognize her potential and her vulnerability, and to worry about her after the novel ends. I am a mother and a grandmother. The mystery, joy and pain, of children is very real to me. Like St. Exupery's rose, I wanted Farina's future life to remain as a question in the reader's mind. Many readers have written asking me to write a sequel showing how Farina fares. I have been told that she is an unforgettable character. I hope that's true.

RV: Your characters range from a scientist to a prostitute, a sand therapist to a nun. Let's focus on a few of them. Luigi is a scientist. He is afraid of fatherhood, unable to commit, needy and insecure. At the same time he is deep in an intellectual way. He recognizes Florentine corruption for what it is. He muses, "The corruption was like manure that plants needed to grow. To ask for transparency was to disrupt." Does Luigi, perhaps, by standing back, represent the status quo in Italy?

WWM: Luigi does not believe that he can change much, so he passively resists. Most people don't want to rebel or react, because they fear the consequences for themselves or others. They also believe change may be worse than what is bad but known. In institutions where there is little mobility, acceptance soon becomes inertia and denial. We face this everyday, unfortunately, in various ways, not only in Italy.

RV: At one point when speaking of the Etruscans, Luigi muses, "why is it that a culture goes so far and no further?" Do you feel that if a culture doesn't adapt it may collapse?

WWM: Throughout prehistory and history we see how new technologies influence things and how people, then, realize that reality is not fixed. Technology contributes to changing belief systems and behavior. I wanted to explore that in a minor way in the novel. The cell phone was my example. Many events in the plot would be different if the possibility to reach people outside of their fixed locations did not exist. Milli realizes that the cell

phone is a powerful god. Luigi considers it a sign of weakness and dependency. In both cases, it alters how events develop.

RV: A major theme in the book is how characters shed old skins for new. Could you elaborate?

WWM: Each character in the arc of the fifteen hours before the solstice in Florence undergoes a change. Some of the changes are major, some minor. Existential choices are not always completely shattering in their effects. I use Virgil, a toad in Susan's garden, to shed his skin during the frame of the novel. He eats it. It is a struggle. Milli remembers how the placenta is honored in Nigeria, how it nourishes. The interactions and cross-references ripple through the book.

RV: Is there a common thread to the many different character voices in TR? If so what is it?

WWM: We are each many characters. I wanted to show relationships, father, daughter, mother, son from many sides within and outside of each of my fictional people. I wanted to create motion until repetitions moved among voices. I wanted to put women in positions where I hoped to find some of the inevitable wonder and conflicts their roles and experience generate. I wanted to show the female as an equal going back to prehistoric times. Susan excavates an Etruscan warrior and in her sand therapy she returns to the myth of Demeter. Themes of the female archetype touch all the characters including Luigi and Gian Franco, his friend.

RV: Was it difficult to find a publisher for TR?

WWM: Finding one took years. I started writing the novel in 1998, finished it after a complete revision in 2005 and published it in 2013. I had two stays at Yaddo, two agents, uncountable rejections in which the justifications were near confessions of guilt. The bright side is that many people were helpful, including the publisher of my nonfiction books at FSG, who fully supported me in finding a home for it.

The world of independent presses is full of creative editors who are looking for voices shouted down by the noise of what sells. Incidentally, in recent years Noble prizes have been given to foreign writers published by small houses. The discovery of Elsa Ferrante, a best seller, is another feather in the cap of an independent press.

After many near misses, I encountered Jeffrey Miller, the publisher of Cadmus Editions. He is an independent, cultured thinker, who has published crucial work by Paul Bowles and Mario Benedetti. He threw himself into producing a beautiful book, starting from his choice of the typeface, Arno. He published *Toscanelli*, knowing that it had few chances for commercial success. Nevertheless, I think it would be fair to say that he believes that writing is about finding its place over time.

RV: How would you describe your writing voice? You certainly have an interest in language. Could you say something about how you use it in your writing?

WWM: Speaking in Italian everyday changed my use of English. Rhythms, word order, clauses, and of course, connotations have mixed and migrated. My language has been enriched; thickened, is the way it feels. Italian holds more metaphor, words more ambiguities.

It surprises me when people say that I have an interest in language. Let's say that I am drawn to the need for speech. Although I didn't know it until I had reached middle age, I lost a great deal of my hearing when I was hospitalized at age three and a half. So I think I became a listener early on as well as becoming a reader. Then, because my parents had very strict, limiting ideas for girls, words became quite painful for me. Their power to affect others nearly split me in two. Living outside of my country, and outside of my language, I was put right back into the dilemma of what language meant to me, and what words could do or not do. Like many writers, I am keenly aware of how challenging it is to be an authentic writer. I don't know if I have succeeded in *Toscanelli* but I have tried to add something unheard, something just outside of expected frequencies, to the world's amazing song.

Roderick Vincent's work has been published in *Writer's Digest*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *The Baltimore Post Examiner*, *Stray Light* and *Offshoots*. His debut novel, *The Cause*, was published by Roundfire Books, 2014.