

## GIOVANNI CARSANIGA

1934–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1989

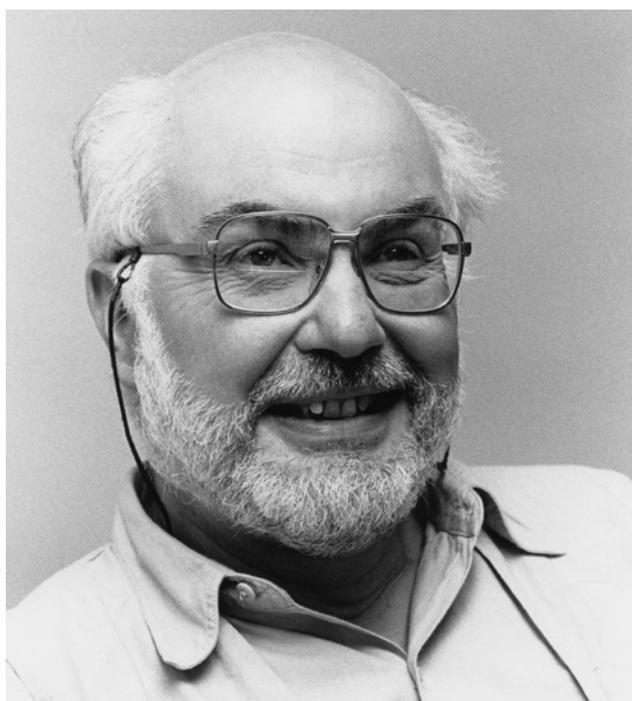


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Emeritus Professor Giovanni Carsaniga, well known to Italianists in Australia and abroad, died in London at the age of 82. Most recently, from 1990 to 2000, he held the chair of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney, the third holder of the chair established in 1963, and held by Frederick May from December 1963 to January 1976, and by Gino Lorenzo Rizzo from 1977 to 1987. He had previously held the Vaccari Foundation Chair of Italian Studies at La Trobe University from 1982 to 1989, and been the Visiting Professor of Italian at the University of Western Australia for two years from 1975 to 1977. His early academic career had been spent in the United Kingdom, where he held junior positions at the Universities of Aberdeen, Cambridge and Birmingham, before joining the University of Sussex in 1966 and rising to the position of Reader. In Britain he was active in the Society for Italian Studies and in the Association of Teachers of Italian. In Australia he served in various capacities as a trustee of the Vaccari Italian Historical Trust, as Director of the Frederick May Foundation, 1990–2000, on the National Advisory Council of the ABC, 1997–1998, and on the committee of the Sydney Spring International Festival of New Music, 1994–1999. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of

the Humanities in 1989, and appointed an Officer of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Italy (*Ufficiale Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana*) in 1999.

After his first Australian experience in the 1970s, Giovanni returned to Australia in 1982 to take up the new Vaccari Foundation Chair of Italian Studies. Elda Vaccari, who had set up the community organisation Co.As.It. in Melbourne and a home for elderly Italians in South Morang, was particularly keen to promote Italian culture through the foundation established by her late husband, and had contacted La Trobe University. La Trobe French professor Elliott Forsyth had suggested the creation of a named chair in Italian funded by the Foundation, and a legal agreement was duly signed between the university and the Vaccari Foundation.

The Italian Division at La Trobe, in existence since 1976, was in a strong position with eight full-time teaching staff, but Giovanni brought with him a new dynamism. He became involved in the staff association, swiftly established contacts with other academics, and began a collaboration with La Trobe musicologist John Stinson in the creation of the *Medieval Music Database*, transcribing and translating texts, as well as preparing sleeve notes for recordings by the Ensemble of the Fourteenth Century. The database, incorporated in the Borchardt Library's website, won international recognition. Having looked at local Italian school teachers and found them wanting, Giovanni started a course on modern teaching methodology at the Italian Institute of Culture. His own research days were sacred and he was not to be disturbed at those times, but he also assisted colleagues to find time and funding for their own research. Indeed he was a very loyal and principled supporter of all his colleagues in all controversies. He organised a teach-in on the Dawkins educational reforms and at all times discussed current affairs with enthusiasm. In day-to-day administrative matters he was impatient of delays and totally rejected administration requests when they came late and suggested unreasonable deadlines. Examiners' meetings which had previously occupied hours of time were drastically shortened. He cut short tormented discussions on student assessment when set work had not been submitted: 'Bisogna responsabilizzare questi studenti' was one of his refrains. Giovanni was not one to leave matters hanging: he courted controversy in a letter to the student newspaper *Rabelais*, in which he claimed to be a feminist. In the next issue a fire and brimstone letter abused him

for the notion that he, as a male, could be any such thing. He immediately contacted the writer to discuss the issue in private and later told colleagues that a cordial encounter had ensued.

Giovanni Carsaniga's appointment to the university of Sydney came at a difficult moment for the faculty, for the department, and for the teaching of languages in general. Changed funding models within the university in response to federal government legislation meant that language departments were quite suddenly subjected to severe cuts, while financial stringency in Italy had the sudden and disappointing effect of reducing Italian government support for the Frederick May Foundation for Italian Studies, established by Silvio Trambaiolo and carried forward with great enthusiasm by Gino Rizzo. Through this period, Giovanni once again provided leadership and support for staff and students in the department and, with art historian Lou Klepac as chair, he continued for as long as was possible the work of the May Foundation. Following his arrival in Sydney he worked closely with dance historian Jennifer Nevile on an unpublished verse description of the dancing performed in the Mercato Vecchio of Florence in 1459. Both the medieval music project at La Trobe and the dance project in Sydney took Giovanni into areas of manuscript studies and philological research that were new for him, but he enjoyed both the intellectual challenge and the opportunity to engage in fruitful collaboration.

Giovanni Carsaniga's *curriculum* was particularly suited to the Australian context. For his degree in Lettere at the University of Pisa (1956) he completed his *tesi di laurea* with Luigi Russo – these were the days when an undergraduate thesis was comparable with an MA Hons and there was no doctoral degree – on the sixteenth-century writer of short stories Matteo Bandello. His *diploma di licenza* from the Scuola Normale Superiore the same year was in comparative literature, a dissertation supervised by Giuliano Pellegrini, on Italian influences – Bandello's in particular – on John Ford's tragedy, *The Broken Heart* (1633). His fellow *Normalisti* included Giulio Lepschy, Carlo Sgorlon, Carlo Rubbia (Nobel Prize for Physics), and Dino Bressan, another Italianist and life-long friend who made his career in Australia. Immediately after graduation in 1956, he received a British Council grant to study in Britain, and his subsequent academic career was in the English-speaking world.

Giovanni's writing followed three strands that wove in and out of each other: literature, philosophy and language pedagogy. His publications included books and articles on Dante, Leopardi, Manzoni, Romanticism and Realism, as well as a very successful general history of Italian literature, written for translation into German, *Geschichte der italienischen Literatur: von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart* (Kohlhammer, 1970). He was at his best as a literary historian: his six chapters in 'The Age

of Romanticism (1800–1870)', part of *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* edited by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge University Press, 1996, 1997, and now online) demonstrate a magisterial command of his subject, matured over three decades, as well as a lightness of touch in constructing a readable and comprehensible account of a complex movement. His standing in this field had been consolidated quietly: an essay on 'Realism in Italy' in the Pelican Guide *The Age of Realism*, edited by F. W. J. Hemmings (Penguin, 1974); a slim but well-received study, *Giacomo Leopardi, the Unheeded Voice* (Edinburgh University Press, 1977); an essay on 'Manzoni and his Twenty-five Readers', in *The Shared Horizon: Melbourne Essays in Italian Language and Literature in Memory of Colin McCormick*, edited by Tom O'Neill (Irish Academic Press, 1990); and a key essay, 'Literary realism in Italy: Verga, Capuana, and *verismo*', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*, edited by Peter Bondanella and Andrea Ciccarelli (Cambridge University Press, 2003; online 2006). It is not a huge output, but it bears the stamp of authority.

Almost all of Giovanni's publications were in English, but he maintained a link with the Florentine journal *Belfagor*, subtitled *Rassegna di varia umanità*, founded by his dissertation advisor Luigi Russo in 1946, and published by Olschki. Here he published short occasional essays in Italian, particularly on moral and political questions, as well as reviews. He was also a frequent reviewer for *Italian Studies* and *Modern Language Review*, and could be merciless in the face of sloppy thinking. Where a North American critic summarised his author's message as progressive and timely, Giovanni observed that it 'reads like a series of platitudes vaguely tinged with Christian Democracy, [so that] one may perhaps forgive the Red Brigades for remaining unconvinced and unresponsive' (*Modern Language Review*, 74 (1979): 960). Throughout his life he was an inveterate writer of letters to the newspapers, and when necessary to *New Scientist*. They commented on a wide range of issues: culture and politics, film and television, and language. A notable one, in relation to the post-coital behaviour of zebras and a misquoted Latin tag, begins quite splendidly: 'Your Latin is even more anomalous than a humped zebra' (19 June 2004).

Leopardi's interest in literature, philosophy and science, and Giovanni's own insatiable curiosity about all aspects of science and technology, both past and future, helped to shape his own thinking about the inadequacy of C. P. Snow's dichotomy between the Two Cultures, scientific and humanistic. He returned to the topic frequently, and in a graduation address in 1990 urged newly-minted arts graduates to bring their ethical values to the table and engage with new technologies, to foster 'one unified culture in which the arts are a sort of science and the sciences are a kind of art, and no one

working in either can think it unnecessary to have a clear understanding of the other' (*Arts* 15 (1990): 108–112).

These ideas, explored in his inaugural lecture at the University of Sydney (*Arts* 16 (1992): 3–22), and in ongoing debates with philosopher Paul Crittenden and science historian David Oldroyd, found their fullest expression in his final work, *The Lab and the Labyrinth: Science, the Humanities and the Unity of Knowledge*, completed in 2006 but published only in March 2016, just before his final illness. The volume is a profound meditation on the humanities and the way in which they seek truth and knowledge in the same basic way as the sciences, even when they use different conceptual tools and research methods.

In addition to his writings on the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Giovanni maintained a passionate interest in language: the Italian 'Questione della Lingua', and questions of etymology and translation, of grammar and language pedagogy. He sought to bridge the rift between language studies and literary studies by exploring the mental processes of communication, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by new technologies at the same time as arguing rationally against those who believed that first language laboratories, then radio and television, and then computers and the emerging internet were going to take over from skilled and dedicated language teachers. He himself was a willing teacher of Italian language classes at all levels, and led by example in combining a communicative approach with old-fashioned grammatical rigour. His language textbooks *Just Listen 'n Learn Italian*, *Breakthrough Italian*, *Italiano Espresso*, *Incontri in Italia*, and *Avventura* had extraordinary longevity and were revised and reissued by others long after Giovanni had moved on to other projects.

Moral and political values were always immensely important to Giovanni. Although he was quite agnostic he came armed with a solid protestant knowledge of the Bible and no fear of a fight. He railed against financial cuts, against forced amalgamations, against barbarian administrators, and fought for various lost causes, but always on the side of the angels. He was a strong unionist, and had been staff union president at Sussex. As a colleague and administrator he was scrupulously fair and straightforward, sometimes clashing with others in his refusal to acquiesce in what he perceived as injustice. He was unfailingly generous to colleagues, students and friends.

Giovanni was born in Milan on 5 February 1934, the son of Arnaldo Camillo Carsaniga, a Methodist minister, and his wife Annamaria Visco-Gilardi. Arnaldo's first parish

was Rapolla, in the province of Potenza, but from 1942 to 1947 he was the Methodist minister in Salerno, just south of Naples, where Giovanni grew up as an only child in the manse, receiving Latin and music lessons from the parish organist who lived with the family. He became a skilled pianist and continued to play as long as his health permitted. Giovanni attended school first in Naples and then in La Spezia, before matriculating to the University of Pisa. Family history records both heroically Italian experiences – his grandmother received a candy from Giuseppe Garibaldi; and the truly exotic – his maternal grandfather had resided in Bedford Square as private secretary to Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins, better known as Anthony Hope, author of the archetypal Ruritanian novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Giovanni's first marriage to Anne-Marie Girolami ended in 1974. In 1975, shortly before his move to Perth, he married Pamela Risbey, and her twin sons, Tom and Paul, and her daughter, Greta Scacchi, accompanied Giovanni and Pamela to Australia. Pamela had been a professional dancer in Paris, and ran a dance school in Haywards Heath and taught Italian. They met when Giovanni was recommended by the University of Sussex to take her O-Level students through to their A-Levels.

Giovanni and Pamela had a rare capacity to make new friends. They were initiated into the refined and fiendish pastime of croquet when they moved to Coogee, and continued to enjoy Sydney's rich offerings of music, cinema and theatre. They were active walkers, and had a smart silver campervan for holidays. Shortly before his retirement Giovanni noticed he was losing strength in his right hand and was diagnosed soon afterwards with a progressive neurological disorder. He brought his retirement forward slightly and he and Pamela returned to Britain, with the intention of dividing their time between their home in Hove and their London flat. By 2012 Giovanni was severely incapacitated by his condition and they moved back to London, to a specially adapted home in Kennington, where Giovanni continued to take a vigorous interest in all matters social, cultural, and political until the end of his life.

He died on Easter Sunday, 27 March 2016, from the complications of a persistent infection. He is survived by Pamela and family in the UK, Italy and Australia.

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I am indebted to Dino Bressan and Antonio Pagliaro for their assistance in writing this obituary.