

Franco Bruno Averardi

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Already from 1929 Franco Bruno Averardi has been spending more time in the United States than in Italy, teaching at various universities. It was only in 1942, however, that his case was brought to the attention of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in New York, with a request for funding of \$1,800. The Committee opened discussion immediately on the question of whether he could be considered a refugee.

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Education and useful contacts

Bruno was born in Turin on 22 December 1894. He went to high school in the same city and in 1915 enrolled in the Facoltà di Giurisprudenza, graduating on 10 May 1915 with a thesis entitled «Il cristianesimo nel diritto romano» (Christianity in Roman Law)¹. In the curriculum vitae presented to the Emergency Committee in New York in 1942 he stated that he also had a Doctorate degree in Letters, completed in Turin, of which, however, there is no record in the archive².

Initially his career seemed to be oriented toward diplomacy. From November 1921 to February 1922 he participated in a naval conference in Washington where he had arrived with a diplomatic passport as Italian Government Officer³; in 1922 he attended the Conferenza economica internazionale in Genoa as secretary of the Italian delegation. As a component of the Italian delegation in the Disarmament Section of the League of Nations in 1922-23,

¹ ASUTo, *Gli studenti dell'Università di Torino dai registri dell'Archivio Storico, ad nomen* <<https://www.asut.unito.it>> (accessed 6 January 2019). See Bruno Averardi, Franco, *Il cristianesimo nel diritto romano*, Turin, Tip. Ditta Eredi Botta, 1921 (thesis, Regia Università di Torino, a.y. 1921).

² NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 38, f. 2, «Averardi, Franco Bruno» [sic], 1942-43, Franco Bruno-Averardi's CV attached to letter of April 1943.

³ National Archives at Washington (DC), Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Passengers and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957*, T715, Roll 3048, p. 2, *ad nomen* (available online <<https://www.ancestry.com>>).

he was member of the Roman offices of the League until 31 March 1924⁴. In the following years he turned his attention to the study of Italian literature and comparative literature with impressive results. He collaborated in the direction of the Teatro internazionale in Rome with Luigi Pirandello, of whom he was recognized as a keen student. From 1926 to 1929 he was – according to his statement – associate professor (or rather lecturer and perhaps for a shorter period) of German Literature at the Università di Firenze. He also translated into German the work of the art historian Adolfo Venturi. As he had a good command of English, he had also translated into Italian several Elizabethan playwrights, including, in 1926, *Il cuore infranto* (*The Broken Heart*) by John Ford⁵. He also spent a period of time carrying out research at the British Museum⁶.

Bruno could rely on important backing and acquaintances: he was a cousin and a good friend of Marcello Soleri, minister of War before the advent of fascism; he was son-in-law of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Prime Minister of Italy before fascism.

Invited by Nicholas Murry Butler, president of Columbia University, Bruno left Florence and returned to the US. Before his departure it seems that Mussolini had urged him to speak not only of Italian literature but also of fascist Italy, so as to counter misunderstandings and prejudices against the regime. He had recommended, however, that he not give the impression that he was acting as «travelling salesman of fascism». In the period 1929-31 he held numerous conferences in cities and at universities around the country and made a point of speaking about the «renewal» of Italy in the fascist era⁷.

In the US from 1929 with his wife

⁴ *League of Nations Search Engine, ad nomen* <<http://lonsea.de>> (accessed 31 March 2019).

⁵ John Ford, *Il cuore infranto. Tragedia*, translated and ed. by Franco Bruno Averardi, Rome, A.R.E., 1926.

⁶ This experience in London is reported in the CVs at ECADFS but with no dates and no precise evidence. There are several incongruences in his CV with respect to other sources.

⁷ Matteo Pretelli, *Cultura e lingua italiana come strumenti di propaganda fascista e affermazione della italianità fra gli immigrati italiani e i loro figli negli Stati Uniti*, PhD thesis, University of Trieste, 2005, p. 10.

Bruno and his wife set sail on the «Augustus» in Naples in September 1929, stating that he was going to New York to stay in the Casa italiana at Columbia University, run by Prezzolini and founded in 1927 with the support of the Italian community of New York⁸. The following year, as emerges from the Ellis Island Foundation records, he returned again with his wife Carla, this time giving his destination as the Institute of International Education⁹. Under the auspices of the Institute, and of the Carnegie Foundation from 1929 to 1933, he gave lectures at various American universities (Harvard, Yale, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Chicago, Western Reserve, Southern California, et al.) and is mentioned frequently in the press¹⁰. At the same time he taught courses at several universities: Italian literature and civilization at Western Reserve University in Cleveland (1929-30); Italian art at the University of California (1930-31) and a Wellesley College, near Boston, (1929-30) in the role of Visiting Professor of Art on the Mary Whiton Calkins Memorial Foundation. In the annual bulletin of Wellesley College he was given special mention: «Not only the students in the Art Department but also the College in general enjoyed his scholarly and stimulating lectures; and our gratitude is renewed to the Alumnae Association for making the appointment of a visiting professor possible»¹¹.

The unhappy marriage with Carla, who was aware of his homosexuality, ended in annulment as «unconsummated marriage». Vittorio Emanuele Orlando tried to stay close to his daughter, also financially, as Bruno was

8 National Archives at Washington (DC), *Records of Immigration and Naturalization Service, Passengers and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1897.1957*, T715, Roll 4584, p. 73 *ad nomen* (available online at <<https://ancestry.com>>).

9 Ivi, Roll 4855, p. 4, *ad nomen* (available online at <<https://ancestry.com>>). On the Institute of International Education: <<http://rockarch.org>>.

10 See for ex. the announcement at Harvard, 16 December 1930 <<https://www.thecrimson.com>> (accessed 29 December 2018) and the booklet *Franco Bruno Averardi: Internationalist, Diplomat and Scholar*, n.p., n.d., available online at *University of Iowa Libraries. Iowa Digital Library* <<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu>> (accessed 31 March 2019).

11 «Wellesley College Bulletin, Annual Reports Number. President and Treasurer», 22, 2, 1932-33, p. 63.

often hospitalized for supposed psychological disturbances¹². She remained in the US and remarried.

Without a job

In 1934 Bruno resumed travelling around Europe: Germany, Italy, Greece, and then Egypt, where he held conferences at various universities on American culture and civilization. On 27 December 1934 he embarked for New York on the Rex in the port of Genoa¹³. In September 1935, he founded, together with Charles Speroni, the Italian department at the University of California, of which he became head, which already in its second year could boast 150 students, according to his account¹⁴.

At this point in his life and career, it seems that he had no intention of returning to Italy: his mother, Maria, 68 years of age, living in Rome in via del Babuino, had joined him in Los Angeles with her maid Tommasina, setting sail from Naples on 20 November 1935 on the Conte di Savoia¹⁵. In 1937 he figures as *lecturer* in the UCLA Register; he taught courses in Intermediate Italian (in part together with Charles Speroni), Survey of Italian Literature and Dante's *Divine Comedy* in English translation¹⁶. In the summer of 1942, however – he was living at 1757 N. Vista Avenue, Hollywood – he wrote to his contacts asking for help: after nearly eight years his department was going to be closed, an indirect consequence of the war, which had led to a drastic decline in the number of students enrolled. As a result, he found himself

12 Cf. Elvira Valleri, *Una vita, forse due: Carlotta Orlando, appunti per una biografia*, «Passato e presente», 103, 2018, p. 137.

13 On this occasion he described himself as a professor, on embarking in 1929 as a proprietor: National Archives at Washington (DC), Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Passengers and Crew Lists Arriving at New York, 1897-1957*, T715, Roll 4584, p. 73, *ad nomen* (available online at <<https://www.ancestry.com>>).

14 Southern Campus, University of California, 1936. See NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 38, f. 2, «Averardi, Franco Bruno», 1942-43.

15 Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search*, Bruno Averardi Maria <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>> (accessed on registration 9 January 2019).

16 «Register. University of California», 1, 1936, p. 164..

without a job¹⁷.

Appeal for help

In December 1942 the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars in New York opened a dossier in his name. Professor Frederick Pollock, director of the Institute of Social Research (which moved from Frankfurt to Geneva in 1933 and in 1934 to New York, at 429 West 117th Street) requested that the EC provide \$1,800 in funding so that the institute could recruit Prof. Bruno Averardi for a grand project on worldwide anti-Semitism, supported also by Adorno and Horkheimer. In particular, Averardi, whom Pollack had met years earlier in Los Angeles where a branch of the institute was to remain, would be given the task of studying why fascism had initially repudiated anti-Semitic policies only to later adopt them¹⁸. Bruno had lost his job at UCLA, as he explained in detail in letters to two members of the EC commission that he knew. The inquiry prepared by Miss Drury for the discussion of the case set for 6 April 1946 took into consideration both this fact and the positive references from Gilbert Guerard of Stanford University, Henry W.L. Dana of the Cambridge School of Drama, Reverend W.K. Williams of the first Congregational church and Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University. Nonetheless, on 9 April the EC informed Pollock that it would not grant the funding requested.

The request was denied, as in the vast majority of cases, but on this occasion the committee pointed out that it did not consider Dr. Averardi a *refugee* in need of assistance like the majority of those who sought assistance¹⁹. He was not Jewish, but this was not a decisive factor for the EC, which declared that it

17 NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b.38, f. 2, «Averardi, Franco Bruno», 1942-43, see his letters.

18 Ivi, «Scholar: Franco Bruno-Averardi», 6 April 1943. On this troubled project launched by Pollock and the Frankfurt School see Christian Fleck, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011, chap. 6 (which does not mention Averardi).

19 NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 38, f. 2, «Averardi, Franco Bruno», 1942-43, letter from the Executive Secretary to Frederick Pollock, 9 April 1943.

made no distinctions on the basis of race or religion. Moreover, at this point it would have been difficult to consider him compromised with fascism, given the references from the Frankfurt School and his personal friendship with Lauro De Bosis, whose antifascist activities were well known. It was stressed, however, that Averardi had been in the US for many years, and perhaps he was already a US citizen.

From April 1943 onwards, there is no trace of him, until the dramatic and mysterious circumstances surrounding his death surfaced. On 16 June 1947 the corpse of Professor Franco Bruno Averardi was found under a bridge of the Lungotevere in Rome, a belt around his neck. Suicide or murder? Even the *New York Times* reported the event. This was one of the first cases of crime reportage involving the homosexual scene that impassioned the post-war press²⁰.

Main publications

- John Ford, *Il cuore infranto. Tragedia*, translated and annotated by Franco Bruno-Averardi, Rome, A.R.E., 1926.
- Eleonora Duse, «Theatre Arts», 15, 1931, p. 772.
- Carl Dudley, *More About Nostradamus*, short film, USA 1941.
- Various contributions, comments and reviews in the review of the Association of Teachers of Italian, «Italice», in the 30s.

Archival sources

- ASUTo, *Gli studenti dell'Università di Torino dai registri dell'Archivio Storico, ad nomen* <<https://www.asut.unito.it>>.

²⁰ Cf. *American Robbed, Murdered in Rome*, «New York Times», 17 June 1947, p. 6, and among others: *Professore torinese strangolato*, «Stampa sera», 16 June 1947, p. 1; *Il professore torinese Averardi morto per collasso cardiaco*, «La Stampa», 17 June 1947, p. 1; *Il mistero di ponte Matteotti. Una fialetta di potente veleno in tasca al professor Averardi*, «L'Unità» (Rome), 18 June 1947, p. 2; *Avviandosi al fiume l'Averardi raccattava pietre*, «L'Unità» (Turin), 18 June 1937, p. 1; *Paprica è il meno colpevole. Tentò di salvare l'Averardi dalle grinfie degli altri amici*, «L'Unità», 21 August 1947, p. 2.

- Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>>.
- NYPL, MAD, ECADFS, I.B. Non Grantees, b. 38, f. 2, «Averardi, Franco Bruno», 1942-43, but Bruno Averardi, Franco.
- Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives, MS 466, Edward *Mandell House Papers* <<https://archives.yale.edu>>.

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- *Franco Bruno Averardi: Internationalist, Diplomat and Scholar*, n.p., n.d., available online at University of Iowa Libraries. Iowa Digital Library <<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu>>.
- The press articles about his death are available at <<http://wikipink.org>>.

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