

## Sinister colonnades

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GUIDA LETTERARIA DI TORINO  
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Recently I returned to Turin for the first time since 1994; I had lived there for a couple of years while researching a book. Much of the city, I found, had been cleaned up for the 2006 Winter Olympics. The magnificent Piazza San Carlo, known as “the parlour” of Turin, looked even more light and airy without cars driving across it. In the square’s many elegant cafés, with their dark-panelled walls and marble-topped tables, people sat sipping coffee over slices of *gianduotti*, hazelnut-studded chocolate cakes. That much, at least, had not changed.

Because of its proximity to France, Turin is in many ways a most un-Italian city. Older bourgeois Turinese still use some French or almost-French words: “Monsù”, “bon-a neut”. French architects had laid down a grid plan for Turin in the sixteenth century, and their mathematical design created 10,000 metres of interlinked sheltering colonnades; “useful when it rains”, Primo Levi observed. Levi, who was born in Turin in 1919, was profoundly attached to Piedmont and proud of his Turinese roots. Turin was “logical”, “spacious”, “self-controlled”, he said. The city’s orderly layout, he believed, was mirrored in the restrained character of the Turinese. And, as Pier Massimo Pro시오 shows in his *Guida letteraria di Torino*, Levi upheld this virtue of concision in his writing, just as much as in his life.

Yet Primo Levi took his life in Turin, as did the Piedmontese poet Cesare Pavese. Before either of them, Pro시오 reminds us, the popular novelist Emilio Salgari had disembowelled himself in the dark woods above Turin. All streets

intersect at right angles in geometric Turin – but this geometry need not square with rational behaviour. Nietzsche reputedly went mad in Turin (the self-proclaimed Antichrist was seen to embrace a cart horse on the Via Po in 1889). Many of Giorgio De Chirico’s proto-Surrealist landscapes, with their sinister broken statues and endless colonnades, are really portraits of Turin.

A likeable guide, Pro시오 takes the visitor on a series of literary promenades (as he calls them), and appends a series of maps for the purpose. These maps are very useful: as with all cities built to a grid, it can be difficult to know where you are in Turin. From the city’s disorientating design, I think, comes a vague melancholy. In the evenings, when the sun casts shadows across the angular arcades and porticoed squares, it can appear unreal. John Ruskin, who visited in 1858, understood this melancholy well.

According to Pro시오, Turin’s renown as a centre of the supernatural hints at a darker undertow. Occultists claim Turin as part of a magic triangle with Lyons and Prague, and table-rapping and other spiritualist hokum are still indulged in this outwardly conservative

city. Turin’s celebrated literary duo, Franco Lucentini and Carlo Fruttero, have co-authored numerous detective novels set in the city’s spooky outskirts. The most famous of these, *La donna della domenica* (*The Sunday Woman*), was the Italian bestseller of 1972, and continues to be read. Yet Pro시오 reminds us that Lucentini committed suicide in 2002, fifteen years after Primo Levi, and in a similar manner, by hurling himself down the stairwell of his residence off the Via Po.

However, there is more to Turin than melancholy atmospherics. The city’s wonderful belle époque poet Guido Gozzano described a place “favourable to pleasures”. In the 1890s, Turin was the capital of Italy’s cinema industry, a small Hollywood on the banks of the Po. The city also set the fashion for swirling art-nouveau (Liberty-style) patterns and the “S” line in dresses, which daringly accentuated body curves. In the Caffè Nazionale, a gilded octagonal saloon along the Via Po, Gozzano and his circle devoured Turin’s gossipy dialect paper, *Bichirin* (“Cheeky Rascal”). And, to judge by the city’s myriad theatres, cinemas and opera houses, cultural life in turn-of-the-century Turin was much more lively than it is today. Nietzsche saw Bizet’s *Carmen* no fewer than fourteen times in Turin (perhaps that was a sign that all was not well with him).

In pages of lucid if slightly antique Italian, Pro시오’s guide (now in its third edition) provides an absorbing and meticulously researched literary portrait of one of the stranger European cities. Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Henry James all passed through. And the smells and sounds I knew so well from the winter of 1994 – roasted coffee, the clanking of trams – hit me forcibly as if I had never been away.