

Confessions of an Italian man

All the drawings are by Gilberto Pace.

Ippolito Nievo

**CONFESSIONS
OF AN ITALIAN MAN**

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Intermediate English

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Ippolito Nievo

He was born in Padua on 30th November 1831. His father Antonio was a nobleman, magistrate, and his mother Adele Marin, daughter of a patrician of Venice. During his childhood and early youth he followed the fatherly shifts for positions in the judiciary, in Venice, Verona, Mantua and Sabbioneta. He had three younger brothers (one died at the age of two) and a younger sister. He entered the boarding school of the Seminary of Verona and the gymnasium of St Anastasia. Later he attended high school in Mantua. His political engagement brought him to participate in the uprisings of Mantua in 1848. In 1855 he graduated in law at the University of Padua.

He is author of a few collections of poetry, novels and tragedies. His masterpiece is the novel *Confessions of an Italian Man*, written in eight months in 1858. It is the fictional autobiography of octogenarian Charles Altoviti, whose personal stories are interviewed with the political events, from the fall of the Republic of Venice to French rule, the Restoration, the conspiracies and the battles of the Risorgimento. The significance of the novel lies in the attempt to fuse the historiographical interest with the psychological.

On 5th May 1860 he embarked in Quarto with the Expedition of the Thousand. On 11th they landed at

Marsala, and on 27th they took Palermo. The garibaldi became part of the national army of Sicily; Nievo was appointed Deputy General Intendant of national forces in Sicily with the rank of captain. New Year's Day was celebrated with his family at Fossato, near Mantua. In February 1861 he received the order to go back to Palermo, to collect the documentation of Garibaldi's administration, which were then to be sent to the government in Turin. On 4th March Nievo with his men embarked on the steamer *Hercules* bound for Naples. The next day at dawn the boat was shipwrecked off the Sorrento peninsula.

Main characters

- Charles Altoviti, the narrator
- Todero Altoviti, his father
- Lady Navagero, his mother
- Lord John, Count of Fratta
- Cleonice Navagero, Countess of Fratta, sister of Charles' mother
- Clare, Rinaldo, Pisana, their children
- Monsignor Orlando, Count of Fratta's brother, canon of the cathedral of Portogruaro
- Sir Mauro Navagero, Cleonice's cousin
- Almorò Frumier, Count of Fratta's brother-in-law, Venetian senator

Employees in the castle of Fratta:

- Martin, Marchetto, keepers
- Captain Sandracca, chief of the country militia
- Germano, gate usher
- Faustina, Veronica, maids

People from Fratta:

- Priest of Teglio, rector of the pieve
- Chaplain of Fratta
- Fulgenzio, sexton
- Monsignor of St Andrew, confessor of the countess of Fratta
- Donato, son of the spice-seller
- Sander, son of the miller

- Giulio del Ponte, a friend of Pisana
- Lord Natalino, Count of Venchieredo
- Raymond, Doretta, his children
- Gaetano, a thug of the Count of Venchieredo
- Father Pendola, preceptor of Raymond
- Mister Ormenta, lawyer, adviser of the Count of Venchieredo
- Lucilio Vianello from Fossalta, doctor
- Albert of Partistagno from Lugugnana, Baron of Dorsa
- Anthony Provedoni, mayor of Cordovado
- Leopard, Brutus, Griffon, Aquiline, his children
- Mister Apostulos, a Greek merchant and banker
- Aglaura, his adoptive daughter
- Spiro, his son
- Ettore Carafa, general of the Neapolitan Legion

I – The Hamlet of Fratta

I was born on the eighteenth of October 1775, St Luke's day, as Venetian, and I will die, by the grace of God, as Italian, when the Providence will decide. That is the moral of my life.

Now, in 1858, I am over eighty, yet young at heart. My life has spanned between two centuries, which will remain a memorable time in the Italian history. They bore first fruit of the political speculations, which arose during the previous centuries from the works of Dante, Machiavelli, Vico and many others.



I spent my first years in the castle of Fratta, that is now a ruin, but in my childhood was a great manor with towers, a big drawbridge and fine gothic windows.

The castle stood impressively with a moat² around it. Century-old poplars shadowed the landscape. His owner was the Count of Fratta. At that time he was over sixty, though he looked as if it was a short time since he had taken off his armour, being so stiff and puffed up on his armchair. Nevertheless, his wig³, his long flowing coat and his snuffbox clashed a little with his warlike attitude. He was always clean-shaven, as if just out of the barber's. When he spoke, even the flies kept silent; when he stopped speaking, all assented or nodded. When he laughed, everyone hastened to laugh; when he sneezed, due to the tobacco, eight or nine voices raced together: 'Bless you! Good health! Happiness! God bless you!' When he got up, everyone reverently got up; when he left the kitchen, all, even the cats, breathed a sigh of relief. The chancellor breathed still more deeply, when the count left him in peace, which seldom happened. Usually the chancellor appeared to be the incarnate shadow of the count. He had to get the respect of the jurisdictional rights of the count over the peasants living and working in his lands. In case of issues, however, the count knew well how to put the clemency of Titus⁴ and the justice of trials together.

The count had a younger brother, Mgr Orlando, who did not look like him at all. He was canon of the cathedral of Portogruaro. Their father wanted him to be a court official, reminding him of his name and advising him to read Ariosto's poem. He, still a child, answered that he used to read the Office of the Madonna. As for him, the old father insisted that Orlando had set free

² Moat: deep, wide channel.

³ Wig: a piece of artificial hair.

⁴ Proverbial paternalism of the good government of Titus Flavius Vespasianus (39-81 a. D.)

the kingdom of France from the Moors, and that, if he had read the *Jerusalem Freed*, he would have learned that not by the Office of the Madonna, but through strokes of swords and lances Godfrey had taken away the sepulcher of Christ from the Saracens.

'God be thanked', was the child's assent. His father did not lose his patience and was used to saying that the infidels had conquered Jerusalem again. Praying was not enough, fighting was necessary. Usually, at this point, his mother meddled with her remark that their child could not have a crusade on his own. He wanted to say Mass and become saint, not kill his brothers. At the end his father reluctantly had to yield to his son's demand.

Besides the mentioned forensic and ecclesiastical dignities, the manorial court lodged its military celebrity. It was Captain Sandracca, chief of the country militia. Beauty was not bestowed on him: it was highly unlikely that the goddesses of grace and beauty had presided at his birth.

The district of Portogruaro, to which belongs the village of Tegliò and its hamlet⁵ Fratta, is part of the Friuli, eastern region of the Republic of the Serenissima.

At the end of the fifteenth century, the Turkish raids had so frightened that land, that the Friulan people had found a bulwark⁶ by joining the Serenissima. Friuli was controlled by about seventy families, coming from beyond the Alps, and established on the territory long ago, to whom the jurisdiction was entrusted from the different dominions. These families and the representa-

⁵ Hamlet: small village.

⁶ Bulwark: protection.

tives of the free lands (about one hundred of jurisdictions as a whole) formed the parliament of the country. The assembly was summoned once a year in Udine and was presided by a Venetian deputy. It demanded the approval of the resolutions to the Serenissima.

The local jurisdiction still referred to the Friulan statutes of 1673. Where the regional laws were lacking in judgement, Venetian law held good. In the Friulan right the shrewdness⁷ of the administrators often came up to the *equitas* of the roman right. Accommodating slyness and greedy bossiness of the officials and their lords marked the boundaries of justice and right.

The Friulan aristocracy had been dividing in two factions. The first was the country faction, which was less used to the Venetian court and closer to the imperial court of Vienna; the latter was the town faction, which was more connected with Venetian nobility. This side of Tagliamento river prevailed the Venetian party, among them the counts of Fratta; beyond the river, on the contrary, the imperial party was prominent.

At the time of Empress Maria Theresa three lords were accused of being pro-Austrian. They were Franzì (province of Pordenone), Tarcentini (province of Udine) and Partistagno (province of Gorizia). In Venice the Secret Council was summoned to discuss the question. The three lords were compelled to appear before the Council of the Ten, to clear up their position. Two of them observed the resolution, while Gherardo Partistagno, instead of the refreshments, gave the inquisitor at his castle a going-over⁸, and sent him back to Venice, snapping that Partistagno did not take or-

⁷ Shrewdness: astuteness.

⁸ Going-over: complete examination.