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Elio Bartolini. *La linea dell'arciduca*. Milan. Rusconi. 1980. 194 pages. 6,500 l.

Apart from Charles of Hapsburg, the Archduke of the title and of the railroad line—the building and not building of which constitutes the novel's action—there are no characters in the usual sense in this book. Instead we have functions—many of them also functionaries of the various political entities which from 1797 to the present governed the Valley of the Tagliamento in Friuli, where the narrative is set. Thus the "engineer" vainly trying to construct the railroad line in each of the book's four major sequences is always different but also always the same.

Whether in the uniform of the Austrian Empire or the knickers and panama of the Savoy, whether driving the Bugatti of a Fascist regime or discussing politics in the fail-safe terms of the post-atomic era, his task never varies: to measure, calculate, plan, project and then finally succumb to the forces of nature both in the swamp where his railroad is to go and in the greater miasma of an indifferent and distant bureaucracy. Since for Bartolini history repeats itself, the woman whom the engineer meets is also always the same, a function of his desire and isolation, though more and more degraded and helpless as the novel reaches the present day and the glitter of the Napoleonic uniforms gives way to the dull sheen of FRIULPLASTIK, decals, motor scooters and pinball machines.

In this work the theme of the manipulation of language recurs again and again, but it is language always inadequate to contain the ebullient forces of both nature and desire which seethe on, indifferent to the various attempts of military dispatches, operatic arias, Fascist rhetoric or technological jargon to define and control them. More a meditation on history, nature and language than a novel, Bartolini's book does not reach any consolatory conclusions but seems to self-destruct within one's hands in its insistence on the futility of all human activity, including the linguistic one which is its own inevitable mode of being.

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