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Imitating Mussolini with Advantages: The Case of Edgardo Sulis

With the new millennium and the fresh political and cultural atmosphere in Italy, the internationally distinguished[1] historian Roberto Vivarelli has come out. He has frankly acknowledged his wartime loyalty to fascism to the very last. As a teenager he had been educated to believe without question that Mussolini's dictatorship was 'a regime above the highs and lows of history and destined to endure'. For his cohort, he has recalled, 'Fascism was a myth, which filled our life and to which we gave our fervent commitment.'[2] His loyalty was absolute and, he now admits, it blinded him to the evil of the Salò Republic's atrocious Nazi ally, although he adds in somewhat predictable self-defence that most Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI) militants, including himself, had felt 'no resentment towards the Jews'.[3] He seems to view anti-Semitism as the only absolute Nazi-fascist evil. So, while he was in a more ordinary world just another schoolboy (he was born in 1929), in spring 1945 Vivarelli had made a personal journey to the front to die for his Italy and, failing in that quest, had returned on 24 April to Milan. The following day, he was steadfastly serving in Party Secretary Alessandro Pavolini's personal guard and hoping against hope that fascism would continue to fight.[4]

When the news spread of Mussolini's death and the humiliation and disfigurement of his corpse at the Piazzale Loreto, the young Vivarelli was appalled and disgusted.[5] Of course, the defeat and demolition of fascism had to be endured; its historical moment had ended. Over the next few months, as postwar life began, Vivarelli learned to conceal his past and was only converted to liberal 'democracy' in 1949. Nonetheless, he does not regard himself as in any sense *pentito* (repentant). Rather, he remains proud of his boyhood choices. He argues stoutly that he

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kept his pledge to the patriotic and ethical values that he learned from his father.[6]

Here, then, is another dimension to Vivarelli's present version of his past fascism. Though doubtless a true believer in Mussolini and his revolution, Vivarelli was simultaneously steeled by a sense of family duty. Indeed, his memoir very early reveals that he was the 'figlio di un morto ammazzato' (son of a murdered man).[7] Lavinio Vivarelli was killed fighting as a fascist volunteer in Italian armies policing occupied Yugoslavia. On 8 April 1942 he was seized in a partisan raid and was never seen alive again.[8] In recognition of his sacrifice, in June 1943 the fascist government made an extraordinary payment of L25,000 to his widow and sons.[9]

Lavinio Vivarelli's story is that of a man who joined the fascist movement in October 1920 in his hometown of Siena. He was born in 1900 into a family which, at least according to fascist officialdom, had fallen from the local patriciate, and he trained as a lawyer. He also found time to be a squadrist, participating in the murderous social actions through which fascism re-imposed order on the local peasantry.[10] Later, he joined the March on Rome and was able to boast that he had been wounded in the fascist cause.[11] After the dictatorship was established, he pursued work as a lawyer, but re-emerged politically to volunteer for service in Ethiopia in 1935–6, and then again in the Second World War from 1940. As the official report on Lavinio explained after his death — and the findings are replicated by his son in his memoir[12] —

> the family lives on a soldier's pension, since Avv. Vivarelli was never in a position to create a tranquil social situation, given that he devoted the best years of his career to fighting in the action squads at Florence and Siena, as well as in the conflict in Africa and the present war.[13]

A sceptical historian might wonder at the piety of these accounts and question some of their elisions. Service in the squads was very likely time-consuming over the period from 1920 to perhaps 1923 or 1924, and the later wars were doubtless an even more serious distraction. But what about the regime's halcyon decade after 1925? Should not Lavinio then have been able to locate a comfortable *sistemazione* (status and well-being) for his family? To this question his son provides no answer, except to assert that his father was a purist fascist. At the same time, we

learn that Lavinio was a believer in United Italy, utterly committed to the *patria*; that he was adamant that all family members must spring to attention whenever and wherever they heard the strains of the national anthem; that he was simultaneously a staunch monarchist, a Catholic and a fascist.[14]

On the surface, Roberto Vivarelli seems to have told his story well and led us cleverly to the conclusion that those who fought for Salò were certainly not the moral inferiors of those who rejected the restored dictatorship and joined the Resistance.[15] He even suggests that, from an Italian perspective, there was little to distinguish between German and Allied 'invaders', and implies that, whatever its fate in the war, fascism could rejoice in high achievements before 1940.[16]

Yet many silences resound through Vivarelli's account of his father's and his country's past. For example, we learn nothing of what Lavinio actually did when he so enthusiastically joined the brutal and largely uncontested fascist invasion of Ethiopia. Such evasion is, after all, the standard Italian position on this war. Nowhere in all the massive detail of his huge book did Renzo De Felice, who controversially defined the event as 'Mussolini's masterpiece', bother to estimate the Ethiopian death toll.[17] An admission that gas was used in the campaign, approved not just by Mussolini but also by the generals of the royal and national army (and no doubt by some fascist volunteers), has also been made only reluctantly and partially by mainstream Italian historiography.[18]

The story of the Italian occupation of the Balkans is a still more touchy subject[19] given that, at least during the first Berlusconi government, one could imagine that a revived Italian Right might query the frontier reached with Yugoslavia (now Slovenia and Croatia) after 1945, and reclaim an interest in Istria and Dalmatia. However, what is clear is that fascist governance of its zones within Yugoslavia was by no means gentle.[20] Moreover, wartime brutality itself had a history since, from its very foundation, one of the most influential components of fascism had been 'border nationalism'. Throughout the dictatorship, fascism pursued a policy in its north-eastern territories which today would be condemned as ethnic cleansing. Unusually in the history of Italian foreign policy, the fascist authorities could rely on a mass base in their determination to outface the 'Slav peril'. It was not just fascism, but rather Italian nationalism, which viewed a city

such as Trieste as a frontier garrison, which constructed Italians as 'civilized' and 'Slavs' as 'barbarous' and which, as a result, drew summary conclusions about the ideal fate of each.[21]

The irruption of the Second World War inevitably deepened the problem of relations between Italians and their neighbours, especially after the Germans swept aside the Yugoslav state in April 1941 and handed its subjects over to such fanatical domestic 'fascists' as Ante Pavelić in Croatia and to Axis occupation. Faced with a courageous and persistent resistance, the occupying Italians, whether fascists or members of the national army, ravaged villages, massacred women and children, brutalized POWs[22] and committed various other war crimes. Roberto Vivarelli tells us that his father was not a participant in such terror, but it is hard to believe that Lavinio the fascist volunteer was unaware of it. His own fate may have been cruel but in the circumstances, shooting prisoners was scarcely a surprising policy for the embattled partisans to pursue.

Vivarelli is not alone in offering a very partial reconstruction of Italy's Second World War. In a fine recent article, Ruth Ben-Ghiat has drawn attention to Roberto Benigni's magical skill in distorting the past in not dissimilar ways in his multi-award-winning film, *Life is Beautiful*. It is cast as a son's portrait of his father, 'like a fable', as Benigni ambiguously puts it (and therefore by implication, as Ben-Ghiat explains, 'perhaps possessed of some truth').[23] Benigni's real father, Luigi, did experience a Second World War, not as a literal Jewish victim of Auschwitz, but as a fascist soldier in Albania transported to Germany after the botched surrender of 8 September 1943, and thereafter held in an Italian POW camp. Ben-Ghiat demonstrates how hard it has been for Italians to integrate the history of such soldiers into the orthodox narratives of both memory and history. But, she warns, the slide offered by Benigni into what might be called a cosy 'Auschwitzization' is unlikely to produce a fully critical reading of the story of the fascist 'revolution' and the viciousness, as well as the failure, of its war effort.[24] Here is another tale of father and son which needs scrutinizing for what it does not say, as much as for what it does.

But Italy's special Second World War is only a part of the history of Mussolini's dictatorship. As noted previously, Vivarelli implies that fascist rule until 1940 had much to be said in its justification, served as it was by austere true believing patriots

such as Lavinio Vivarelli. The concept of 'true belief' and the notion that 'fascinating fascism' held in thrall the great majority of its citizens are becoming commonplaces of revisionist, 'Anti-Anti-Fascist' historiography. Moreover, the adepts of such interpretations are likely to rise in status and opportunity given that Italy can now boast Silvio Berlusconi as its Prime Minister and Gianfranco Fini, the allegedly 'post-fascist' chief of the Alleanza Nazionale (once the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano), as Deputy Prime Minister.

But did fascism really win hegemony? Did the spartan principles of its revolution really cheer the hearts and minds of its supporters? In the case of Lavinio Vivarelli, the answer seems to be yes. Nonetheless, in other instances, the hypocrisy and corruption of Mussolini's henchmen,[25] underscored by the Duce's own ever deepening misanthropy and cynicism,[26] offset more literal appraisals of the nature of fascist 'consensus'. However, what of middle ranking fascists: did they march onwards, united as fervent fascist soldiers? One telling case in this regard is that of the Sard aspirant intellectual, Edgardo Sulis. His fascism purported to be 'real', but somewhere not far beneath the surface, his fascist life was framed by the complex ties between Italian fathers and sons, as well as by those bonds which had long united Italian clients and their patrons.[27]

Sulis' first claim to fame is that, in 1934, he published a book with perhaps the most egregious title of all the star-struck accounts of the Duce, *Imitazione di Mussolini*.[28] In its pages, this Thomas à Kempis of fascism set out the basic tenets of what he called (in a way that would satisfy those convinced by Emilio Gentile's account of the 'sacralization of politics' under fascism)[29] 'the new political religion'. In the articles of this totalitarian faith, love of country, of nation, of Duce and perhaps potentially of race[30] fused in mysterious fashion. But in practice, Mussolini incarnated all that mattered to those who would serve the revolution. As Sulis preached in his peroration: 'You should imitate Mussolini alone; you should have no other example in life except him.' This 'imitation' amounted to a 'love which invades every thought and action, sometimes so unconsciously that you are sublimated . . . [into] perfection'.[31]

With the passage of time, Sulis did not resile from this position. Rather, he continued to publish essays, burning with fascist fervour and effusive in their commitment to a radical restructur-

ing of society. In 1937, writing in *Gerarchia* (Mussolini's own theoretical journal) he urged that the torch of the revolution be passed to a new aristocracy and suggested, at least by implication, that the age of old aristocrats and the Savoy dynasty was over.[32] Two years later, he returned to his theme in *Rivoluzione ideale*, which was dedicated to his father, another who could be hailed as a 'volunteer in life and in death'.[33] Going beyond the title seems to have been difficult for Sulis. Rather than explaining enthusiastically the revolutionary basis of fascist philosophy, he began by sketching a confused and tendentious history of fascism. He was sure that the movement started with the *intervento* in 1915, but any historical narration must bow to the overwhelming domination of the Duce. 'Fascism', Sulis urged, 'is Mussolini'; the Duce was quite simply the bearer of a 'new civilization'. 'Fascist law, Fascist legal practice, the Fascist constitution, the new idea, all today possess only one name: Mussolini.'[34] Whenever they thought about anything, all fascists naturally wanted to centre their mental processes on the Duce. He was the 'holy vessel' of the fascist revolution. His refulgent glory illuminated Sulis himself. In his preface, just after the dedication to his father, Sulis highlighted a report by the Agenzia Stefani that, on occasion, Mussolini had been gracious enough to grant him an interview.[35] It was then, Sulis explained, that he had been visited by the afflatus which now stimulated his prose.

When such grovelling was done, Sulis did try to make some other points, even though they amount to a mixed bag. The fascist revolution meant above all the substitution of unworthy men by those who believed to the bottom of their souls.[36] He added in more conservative tone that fascism had been especially successful in reconstituting the family, which had been rent by liberal democracy. Under fascist rule, the father, the head of the family, had his power and authority restored. In his own small world, the father replicated the role of the Duce, and so, for example, ensured women's healthy devotion to maternity and household cares.[37] And then there was also the question of private property. Everyone had a right to it, of course. But, wrote Sulis, once more the revolutionary legionnaire, individual wealth should not be allowed to become an obsession. The new aristocracy being tempered by the fascist revolution must not yield to the material but, rather, should be ready to offer its goods as well as its being to the holy mission of the *patria*.[38]

After all, Sulis added in an edited work entitled *Processo alla borghesia* (which was published in October 1939 a time when fascism was grappling with the problem of what the Second World War might mean to Italy), the foe was identified and should now be arraigned. It was the bourgeoisie, that class which the Duce had called 'enemy number 1 of the Revolution'.[39] Sulis proceeded to indict it on a number of counts. Rather than heroic in the manful fascist manner, the bourgeoisie was in its fundamental nature womanishly weak. Sprung from a sordid union between the 'daughters of Luther' and the misguided paladins of 1789, its creatures could not rise above a life of ease. They served no *patria*. They were wedded to money, but brought forth no offspring except their own self-interest.[40] Now, their doom had sounded. Whatever might eventuate at the front, fascist Italy must wage war against bourgeois feebleness and excise it ruthlessly from Italian homes,[41] exposing and destroying its lingering influence on national education.[42] A genuine fascist revolution could do none other. Once again Sulis endorsed that brand of fascism which (echoing Mussolini's directive to 'go to the people') seemed determined to see Italian totalitarianism penetrating every nook and cranny of life.

Nor did the Italian entry into the war cool Sulis' ardour. Editing two new works became his chief and cushy wartime activity (he was no volunteer for the front). The first, published in 1941, was an 81-page bibliography of Mussolini's works. In the introduction, Sulis further developed his thoughts about fascism. The conflict in which the Axis was now engaged amounted to a 'civil war among the European people'. In its epic battles, a new civilization was seeking to overthrow an old.[43] The military fight would take its course, but on the domestic front of this struggle to the death, certain issues remained to be clarified. Sulis acknowledged corporatism was still in practice only 'a point of departure' for the fascist regime and had not finished its development within the fascist state.[44] The Catholic Church might also need some reformation in a fully fascist world since, Sulis explained intransigently, 'for us God is not a nightmare nor a teacher, but rather a reckoning'.[45] But, as ever, the hint that Sulis longed for a bloody destruction of the old order in its entirety was checked by the need to salute the Duce. War showed again that there was one sure fortress in every time of troubles — Mussolini. 'Fascism', Sulis emphasized in now familiar senti-

ment, 'does not originate in an idea, but rather in The Man who is the vessel of the idea.' 'No one is perennially new and eternal as He is.' In sum, the Duce was 'the Man of tomorrow', as well as of today. 'The people . . . need Him as they need air and bread; a people can believe in itself because it believes in Him.'[46]

A year later, Sulis went beyond bibliographical listing to publish a set of extracts from the Duce's speeches and writings. Again, he emphasized that Mussolini was 'the revolutionary of yesterday, today and tomorrow, especially tomorrow' and that his influence admitted no chronological limit — 'twenty years is only a breath in the eternity of the revolution'. This immanence meant that Mussolini could not be fully comprehended by mere mortals, even one named Edgardo Sulis, but it was at least clear that the Duce was a 'born anti-democrat. His mission is to destroy 1789.'[47] Moreover, Sulis noted, he had reverentially (if self-importantly) consulted the Duce himself about the pieces which he now published. He implied that his own feeble words drew their strength from the imprimatur of Mussolini.[48] Sulis' readers were assured that he had earned the inestimable right of approaching near to the godlike leader and thus could express his thought almost osmotically. Moreover, Sulis duly rallied to the Social Republic after September 1943, rising to be head of the press office of the Undersecretary to the Presidenza del Consiglio, and in March 1945, offering to set up a *Gruppo Rivoluzionario Repubblicano* to propagandize the trinity of Italy, republic and socialization to a still evidently reluctant public.

So far, then, the evidence seems to be that if Sulis was not exactly a profound political philosopher, he was at least a true believer in Mussolini and his works, committed to the service of an ever more socially radical fascist revolution. If there was any doubt lurking in his lucubrations about the effulgent glory of the Duce, it was a fear that the revolution had still not moved far or fast enough, that the 'new men' had not altogether ousted the old,[49] and that the 'new civilization' remained on the drawing boards.[50] Sulis always remembered to believe in Mussolini, but what did he think of fascism as it actually was, a regime whose revolutionary ideal, he conceded, was not yet realized?

Before answering this question, it is useful to note another side to the Sulis story, one that is traceable in Italian archives. De Felice, who in his biography of Mussolini makes brief mention of Sulis as a radical new generation fascist, records in one of his

footnotes: 'In regard to Sulis, it is worth remembering that, at the end of October 1932, he was sentenced to two years in *confino* for a spat, in part personal, in part political, with the authorities in his home town in Sardinia.'[51] This hometown background of Edgardo Sulis is more telling than De Felice allows. It turns out that Sulis' radical fascist ideals contained a strong dash of self-interest, and that his devotion to a totalitarianly united fascist nation was fretted with the more humdrum and divided history of the Italies. His own practice of fascism was not quite as pure as he made it out to be.

Edgardo Sulis was born in April 1903, thus a perhaps crucial three years younger than Lavinio Vivarelli. His father Antonio had based himself at Villanovatulo, a small inland *paese* on a back road in the Sardinian province of Nuoro. In this humble world, Antonio Sulis did well for a time, backing the fascist revolution, sustaining it locally (at least by his own later account) during the troubles which followed the murder of Matteotti (it was then that Edgardo signed up as a member), and serving as a centurion in the party militia, the MVSN (Movimento Volontario per la Sicurezza Nazionale). [52] (Edgardo Sulis would later claim to have been the founder of this organization at Villanovatulo.)[53] By the end of the 1920s, the family rejoiced in the ownership of a palazzo in the *paese*, land and an old country house in the hills outside it. There were also suggestions, which were never fully clarified, that the family possessed further real estate to a value of more than L100,000.[54] Whatever the case, the decision by Antonio Sulis to construct a palatial new edifice in Villanovatulo had caused comment. Just as life seemed to blossom Antonio, defined by those who were not his friends as 'turbulent and quarrelsome', began to cede to others the various official positions he held in the town. Soon he was left merely as the combined secretary and cashier of the small local branch of the Istituto di Credito Agrario per la Sardegna. Blasted by a newly hostile wind of fate, the Sulis family began to be beset by rumours that they were living beyond their funds and station. Worse, anonymous letters and whispers in the piazza charged that all was not well with the administrative practices of Antonio Sulis at theIstituto.[55]

Such gossip signalled an approaching crisis for the Sulises. Whatever their devotion to fascism — and one authority described Edgardo at the time as 'apolitical' rather than fervently fascist[56] — they now counted the Party *podestà* of Villanovatulo

as an enemy. As if in proof of the malevolence swirling around them, a government inspector turned up to investigate the books of the *paese*'s credit bank. There he found a deficit of L42,000 and evidence of forgery. In outraged or desperate response, on 16 May 1932 Antonio Sulis committed suicide, leaving a widow and three sons weighed down by dishonour and debt. Assunta Sulis (an elementary school teacher like Mussolini's own mother) had recourse to a small government pension, but that was scarcely sufficient to repay the family's most pressing creditors.

Edgardo Sulis now began a decade-long endeavour to restore his family's fortune and reputation. As he saw things, his father had been 'a staunch Fascist whom terrible mistakes in local politics brought to ruin'.[57] Before ending his life, Antonio Sulis had taken the trouble to pen a farewell letter, emphasizing that he had died still a believing fascist and remembering his commitment during the 'tough times' of fascism's rise.[58] In this assertion lay potential for an improvement in the family fortunes, indeed the most obvious means through which Edgardo and his younger brother, Italo, could regain their places among their town's élite (and even seek to go beyond it in the way that Antonio Gramsci, himself a Sardinian, argued was typical of 'Southern intellectuals').[59] Whatever his father's actual relationship with the dictatorship and its revolution,[60] now was the time for Edgardo Sulis to affirm his ideological rigour. History, the little history of Villanovatulo and its meeting with the great history of fascism, might yet be on the family's side, especially if Edgardo Sulis could be its chronicler. The Sulises might yet possess a usable past. It might offer opportunity for well-rewarded connection with that greatest of patrons, Mussolini, and his fascist state.

Edgardo took some time to fully discern the path which might lead his family to a new *sistemazione*. At first he tried to organize a rumour campaign of his own, denigrating his father's enemies and, notably, the *podestà* and his lieutenant, the secretary of the *comune* of Villanovatulo. Sulis naturally rallied his own 'friends and partisans' to his cause, presumably once themselves Antonio Sulis' clients and now ideally his own, at least if he could affirm his inheritance as a 'man of respect'. However, that tactic proved barren, since a number of further official probes did nothing to damage the *podestà*. In some desperation, Edgardo and brother Italo decided on action. As a police report put it, in phrases loaded with traditional assumptions about life, and so with atti-

tudes which make fascism indeed seem a superficial short-term event fleetingly surfacing above the ancient structures of the Italies:

> Exploiting the discontent which more or less openly always eddies through the population of a place like this, both because of a native riotousness and the profound hostility elicited by any demand for payment by the communal authorities, the Sulis brothers, on 21 August [1932], secretly organized a demonstration which seriously disturbed law and order at Villanovatulo.[61]

Although the brothers themselves refrained from physical action, they incited their followers to break into the offices of the *comune*, railing against the *podestà*.[62] In the fascist dictatorship, retribution for such an infraction of public peace was swift. Edgardo and Italo Sulis were deemed responsible for the demonstration and arrested, found guilty and sentenced to internal exile or *confino*, in their case to a mountain *paese* in the Molise. As far as the prefecture of Nuoro was concerned, Edgardo Sulis was a bad hat, a young man overwhelmed by 'vanity and megalomania'.[63] Not even a pious letter from Assunta Sulis, pledging that her sons had really not committed any crime and underlining that their actions had been in response to the family's money troubles,[64] seemed likely to salve the deteriorating fate of the Sulis boys.

But Edgardo Sulis had an ace up his sleeve. He had written a book. It was entitled *Imitazione di Mussolini* and was a work which could persuade the Nuoro authorities that the young man was not a loopy subversive, but someone of 'outstanding intellectual qualities, devoted to fascism and the Duce and so meriting encouragement and help'.[65] Sulis had managed to get a letter through to Mussolini's private office, an epistle in which he humbly requested that the Duce write him a preface, naively appending a note about the personal motivation which had prompted him to write: 'my dream is to try to repay the family debt either in part or in whole through my efforts [as a writer]. It is the honourable thing to do, and I place all my hopes in a better future when I can restore splendour to the memory of my poor father. It is a holy work.'[66] Whether won over by the account of the Sulis family tragedy, or by the book's content or title, the Secretariat reacted favourably. Publication could proceed.

Being an approved author had immediate advantages. In November 1932, Edgardo Sulis formally appealed on behalf of his

brother and himself to have their term in *confino* cut short. He explained that he was the author of a book in the process of publication, entitled *Imitazione di Mussolini* (its title, he rightly implied, indicated its character and purpose).[67] Though not all the authorities were convinced, the tactic worked and late in 1933, Edgardo and Italo Sulis were permitted to leave the Molise.[68] *Imitazione* was already at the printer; it reached a presumably grateful public in February 1934. Three months later the sentence which had been imposed on the brothers was formally revoked.[69]

Now that he had become an author and 'intellectual', a brave new world began to open up for Edgardo Sulis. The radical writer, Berto Ricci, accepted him as one of the editorial team on his journal, *L'Universale*.[70] Some of Sulis' writings were published by *Il Popolo d'Italia*.[71] In July 1934, along with Ricci and other journalists, Sulis was granted the useful favour of an official audience with Mussolini.[72] Better still, the government put him on a monthly stipend extracted from the Duce's secret funds. It eventually totalled L72,000. From the same source, Sulis received a special gift of L56,000 and thereafter continued to have his life sweetened by smaller bonuses. [73] Shrugging off his troubles with the law and his father's disgrace, Sulis had swiftly become a man of some presence among the fascist élite. Here, it might seem, was a member of the 'emerging middle classes',[74] doing well from doing good for the dictatorship.

Sulis' motivation for this new course, however, remained complex. Despite his new stature, his residence in Rome, the tracts he wrote with all their revolutionary fervour, he had not forgotten Villanovatulo and the family finances. Even as he imagined a new Italy forged by Mussolini's blessed hand in the crucible of fascist revolution, Sulis cherished a *mentalité* rooted in the Italies. When he was not composing fiery expressions of his fascist faith, Sulis spent much time trying to extract the maximum possible benefit from his clientship to the Duce. Life was such a taxing matter, especially for the son of a father who had died in financial and social disgrace, and the generosity of government payments to him could never quite overcome that original sin and its wages. Impelled by the need to confront the wickedness of a world in which creditors did not know the meaning of mercy, Sulis kept asking for more money from the Duce's office, from the Ministry of Popular Culture (Minculpop) with its overseeing role

in fascist journalism, and from Mussolini himself. As Sulis put it in a moment of desperation in the summer of 1938: 'Do with me what You like, order me as You will, since Your command and only Your command has the force of goodness.' If only a new subsidy could be paid, Sulis added, in a rapid four months he could finish the book which, he claimed, Mussolini had ordered him to write (and which turned into *Rivoluzione ideale*). 'At the bat of an eyelid', the Duce could force Sulis' most insistent enemy, based in a business concern in alien Milan, to 'see reason'.[75] Mussolini's assistance could rescue poor Sulis from all his troubles, begun in the 'sad times' of family disgrace and caused by 'capitalism'.[76]

On this occasion, Sulis did get the money he requested and, by March 1939, *Rivoluzione ideale* was approved by Minculpop as 'a stimulating work, likely to foster lively discussion about the political and spiritual matters which it treats'.[77] But financial assistance and a guarantee of publication were not enough. What Sulis really wanted was another chance to meet Mussolini personally,[78] an encounter which he certainly hoped would confirm his place as a specially privileged client and which would also alert his patron to the likely benefits of continuing munificence and sympathy. If his request was refused in 1938, could he the following year formally present the Duce with the copy of the book when it appeared?[79]

But any occasion would do. As he urged in March 1939: 'I am very embarrassed to disturb you yet again. But as the father of a family I have a duty not to let myself go under. In my present condition, only You [*Voi*] can help me.' He explained that his record was impeccable. At 20, he had founded both the *fascio* and the MVSN branch in his home town. When employed as a journalist in Sardinia during the Matteotti affair, he had endured the bombing of his printing office by malevolent anti-fascists. He had always worked for Mussolini, and for Mussolini alone. He was grateful, of course, for the exceptional payment he had received some months ago, but what he really wanted was a regular pension for his wife and children. If he could not repay the family debts, he would have to sell his house and land, and drive his old mother out to a cruel fate. Such an act would create scandal in any situation but it would be made worse by the fact that, in Sardinia, he was known as a journalist who worked for *Il Popolo d'Italia*. His wife, who was regularly pregnant in the way

a fascist woman should be, was frequently sick, and her illnesses were another expense and a strain on his nerves. He had knocked at every door in the kingdom, but nowhere did there seem to be *sistemazione* for 'a revolutionary political writer'. 'Help me', he begged, 'and You will never regret having done so.'[80]

A year later, he wrote again signing himself 'with intransigent faith'. And yet still his career had not flourished as he had hoped it might. More paternal debts had fallen due. His situation was 'very urgent'. If only he could see the Duce face-to-face, he was sure that he could tell him things which others concealed from him.[81] The outbreak of war seemed to offer opportunity. Sulis expressed the wish to publish a journal to be entitled *Asse: della nuova civiltà*, committed to the view that

> the Axis is not just a relationship between one state and another, but a meeting of two Revolutions, utterly hostile to all other conceptions of contemporary civilization. Here lies the power of the Axis and the certainty of it lasting.[82]

But again Sulis was left to complain sadly that the authorities had rejected the scheme, despite his record, the plight of his four children and the fact that so many papers actually remained redoubts of 'bourgeois and foreigner-lovers', men who lacked his own 'coherence in the faith'.[83]

Alas for Sulis. Although, as has been seen, he did retain a certain presence in wartime journalism, he still stubbornly sought to gain another meeting with the Duce.[84] A last recorded attempt in November 1942 carried a special sense of desperation, with Sulis promising that, once secure in his leader's presence, he would reveal 'a substance which could block the radio reception of foreign programmes and so at a stroke eliminate the problem of enemy propaganda penetrating the Italian people', and release 'a new fount of energy, practically inexhaustible, activated by a new magnetic force'.[85] As Italian fascism slid to its ruin at the front, Sulis was drifting from the nostrums of radical revolution to those of popular science, perhaps destined to be a more secure hope in that Americanizing culture which was soon to begin penetrating Sardinia. But, doubtless again sadly for Sulis, Mussolini was moved neither to assay Sulis' mysterious knowledge of warfare nor to grant him an interview.

Perhaps they did meet at Salò when Mussolini dispiritedly slipped into the oxymoronic condition of being a puppet dictator. Indeed, surely they must have done, although the last days of the

Repubblica Sociale were not an ideal time for any seeking lasting *sistemazione*. However, Sulis was not a victim of the popular killing of fascists in 1945 nor did his fascist fanaticism drive him to seek his own death in coincidence with the demise of the revolution and its Duce. Rather, changing his shirt with apparent aplomb, within a few years Sulis began writing for a Catholic journal entitled *Orizzonti*.[86] On his new horizon, the cross of Christian Democracy perhaps now matched the allure which the *fasces* had once held for him. He did not die till 1989.

Unlike that of Lavinio Vivarelli, the story of Edgardo Sulis is then not that of a single-minded fascist. The radicalism of Sulis' version of fascism cloaked only very partially a desire to find a means, any means, to be recompensed for the damage which society had so suddenly and perversely dealt out to his father and to the Sulis family in their Sardinian abode. Even as he lambasted the bourgeoisie, capitalism and the old order, Sulis remained the loyal son, protesting his father's innocence from the dishonourable charge of embezzlement, devoted to the material well-being of his own children. When Sulis worshipped his Duce, he simultaneously sought reward for his piety and faith, a job, a pension and a repaired reputation. He rested his hopes on a patron who behaved in the accommodating way that tradition, and so the officially despised history of the Italies, told him a good patron should.

Lavinio Vivarelli, less than successful lawyer and fascist volunteer, may have been perennially ready to sacrifice himself to the *patria* and its dictatorship, but Edgardo Sulis was one of those more ordinary human beings very capable of translating his own immediate needs and preoccupations into the winning political discourse of the moment. In his fascist ideal, imitating Mussolini was a process above all designed to bring visible advantage in money and status. Even as he resided on the 'Street of the Fascist Martyrs' in the Rome of the fascist empire, and expatiated about the glory of a Nazi–fascist revolution, he kept much of his mind set in the humdrum surrounds of Villanovatulo. For Edgardo Sulis, the god Mussolini was at his most valuable if he could be persuaded to deliver his rewards not in some imagined future fascist heaven but now, and here on earth.[87]

Notes

1. For a characteristic example of his work in English, see R. Vivarelli, 'Interpretations of the Origins of Fascism', *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 63, No. 1 (1991), 29–43. With what now seems a certain irony, Vivarelli dedicated his first major book to the anti-fascist historians, Federico Chabod (eventually a partisan in the Val d'Aosta) and Gaetano Salvemini (driven by fascist violence from his teaching job at Florence to exile abroad). See R. Vivarelli, *Il dopoguerra in Italia e l'avvento del Fascismo (1918–1922): I. Dalla fine della guerra all'impresa di Fiume* (Naples 1957).

2. R. Vivarelli, *La fine di una stagione: memoria 1943–1945*, (Bologna 2000), 18.

3. Ibid., 26.

4. Ibid., 79–91.

5. Ibid., 94. For an account of the adventures of the corpse, then and later, see S. Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce: un cadavere tra immaginazione, storia e memoria* (Turin 1998).

6. Vivarelli, op. cit., 104–5.

7. Ibid., 13.

8. Ibid., 13–14.

9. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Segreteria particolare del Duce, Carteggio ordinario*, 540382, 6 June 1943 note. On 4 June, Margherita also asked for a signed photo of the Duce, a request approved by the prefect of Siena on 17 June. She took care to mention the 'high, pure faith' which had always driven her husband in his fascism.

10. For an English-language account of the terrible events in the region, see F.M. Snowden, *The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany 1919–1922* (Cambridge 1989).

11. SPDCO 540382, official note on Lavinio Vivarelli's career.

12. Vivarelli, op. cit., 14–15.

13. SPDCO 540382, official note on Lavinio Vivarelli's career.

14. Vivarelli, op. cit., 15.

15. He says that, since the fascists were almost always in uniform, they were more unfairly exposed to attack and retribution than the anonymous and by implication, more cowardly, partisans. Ibid., 55.

16. Ibid., 105.

17. Even though his chapter on the campaign characteristically runs to 161 pages. See R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: I. Gli anni di consenso 1929–1936* (Turin 1974), 597–757.

18. For an account of the reticence and lying involved, see A. Del Boca, ed., *I gas di Mussolini: il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Rome 1996).

19. For a background to the silences involved, see F. Focardi, 'La questione della punizione dei criminali di guerra in Italia dopo la fine del secondo conflito mondiale', *Quellun und Forschungen aus Italienisch Archiven und Bibliotheken* Vol. 80 (2000), 543–624.

20. See 'Dossier Italia–Slovenia', *Il Piccolo*, 4 April 2001, with an account of the delayed report by a team of historians from the two countries about their difficult history. The victims of Italian occupation were numbered in the tens of thousands.

21. See further, G. Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo–Yugoslav Border:*

Difference, Identity and Sovereignty in Twentieth-Century Europe (New York 2001).

22. For an attempt to remind Italians of their murderous record in the camps which they established in the region see J. Walston, 'History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps', *Historical Journal* Vol. 40, No. 1 (1997), 169–83.

23. R. Ben-Ghiat, 'The Secret Histories of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*', *Yale Journal of Criticism* Vol. 14 (2001), 255.

24. For a severe analysis of this effort, see M. Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943* (Cambridge 2000).

25. See R.J.B. Bosworth, '*Per necessità famigliare:* Hypocrisy and Corruption in Fascist Italy', *European History Quarterly* Vol. 30 (2000), 357–87.

26. This is a major theme in my new study, R.J.B. Bosworth, *Benito Mussolini* (London 2002). Any knowledge of the peasants' worldview, still perhaps the numerical majority of Italians, also casts grave doubt on the profundity of Italian commitment to fascism. Still the best account of this world is R. Absalom, *A Strange Alliance: Aspects of Escape and Survival in Italy 1943–45* (Florence 1991).

27. This is a major theme of Ruth Ben-Ghiat's studies of fascist and anti-fascist intellectuals. See R. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA 2001); 'Fascism, Writing and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930–1950', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (1995), 627–65.

28. E. Sulis, *Imitazione di Mussolini* (Milan 1934); in her study of the imagining of Mussolini, Luisa Passerini notes the implied parallel with Christ, but misdates the book to 1932. See L. Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario: storia di una biografia 1915–1939* (Bari 1991), 90.

29. See, in English translation, E. Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, MA 1996). And for further historiographical placement, R.J.B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London 1998).

30. R. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 100, notes how the radical circles around the journal *L'Universale*, into which Sulis was to move, were exhibiting a drift to anti-Semitism as early as 1933.

31. E. Sulis, *Imitazione di Mussolini*, 111.

32. E. Sulis, 'Accuso le costituzioni', *Gerarchia*, Vol. 17, September 1937, 600–4. Cf. also R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce II. Lo stato totalitario 1936–1940* (Turin 1981), 42.

33. E. Sulis, *Rivoluzione ideale* (Florence 1939), frontespiece. De Felice esteemed the work as typical of the state of mind of 'new Fascism'. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce II.*, 245.

34. E. Sulis, *Rivoluzione ideale*, 29.

35. Ibid., 7.

36. Ibid., 33.

37. Ibid., 175–9.

38. Ibid., 245–52.

39. E. Sulis, introduction to his *Processo alla borghesia* (Rome 1939). Cf., too, his earlier disquisition, *Accuso la civiltà meccanica* (Rome 1934). De Felice says that *Processo alla borghesia* was a publishing success, with three printings in four months. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce II.*, 100.

40. E. Sulis, introduction to his *Processo alla borghesia*, 7.

41. E. Sulis, 'La borghesia', ibid., 9. He added (15–16) that the bourgeoisie was also painfully devoted to bureaucratic form and detail.

42. This case was argued by B. Ricci, 'Categoria spirituale e categoria sociale', in E. Sulis, ed., *Processo alla borghesia*, 25–41. In the 1990s, unlikely attempts were made to revive Berto Ricci as a serious thinker. See B. Ricci, *La rivoluzione fascista: antologie di scritti politici*, eds. A. Cucchi and G. Galante (Milan 1996). Cf. P. Buchignani, *Un fascismo impossibile: l'eresia di Berto Ricci nella cultura del Ventennio* (Bologna 1994), who notes (181) that Sulis, along with the young Indro Montanelli, wrote for Ricci's journal *L'Universale*. In a website still devoted to Ricci's memory, Sulis has his name recalled with a sort of reflected glory.

43. E. Sulis, 'Introduzione' to E. Sulis, ed., *Mussolini e il Fascismo* (Rome 1941), xxxii.

44. Ibid., xix.

45. Ibid., xxii–xxiii.

46. Ibid., ix.

47. E. Sulis, ed., *Mussolini contro il mito di Demos: dagli 'Scritti e discorsi' del Duce* (Milan 1942).

48. R. De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato 1940–1945 1. L'Italia in guerra 1940–1943* (Turin 1990), 1286–7.

49. E. Sulis, 'Uomini nuovi', *Gerarchia*, Vol. XX, December 1941, 619–22.

50. E. Sulis, 'Il lavoro e la nuova civiltà' *Gerarchia*, Vol. XXII, January 1943, 19–23.

51. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce II*., 311.

52. SPDCO 590534, undated letter, E. Sulis to Mussolini's secretariat. His son indeed claimed both that he had been an army officer and that he had established the *fascio* at Villanovatulo.

53. SPDCO 590534, 22 March 1939, E. Sulis to Mussolini.

54. Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza. Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati, Confinati Politici (hereafter DGPS CP), 986, 13 December 1932, Prefect Nuoro to Ministry of the Interior.

55. DGPS CP 986, 2 April 1933, Prefect Nuoro to Ministry of the Interior.

56. DGPS CP 986, 2 April 1933, Prefect Nuoro to Ministry of the Interior.

57. SPDCO 590534, 25 May 1932, E. Sulis to unnamed recipient.

58. SPDCO 590534, undated letter, A. Sulis to Prefect Nuoro.

59. See A. Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Rome 1975).

60. Certainly Antonio Sulis is not mentioned in a contemporary study of the local fascist movement, emphatic about its commitment to radical revolution. See S. Ruinas, *Figure del fascismo sardo* (Rome 1928).

61. DGPS CP 986, 29 November 1932, *Carabinieri* report.

62. DGPS CP 986, 10 October 1932, *Carabinieri* report.

63. SPDCO 590534, 13 August 1934, Prefect Nuoro to Mussolini's secretariat.

64. DGPS CP 986, 11 March 1933, A. Sulis to Ministry of the Interior. Assunta was behaving in a way highly typical of Italian mothers in the circumstances. For the example of the mother of Amerigo Dumini chief of the squad which murdered Matteotti, see R.J.B. Bosworth, '*Per necessità famigliare*', 366.

65. SPDCO 590534, 23 June 1932, Prefect Nuoro to Mussolini's secretariat.

66. SPDCO 590534, undated letter, E. Sulis to Mussolini's secretariat.

67. DGPS CP 986, 4 November 1932, E. Sulis appeal. He also wrote patriotically on Vittorio Veneto day, the national *festa* celebrating Italy's allegedly victorious final battle in the First World War.

68. DGPS CP 986, 20 October 1933, note; 5 December 1933, Prefect Nuoro to Ministry of the Interior.

69. SPDCO 590534, 23 April 1939, Prefect Nuoro to Mussolini's secretariat.

70. For further on this group and their role, also after the lapsing of *L'Universale* in 1935, see R. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 156–7, 165–6.

71. SPDCO 590534, 10 December 1939, Prefect Rome report.

72. See R. Ben-Ghiat, op. cit., 118–19. For a contemporary account of the meeting, see SPDCO 514829/1–2. (My thanks to Ruth Ben-Ghiat for alerting me to this file.)

73. National Archives, Washington, DC, Personal papers of Benito Mussolini, 26/012640 (I also owe this reference to Ruth Ben-Ghiat). Apart from what he earned from his work with Ricci, Sulis received extraordinary payments of L1000 in 1937, 5000 in 1938, 2000 in 1939 and 1000 in 1940. See SPDCO 590534, reports.

74. For an English-language introduction to De Felice's controversial use of this term to define the class base of fascism, see R. De Felice, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice* (New Brunswick, NJ 1977).

75. SPDCO 590534, 17 June 1938, Sulis to Mussolini. Perhaps appropriately, Sulis wrote from an address at Via dei martiri fascisti, 5 in Rome.

76. SPDCO 590534, 18 June 1938, Sulis to Mussolini.

77. SPDCO 590534, 2 March 1939, Alfieri to Sebastiani.

78. SPDCO 590534, 18 June 1938, Sulis to Mussolini.

79. SPDCO 590534, 1 December 1939, Sulis to Mussolini.

80. SPDCO 590534, 22 March 1939, Sulis to Mussolini.

81. SPDCO 590534, 28 March 1940, Sulis to Mussolini.

82. SPDCO 590534, 1 July 1940, Sulis to Mussolini.

83. SPDCO 590534, 1 July 1940, Sulis to Mussolini.

84. SPDCO 590534, 21 December 1941, De Cesare note about another rejection.

85. SPDCO 590534, November 1942, note by Mussolini's secretariat.

86. I owe this information to correspondence with the Archivio di Stato of Cagliari.

87. Students of southern Italian popular Catholicism will recognize a commonality here between Sulis' search for a useable fascism and other male southerners' belief that priests needed regularly to be able to demonstrate that they could deliver tangible benefits from their God to their parishioners. For some introduction, see R.J.B. Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World 1860–1960* (London 1996), 150–1.

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