

The Free Art of a Free Spirit

by Bruno Filippi



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Ugly, with a head of hair like Absalom, he looked like a Rasputin who had bathed. Two clear eyes that never flashed, but at certain moments blew an ice-cold wind.

If you want to know any more about him, go into the tunnel. You will see a great wool scarf with a hat above it. That's him. Stop him. Greet him. Even if he doesn't know you, he won't be surprised to see you. Offer him a cigarette (otherwise, he will ask you for one!) and he will graciously speak with you. Later, if you pay him a bottle of Judas' blood [A name for a kind of red wine in Italy.-translator], then he will clear up some paradox that disturbed you. But don't fool yourself into think you understand his idea. Within one quarter hour, he will be anarchist, bourgeois, aristocrat, occultist, futurist, etc., etc. He will break your eardrums with the words he spouts; he will mock the hell out of you with an air of seriousness.

And don't take offense, because, after all, at that moment he will feel a great fondness for you. He might even kiss you. He is horribly neurasthenic. If you notice that he has grown silent and is smoking furiously, you will only manage to draw inconclusive words from his mouth. At that moment he desires two people; the one most desired is of no concern to you, the other is his dear little numbskull.

If he finds her, if he takes her in his arms, if he leaves with her. What carnage then!

They are capable of breaking windows in houses, trying to derail streetcars, spitting on old men's coats...

Creatures from another world, I tell you... marvelous rascals. This is "He"!

receive the young flesh that will fertilize it. This magnificently terrible decadence occurs in the titanic light of a colossal fire, suitable for the collapse of this civilization.

So I see this vast entanglement of people, I see death by alcohol, tuberculosis, cannons. I see cripples, consumptives, idiots, delinquents.

Literature, art, science, the influx of this monstrous invasion replaces everything. The whole world is nothing but a teeming putrefaction that rises, rises and invades everything and swallows it up.

Humanity considers itself noble. It speaks of heroism, of progress and is not aware of its infection. The abyss has opened up and humanity falls into it singing, howling, quarreling, with its god, its fatherland, its murderous civilization, its elegant degeneration.

Everything falls, everything collapses. Moldy morality, twisted and lying philosophies, out-dated rhetoric do not redeem the situation. The disease has advanced and there is no longer any way to prevent it. The tidbits that adorn the old structure have become the home of infectious microbes. Everything is already condemned to disappear, crushed under the enormous pile of old rubbish. History closes this curious phase, which presented the incomprehensible spectacle of inertia in members devoted to a throng of various non-existent phantoms, and which saw continuous ridiculous construction in order to then destroy, the continuous patient suffering of the multitudes and the revelry of the few, everything creating an ensemble of cowardice, inversion, wickedness that they would try to pass off as heroism, everything a withered mentality that they call inspired.

So this age has ended. Good riddance. In the presence of such ruins, I sing of the disaster, a new Nero. I revel in seeing it. Then on these ruins, I will build my edifice, my civilization, my world. Therefore, I sing...

* * *

“HIM”

That imbecile was a living puzzle. You never knew what he had in his skull.

Who Was Bruno Filippi?

Little is known about Bruno Filippi. He was born in 1900 in Livorno, Italy, the first of six brothers, and his father was a typographer. His family moved to Milan when he was still a child. In 1915, he was already known to the police who described him as a “dangerous element”. That same year, he was arrested during an anti-militarist demonstration; he had a warm gun without bullets. He spent some time in prison. After the war, in 1919, social unrest broke out throughout the country. In Milan, there were often clashes with the police and Filippi was among the rebels. In the summer, several young anarchists, including Filippi, began to attack their enemies. A bomb exploded at the Hall of Justice; there was an attempt to injure one of the most powerful Italian capitalists, Giovanni Breda, with sulfuric acid and a bomb exploded at his house; another bomb exploded at the home of a rich senator.

On September 7, 1919, Bruno Filippi was climbing the steps of the building where the “club of nobles” was located. He was carrying a bomb, hoping to destroy this meeting place for the richest people of the city. Suddenly, the bomb exploded, killing the young anarchist.

Bruno Filippi was a regular contributor to the individualist anarchist paper Iconoclasta! In 1920, the editors of the paper printed a booklet with many of his articles entitled Posthumous Writings of Bruno Filippi.

Row after row of those who are more morally than physically chronic consumptives, pinheads, cripples, hunchbacks, blind; horrible faces sculpted by vice, by syphilis, by alcohol.

Whose toothless, yellow, slobbering mouths vomited against my horrible insults.

All the hatred that gurgles in your throat, forming two rivulets of slobber that run down from the corners of your mouth, does not move me from my indifference.

Still you shake your fist, which was trained to toss dung. And you women insult me as well, you in whose womb human sorrow perpetuates itself. You are all vile, vile! Despicable beings, worthy of the whip! Crawling reptiles in search of one filthy crust of bread, dogs who lick the hand of anyone who beats you! Is it for you, really for you, that I must rise up in revolt?

For you, for your children and your mothers?

Carcasses rotting in resignation, worm-eaten mummies of a decadent society, you deceive yourselves. I wouldn't give the tiniest drop for your cause, nor even waste a cigarette on you.

Go on with your descent into the mud. While you bring yourselves down, I will climb. I will rejoice in seeing the degeneration that makes its way inside you. I rejoice. I rejoice.

Day after day, your forehead recedes, your mouth becomes more sinister. Day after day, the stigmata of putrefaction are noticed under your yellowing skin.

And I laugh, I laugh!

What a joy to be present at the collapse of a world, to see blood, corpses, rot everywhere!

Meanwhile the bourgeoisie and the people deceive each other and slaughter each other.

I am here, amused by all this bustling about.

The people go out, look, comment, commiserate and then go back to drinking, shouting, singing.

Again I flee. On the corners I see the announcements for various operettas and cafe chanteuses: I hear a crowd of young men discussing soccer and cycling. Poor humanity that rises!

I leave the streets, I go deep into the meadows. I want to forget, to dream. A figure comes out from a group of trees and approaches me. I feel the scent of wine strike my nostrils. "Come, you will give me thirty cents!"

* * *

I have dreamed of a world in flames, rolling in the infinite and hurling red-hot meteors and sparks through the starry spaces.

* * *

I have a god like everyone else; but this god is myself. [In Italian this is a wordplay that does not translate. In Italian, "god" is "dio" and "I" is "io". A literal translation of this sentence would be: "I have a god (dio) like everyone else; but it is without the 'd'".]

* * *

Decadence.

Today various nations butt their heads together like enormous rams, each desiring supremacy over the others.

The romantic Latin lands and mercantile Albion against imperial Germany while the tiny Balkan lands trail behind with the picturesque baggage of their backward eastern customs. And Russia blazes on the horizon as it enters a new phase of its life.

In the East, civilizations renewed and reinvigorated by fresh energies look to the north where the fine odor of corpses can be smelled, and the little children of the sun hope that they can spread their over-abundant population here in a renewed expansion of Asiatic civilization.

And yet this spectacle, this mad squandering of energy, this relentless struggle for life, reveals no ardor for real and conscious strength to me at all. I see only an immense breakdown, a demolition of castles, a mortal collision between nations, while the indifferent earth opens its breast to

aimlessly and observe the incessant hustle and bustle, the continuous parade of stereotyped and indifferent faces. Flashy women pass, and in all their movements and their simplest gestures you see the effort, the ostentation, aimed only at arousing desire. And men stop, follow the gaudy, buxom figurine with a greedy eye and make vulgar comments. Here is a crowd of orphans, badly stuffed into poorly made clothes. They go by guided by a stocky, vulgar priest. Poor babies! Raised in bigotry, in the corrupt atmosphere of the boarding school, they are resigned, the helots of tomorrow. I see a church. A coarse pastor talks with the devoted women who listen to him, repentant and attentive, and the priestling shakes the hairy hands and turns his eyes away throwing sidelong glances. The well-fed one in the shadow of the temple of lies hears the howls of work and misery that seem to hover over the great city with anger. "Spare change, sir," a filthy ragged being moans... "Spare change, sir..." And the crowd goes by, uncaring, thinking of the evening's soup, the tavern, the bowling game. And the call of the beggar continues, annoying and implacable, making my head pound, making my brain throb.

I quicken my pace; I am in the wealthy district. Carriages, automobiles, liveried servants with idiotic faces open car doors and bow. I see women wearing make-up and perfume, preened dandies with kid gloves, monocles, walking sticks, tricolor cockades. These people collide and mingle: they speak of dinner and dancers. A nauseating scent rises that takes me by the throat and chokes me. But I remain, nearly spellbound, hearing the rustling of silk, the twittering of the gentlewomen. The notes of a patriotic anthem come billowing out of a cafe: there is a cripple standing near to me, leaning on crutches, who watches the endless stream in amazement.

I flee. I walk through solitary, half-lit streets: I come out in squares, in alleys.

Ragged, dirty children, pregnant women, people black from smoke and stinking of cigarette butts. Dump, crumbling houses, corners smelling of piss, taverns full of drunken, shouting customers. Here are the soldiers: with heavy steps, in rhythm, sweaty, dusty, furrowed faces, bent backs.

Here a Kaiser, there a Wilson and everywhere people who moan and don't rise up.

Into the mud, reptile!

I do not want to unite with the multitude of those who flatter the proletariat, excusing them, praising them, adorning them with wreathes. No, oh distinguished windbags, your verve disguises nothing. The "people" is always there, idiotic, cowardly, resigned. And I, who consider myself superior, desire to be so, and both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will pay for my superiority. You languish in hunger and hardships, you vegetate, bestially fertilizing wombs with a swarm of ragged, filthy, scrofulous, stunted brats.

Force! You raise your cowardly lament in chorus! You say that you are hungry. You stretch out your hand in front of the shop window full of jewels. Do it, take it! You complain to each other about the war when you yourselves are its authors, and it continues because you put up with it! But I flee from your putridity that would sully me. Proudly alone, I break the chains that link me to you and separate myself from the pack of mangy dogs, submissive to the shepherd. I will wander the world alone carrying my hatred and scorn everywhere. Alone in struggle. A one in victory and in defeat. My ideas will be the poison that must end up intoxicating you and you tremble before me as before the King, the supreme!...

And meanwhile, I laugh at your grotesque and bloody throng, I laugh so much that I no longer see anyone, and it seems to me that humanity is an immense gangrenous sore that perpetually disgorges thick putrescent pus. And this sore is moved, shaken, covered with scabs that later disappear in order to make way for another disgorging of putrescent matter.

And I laugh and laugh!...

* * *

Most ancient roots of a sentimentalism that has already ended, why do you persist in your moldy ideas? Don't you here the thundering life that pursues and teaches?

Absorbed up to now in a placid dream of peace, in a shining future, you fought this way, with your eyes lost in your illusions. But now we pose a problem, and you must have the courage to confront it and discuss it.

To you we pose the problem: to be or not to be. Up to now, your dream was altruism, sacrifice for humanity, for the future. And so you sacrificed your entire being in this inversion. Why should you care about the future? Why should you care about the progress of the people? Since you, who call yourselves anarchists, are sure to engage in a battle that is already lost for you before it has even started, since you will certainly not see the society of which you dream, and even if the people rebel, social conditions would not change for you and your rebellion would have to continue.

So what's the use of going down among a mass that cannot comprehend you since its conditions are such as to render you unintelligible to them? If you are rebel geniuses as you claim, you should not replace Christian self-denial and patriotic servitude with the altruism of the anarchist who sacrifices himself for a future he will not see and this for people who do not comprehend you. You must recognize that, being born into a society that is harmful to us, we rebels are in reality the best slaves. Being slaves of evolution, by means of our sacrifice, we allow humanity to take a tiny step. If only that were adequate, but since progress never ends and is, therefore, useless, since once society has attained the social form for which we fought it will not stop, but will need to go on toward a goal that we cannot imagine at all today, we must admit that all of our bustling about is utterly without purpose. So we observe that the strongest and best energies of every epoch are exploited by this immense leech that is humanity.

Socrates, Christ, Bruno and a vast multitude of great thinkers have been the victims of this rising movement, which is harmful for anyone who submits to it. For it is natural that the slaves in Rome, being born in that era, were content with their condition just as wage-slaves are today.

Relative contentment, let's be clear about it, formed of resignation, cowardice, ignorance, etc., etc. Defects that the mass will always have in

for rest, the enticement to remain so on the sand, to vanish, to disappear under the sun, to return to the void. The jackals would come and make a feast of my body, leaving only my blanching skeleton as a mute mockery of life. But I rise up, I kill the germ of peace and go on. I will arrive because I desire it. And if I don't arrive? Then the desert will take possession of me.

* * *

I have fallen ill with the same disease as Nietzsche and it displeases me to admit having anything in common with this or the other world. I am restless and neurasthenic. I have an iron hoop on my head that crushes my skull, and my eyes throb in their sockets, swollen and bloody, tired of dreams. I am destined to pass through this world, wandering like an invisible meteor. Precisely because I am superior, I will have to empty the entire cup of sorrow and distress with no joy to cheer me. But the harsh intoxication of drinking from the chalice of sorrow is a superb pleasure that only one who tears his soul to shreds by himself, with his own hands, is given to taste. Still I sometimes covet the other cup, the cup of joy, in order to moisten my greedy lips with it, but it flees and now, day after day, the chasm that separates me from others frightens me. Who will come with me? Who will have the courage to fly over the gulf in order to listen to my truth, in order to disperse a little of my sadness? Who? ... Yesterday at the peak of my weariness, I received a postcard from an unknown woman. Three violets that cheered me up a bit with my gaiety of the thought and the symbol: twelve words that made me dream pleasantly.

I thank the unknown woman for her thought and for her mysteriousness that allows me to rise in flight on the winged horse of reverie. Gentle unknown woman, where are you? Perhaps in passionate Andalusia or in gay France? Who knows? Any one who knows that she, the unknown woman, is the ray of light! ... No, impossible! Inside me lies thick darkness. I don't think, I don't speak, but I desire the sun, the light.

* * *

I wander through the voracious city, immersing myself in the din of life in order to kill a germ of melancholy that is developing inside me. I wander

in search of the spring that she will never reach it; you will see her fold her wings lost, discouraged. I do not stop, I do not fold my wings. Who knows that the distant dawn cannot be reached; who knows?

My spirit is dry as a desert, my eyes burn as if with fever. And it seems that with each stroke something inside breaks with a mournful crash. Who, who could describe what I feel? Not even I myself can do it. At times I feel my mind spreading out, expanding, glad, confident. And then, at a stroke, it shrivels suddenly with a most acute sorrow. What does the world, what does humanity matter to me? I no longer see anyone. My eyes see only one thing, a distant dawning. Everything else is shadow.

Laughing nature irritates me since it clashes with my sorrowful thoughts and almost seems to mock me. I would prefer that the sky was dark and flashing like me at these times. Like the shipwrecked person who finds himself in the desolate vastness of the ocean and trembles at the baleful solitude, keeping an eye on the horizon in hope of seeing a friendly sail appear, I also feel alone, painfully alone, lost in a fearful vastness. But I will not let myself be overcome by waves. I will plow the sea with my vigorous arms in my search, an untiring and daring wayfarer.

Fluctuat in porto. The Latin motto spurs me on and I gaze like the helmsman at the lighthouse in the distance that pierces the fog with its beam of the light. And I want to reach that light. I will, I will! No obstacle will keep me from it, neither reefs nor blustery gales. I will be strong, I will arrive. Like the Arab caravans preparing to cross the Sahara and observing the sandy vastness that they will have to cross with fear, with the anxiety of being lost along the way, that still go on and on and on, under the blazing sun, amid the raging of the simoom, thirsty, hungry, tired, beside humped camels that widen their nostrils in order to steal a little coolness from the dry air, with the urgent, fixed vision of a slender white mosque from which the muezzin salutes Mecca in the evening, of a cool village in which to rest, thus I also go on and on and on with a single vision in my eyes. Untiring, I go on, choking with an entire tempest inside me. If what I feel could be changed into wind, I would pass like a devastating storm, destroying everything under my violent blows. And I go on, I go on. My mind suffers, my eyelids close; I feel a need for peace,

greater or lesser degrees because collectivities are always inferior to individuals.

The people are conservative: they are satisfied with the society they find. The minority are innovators instead and therefore they rebel. The mass restrains revolutionary action with its brute weight and submits to it.

It grows accustomed to the new state of things. It rots there until the minority rebels once again.

And do I have to suffer through this entire balancing act? I, who have the strength and awareness to be my own motive force, will not be the little cog that is overwhelmed, annihilated by the heavy social gears.

Rebel, because today society oppresses me and tries to prevent the free expression of my being, I use every weapon to fight it.

Rebel against the mass that is also my enemy with its superstitions, morals, degradations, etc. I fight against the mass as well. In struggle only for MY redemption, for MY freedom, for MY present.

I don't give a damn for all the rest.

The priest triumphs, alcohol kills, the government slaughters; it means nothing to me because it doesn't touch me.

I, I defend only myself from attacks.

And if I should fall in this unequal struggle, certainly not alone [* Alas, you did fall alone! (Italian editor's note)] , I will have the sublime satisfaction of having risen up against a world and having won intellectually if not materially.

Scholars, scientists, poets, novelists, painters, this is why your genius is worthless in front of me. You are a reflection of life, I am its essence. And you certainly, feel atrocious pain in your hearts at seeing rhetorical castles collapse, and in spite of it all you continue to support them out of hatred for anything new. And, after all, you do well. You are born to crawl, I fly. For you the mud, for me the peaks. For you cowardly annihilation, for me the sublimation of being. And surely if life is for the strongest, I will have it. I will take it by force and by force I will steal well — being and enjoyment.

And you, parodies of human beings, continue on your march through darkness. The light shines on my path. You are afraid to be: this is the truth. The true human being frightens you. In spite of your rhetorical bluster, reality frightens. You dream, you dream. I live. You are not; I am.

I have solved the problem. You howl at me from behind.

* * *

“I would like to lie down on a soft, fragrant bed of roses...” “Watch out for the thorns” they cry out to me. “And what do they matter to me? Since thorns are not lacking in life, I prefer those of the roses that give joy with the pain.”

* * *

And fine. You who are reading this can say that my prose is crazy, abnormal, as you have called my actions crazy and abnormal. But your judgment doesn't interest me at all nor do I solicit it.

I only desire superior minds to know why I hurled myself into the darkness due to an indescribable feeling; I want the opposing mercenary pen to be unable to cover my name with the trash that is in their baggage. I alone am the reporter of myself: I flee the intermediaries who would, in good or bad faith, deform my ideas. And since I will probably not be able to reveal them, I desire that after my disappearance it is known how I determined this struggle against society. Therefore, I entrust these thoughts to a person who does not know my project and who will reveal them when the curtain falls.

* * *

Is it the haziness of the universe that still saddens me with its hazy mist? Is it a dark fate that threatens me? I don't know what causes this melancholy that depresses me, delighting in tormenting me, snatching all that I fool myself into loving and believing away from me.

Oh! The joyful faith of times past when I gladly fought the good fight for the Idea, without fears without doubts. Now, however, it all seems vain to me; for everywhere I perceive dense and impenetrable darkness.

I have destroyed everything, everything, and now I am left with my sad thoughts, doubting everything, all of it. And I feel this need to spread my

thoughts on this blank sheet that has not shuddered at learning of the storm that torments me. Who will read these lines? Perhaps nobody. They will remain unknown as nothing is known about those who are familiar with the weariness of my thought.

* * *

This evening, as usual, I was reading when a passage of the piece struck me vividly and I then stopped reading to reflect. I was just then musing when, turning my eyes absent-mindedly about the room I looked, and more, I saw myself seated on the bed. Not I, but yet it was I, because he was absolutely like me. Amazed, I gazed in silence, and he, the other I, looked at me as well, but with a certain ironic smile.

“Who are you?” I asked him. “Your shadow,” he answered. “I have come here for a bit of discussion.” “Let's discuss, then,” I replied.

“Well: why are you an anarchist?” “Why, because currently we are exploited, trampled by rulers.”

“Rhetoric, rhetoric, my dear. Listen: you are an anarchist and you don't even know why. I have always noticed this: that in every society there have been innovators who end up on the stake, on the cross and so on and so on. So these innovators with all their dreams and sacrifices failed miserably, because any renewal, anticipated by any individual whatsoever, occurs a long time after the death of that individual. And this is what will happen with you anarchists. You will die without seeing any one of your ideals carried out, and the generation after you, which may live in an anarchist society, will long for a higher ideal and will die in their turn without achieving anything. It's a vicious circle, an eternal chasing after oneself.

* * *

Today as never before, the shadows surrounded me. And indeed it happens that after living for some time surrounded by the warmth of the sun, when it is eclipsed, one is shaken with a sudden chill.

The cold has entered my mind that dreams of a future of warmth and sees it in the far distance, or, as someone told me, almost out of reach. How sad these words are. You say to the swallow that takes flight