

# The Average and the Excellent: Literary Possibilities and Cultural Ambiguities

Francesco Marroni

Interviewed by

Gloria Lauri-Lucente and Ivan Callus

G. d'Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara  
E-mail: f.marroni@unich.it

## Abstract

Francesco Marroni is an Italian literary critic and writer of fiction with a distinguished record as a scholar of Victorian and Edwardian Studies and further researching strengths in contemporary and comparative literature. In this interview with Gloria Lauri-Lucente and Ivan Callus he speaks about representations of mediocrity in humanist learning and philosophy and in English and Italian literature. He also reflects on mediocrity's penetrative qualities within contemporary life and culture. A number of key writers and thinkers feature in this wide-ranging interview, among them Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Locke, George Eliot, Trollope, Gissing, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, James, Orwell, Svevo, Moravia, Calvino, Tabucchi, Manganelli and d'Arrigo.

**Keywords:** *mediocrity, average, English literature, Italian literature, Italy*

**IVAN CALLUS:** *Let us start with definitional issues, if we may. Going back to the Horatian term "aurea mediocritas", mediocrity in certain languages, cultures and traditions suggests the average and the middling together with tasteful moderation as opposed to inelegant excess. In others, it's a case of the below average: of performance and execution that is below par, suggestive of something a little worse than indifferent quality. What's your instinctive understanding of the mediocre? Is it a case of the average or is it more a matter of things pitching below that level? And how do you see that operating in the Italian language and in Italian usage?*

**FRANCESCO MARRONI:** In my view, the best way to consider the idea of mediocrity is to approach its many literary and non-literary definitions by paying attention to the phenomenology of the mediocre in its contemporary versions. In this sense, it is fitting to maintain that mediocrity combines and, more often than not, masks its practical manifestations with such diverse behavioural attitudes as ideological orthodoxy combined with critical blindness, sociolinguistic conformism, obsession with fashion and its capricious metamorphoses, the pursuit of popularity and visibility, and, above all, the inability of living one's daily life with a full appreciation of its complexities and contradictions. A mediocre person is always at ease with a simplistic approach to the

real. Doubts and dilemmas are never hosted in the realm of mediocrity; this is why mediocre people are always ready to applaud political leaders and their speeches on a better future and a quasi-utopian society. In one of the most illuminating pages of *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky observes that “man is a frivolous and unseemly creature and perhaps, like a player of chess, he loves only the process of achieving his goal, and not the goal itself”. Following Dostoyevsky’s thinking, I believe that mediocrity is embodied by those human beings who are never fully aware of the significance of what they are aiming at in terms of ontology and self-realization. In a way, they are simply involved in an ephemeral satisfaction of their own daily wishes and aspirations.

This is my “instinctive understanding of the mediocre”. Here I would like to add that, conversely, according to the classic tradition, *mediocritas* was the main road to self-control and rationality as opposed to every form of excess, which meant something very close to untruth, disorder and chaos. In this connection, a synthesis of *humilitas* and *mediocritas* was deemed to be the key to a full life and wisdom. It is no accident that Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* regarded the mean as a territory which, being placed between excess and deficiency, represented virtue and magnificence. Strangely enough, in contemporary society, mediocre people are characterized by their hunger after excess and after melodrama in media and fiction as well as in real life. A spectacular exhibition of the most sensational, hateful and gruesome aspects of an event – and television seems the best instrument to effect such an invasion of vulgarity and violence into our private sphere – is part of a mediocrity which, paradoxically, and unsurprisingly, clashes with the classical interpretation of *mediocritas*. Excess and sensationalism seem to me the dominant discourses in Western societies.

As to the Italian language, the only thing that I wish to underline is that we Italians have lived in a limbo of cultural mediocrity for some decades now. Hopefully, something will change, but for the time being it is very difficult to imagine the future of our society. The disheartening fact is that the notion of meritocracy is a very vague term for the Italian ethos of the third millennium since we have a tradition of sociocultural dependence on political “protection”, which in the worst cases means mafia and its variations (“Ndrangheta, Camorra, Stidda and Sacra Corona Unita”). This is a historical problem, of course. As one can easily imagine, when the differences between meritocracy and mediocrity are blurred, you cannot conceive an educational system capable of expressing in its full valence the cultural excellence and creative genius that Italian people have had *naturaliter* inscribed in their DNA for ages. Hence, a most depressing depauperization of our language in its lexical and morpho-syntactic forms, not to mention the way written Italian has been becoming poorer and poorer because of the low standard of our educational system. But I do not wish to portray myself as a *laudator temporis acti*. On the contrary, I want to imagine a more dynamic configuration of the Italian tongue and trust that Dante’s and Petrarch’s words – as well as the words of the masters of Italian literature – will survive the contemporary tide of *mediocre* language thanks to the persistence of the classics, as Italo Calvino suggested in *Perché leggere i classici* (*Why read the classics*, 1991).

GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE: *As an Italian scholar but also as a comparatist, what do you consider to be some of the most useful texts and works in Italian literature and culture for a consideration of the mediocre?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: The first writer who immediately comes to mind is Italo Svevo. In many respects, his narrative works are a dramatization of mediocrity in which his protagonists make every effort to go beyond their baffling state of ineptitude. Needless to say, in Svevo's *Weltanschauung*, the mediocre and the inept concur both to define the field of an individual failure and the incapacity of establishing a normal relationship with people and the external world at large. In decades dominated by Gabriele d'Annunzio and his *Übermensch*, Svevo represented the way ordinary men, lacking in all ideals, could be the protagonists of imaginatively stimulating novels such as *Una vita (A Life)*, *Senilità (As a Man Grows Older)* and *La coscienza di Zeno (Zeno's Conscience)*. On another level, mediocrity can be found at least in two novels by Alberto Moravia, *Gli indifferenti (The Time of Indifference)* and *Il conformista (The Conformist)*, in which everything seems to be structured around averageness as a nihilistic relationship with history and society. More importantly, Moravia's literary imagination explored the moral decadence and hypocrisy of the Italian bourgeoisie in the years between the wars. In his works, Moravia never concealed his own disgust of the average man whose sensibility was unable to distinguish normality from conformity, the mean from the mediocre. Svevo, Moravia, Pirandello, Landolfi, Gadda.... It goes without saying that I could go on with more authors but the two I have cited are fairly symptomatic of Italian literature on mediocrity.

GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE: *How would you wish to relate all that to English philosophical thought, particularly in the light of John Locke's meditations on mediocrity, in which, we know, you're interested?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: It is well known that, from a positive viewpoint, John Locke regarded *mediocritas* as a typical condition of man whose faculties were by no means capable of penetrating mysteries and supernatural events which were beyond his own investigating eye. In other words, Locke established a precise nexus between man's earthly existence and mediocrity, whose meaning was equated to objective limitations of the human mind. On another level, Locke's *mediocritas* corresponds to a mental posture implying a positive capacity to put a restraint on impulsiveness and excess in order to counteract and neutralize the human tendency to succumb to base sensuality and earthly pleasures. As is clear, considered from a philosophical angle, *mediocritas* is almost always a value and posits an axiology founded on rationality, temperance and self-control. In my opinion, what is evident from Locke's thoughts on the mediocre is that one of the decisive traits of humanity is mediocrity. It is from our permanent state of *mediocritas*, i.e., from the way we experience the conflict of interpretations on a daily basis, that we may also derive a confirmation of the limits of our understanding.

IVAN CALLUS: *Let us move from English philosophy to English literature. How important was the concept of mediocrity in the formation of the novel? And how would you relate this to English literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century, particularly in the light, for instance, of Matthew Arnold's take on sweetness and light and George Eliot's views on provincialism?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: Certainly, I concur wholly with you on the importance of the idea of mediocrity. No doubt the revaluation of the average was one of the shaping

factors in the rise and development of the English novel. It is well known that when George Eliot wrote her first novel, *Adam Bede*, she was very explicit in voicing her ideological programme as regards the main themes of her fiction and the kind of characters that would be under the lens of her investigation. More precisely, in chapter XVII of *Adam Bede*, Eliot claimed that, while observing the simple life represented in Dutch paintings, she found “a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions”. Her stance is very clear. Eliot is suggesting to her readers that she has chosen the middle ground as her thematics. It stands to reason that her point of view is marked by the rejection of extremes precisely because diegetic exaggerations and rhetorical hyperboles are far from detecting the complex meanings hidden beneath the surface of daily life. According to George Eliot, the very gist of the real can be found only when we consider the average. In this sense, stimulated by her conviction that *in medio stat virtus*, she is ready to subscribe to a poetics of mediocrity, whose moral and psychological possibilities she dramatized in every text she wrote in prose as well as in poetry.

Significantly, in *The Great Tradition* F. R. Leavis observes that there is “nothing sentimental about George Eliot’s vision of human mediocrity”; on the contrary, she sees in mediocre people “matters for compassion” as well as an “assertion of human dignity”. It is not surprising that in her first work of fiction (*Scenes of Clerical Life*, 1857), she features the lives of ordinary men and women whose difficulties, dilemmas and weak points are an embodiment of mediocrity understood as “the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tone”. In brief, George Eliot’s realistic fiction can be regarded as a study in *mediocritas* which, in her view, is a paradigm from whose influence no one seems to be immune. In *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1872), for example, one of the protagonists is Tertius Lydgate, a physician deeply involved in the exploration of the new field of medicine. He is portrayed as a motivated young man characterised by “spots of commonness” which, in the development of the novel, will lead him to complete failure both as a researcher and as a human being. In Eliot’s worldview, all this means that the noble and the mediocre, the creative and the destructive, can inhabit the same personality; and that the clash of opposites can easily activate an ontological conflagration often involving ethical decline and self-destruction.

Another Victorian novelist who enormously contributed to the exploration of the mediocre was Anthony Trollope. His *Autobiography* can be read as a representation of a mediocre man who, thanks to his stubborn will and constant work, is capable of becoming the best and the most popular among the Victorian novelists. In this connection, we could say that the majority of his novels focus their attention on the way a life of conformity culminates in self-satisfaction and success. In a way, his novels offer an ample range of average men on whose lives only the side-effects of devastating earthquakes reverberate. In this sense, Henry James is right when he notes that Trollope’s “great merit was a complete appreciation of the usual”. However, there are many works of fiction which show how the phenomenology of mediocrity can find a vast array of interpretations which exemplify the response of the Victorians vis-à-vis a social change whose effect entailed a redefinition of the social ladder.

The closer we look into the fabric of Victorian society, the more we can perceive that the notion of mediocrity was often associated with the decline of culture as well as a more general obfuscation of spirituality. Matthew Arnold was very clear on this point. His seminal work *Culture and Anarchy* evinces how Arnold was obsessed by the idea of a growing mediocrity in such a mass society as the one industrial Britain was becoming. Admittedly, by examining the socioeconomic context of his time, Arnold was worried by the relation of continuity he perceived between the mediocre, the vulgar and the destructive. According to him, there were too many “men without quality” in a nation which, on the contrary, needed men of “sweetness and light”, that is to say, intellectuals capable of offering a moral response to beauty while busily working on a rational investigation of the real in the pursuit of perfection. Striving for a solution to the problem of impending disaster, he postulated that “the raw and unkindled masses of humanity” were to be touched by the vague binomial “sweetness and light” in order to lead the masses away from their condition marked by spiritual deadness, aesthetic dullness and ignorance. For Arnold, it was an urgent task of the ruling classes to prevent the nation from getting sucked into the vortex of mediocrity which was increasingly inhabited by “Philistines [...] the enemy of the children of light”.

While a tide of ignorance and chaos seemed to invest the industrial cities and their underworld life, George Gissing responded dramatically to what he deemed to be the reign of mediocrity. In late Victorian England Gissing’s novels showed – and *The Nether World* (1892) is a case in point – how the decline of Western culture envisioned by Arnold was already beginning in some invisible areas of London, where slum-dwellers lived in a condition of savagery. While starving, “the unclassed” were totally abandoned by the Establishment. In Gissing’s view, the demographic growth, the rise of mass consumption and production, and the consequent decline in culture, were the index of a mediocrity which he regarded as a direct consequence of the capitalistic organization of society. Strongly influenced by the Arnoldian analysis of culture, Gissing was convinced that capitalism, the bourgeoisie and mediocrity were the same thing. In line with Gissing’s ideas on mediocrity and the masses, George Orwell’s fiction expressed the same concerns as to the destiny of culture in connection with Englishness. At least two of his works of fiction – *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939) – placed emphasis on the common man and his attempts to find an escape from the dull life he was trapped in. In this sense, Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*, genealogically speaking, seem to tread on the same unstable ground as Gissing’s heroes. Similarly, Comstock and Bowling will conclude their temporary revolt against a drab daily life by accepting their own failure and decline into mediocrity. Significantly, Orwell epitomized his cultural rebellion against the mediocre in an illuminating passage we find in *Inside the Whale*: “There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter what happens”. In sum, this is Orwell’s portrait of a mediocre person – moral indifference and social insensibility, an aloofness from the reality and a lack of sense of responsibility and sympathy. To be inside the whale means all this: blindness with regard to catastrophe ... *Inside the Whale* was written in 1940, which means a lot in historical terms .... These are only a few examples of the many ways mediocrity has inspired British literature. Of course, the notion of the average offers the possibility of considering more twentieth-century authors. But I think I’d better stop here, else mine would be too long a reply.

GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE: *You are also a scholar of contemporary literature and also a fiction writer. What are the insights that we can glean there for a fuller understanding of the mediocre? Within Italian fiction Stefano d'Arrigo, Giorgio Manganelli, Italo Calvino and Antonio Tabucchi, in particular, might seem particularly relevant, because they do seem to have an understanding in their work of how the mediocre can be enlivened by fantasy: in other words by a capacity and a mode that is entirely antithetical to the mediocre. Could you comment on that?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: Well, I think that it is right to say that the mediocre inhabits a territory where fantasy seems to have no chance of exerting a significant influence. This is true in real life but not in the field of literature. Considering the fantastic, it is no exaggeration to claim that the most extraordinary pages may be stimulated by mediocrity simply because a refined writer recognizes in the mediocre a sort of challenge to his art. Flaubert is a case in point. Therefore, I am sure that every contemporary practitioner of the genre would subscribe to the notion that the average is stimulating, whereas the heroic is too obvious if not boring. This is why 'Ndrja Cambria, the hero of such a powerful novel as *Orcynus Orca* by Stefano D'Arrigo, is a common man whose wanderings between Scylla and Charybdis entail an oscillation between myth and history and a final awareness of such a destructive event as the second world war. Somehow, this novel may be read as a sort of *Moby Dick* plus a great display of fantasy – a fantasy which often culminates in grotesque situations not to mention some pages in which the absurd and the fantastic become a key to a better understanding of *mediocritas*.

On another level, Manganelli, Calvino and Tabucchi show how they are fully aware that the mediocre is by no means incompatible with literary inspiration. On the contrary, they often succeed in expressing the best of their narrative art when a character trapped in mediocrity is confronted with the ambiguities of the real. The eponymous hero of *Sostiene Pereira* (1994), for example, cannot be regarded as an exceptional man. His life aspires to a normalcy which the historical context (Lisbon, 1938, Portugal under the dictator Salazar) seems to negate, but what he most longs for is a sort of *aurea mediocritas*. Time and again, Manganelli maintained that literature is an antidote to banality and he firmly believed that “a writer can discover everything” precisely because he has nothing to teach, nothing to say. For him the average is always out there and a writer cannot help facing it. On the other hand, Calvino is an author whose works cannot be easily categorized. Well, I would simply say that the underlying principle of his fiction is the recognition of multiplicity, as we can read in the final chapter (“Multiplicity”) of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In his view, rationality and fantasy are integral parts of the human experience in which the mediocre plays an important role .... Yes, of course, from a culturological perspective, the majority feeds on mediocrity. In their respective conception of the art of fiction, it is only too obvious to conclude that Calvino and Manganelli fought mediocrity in Italian literature since they felt it was their artistic mission to break new paths in contemporary fiction.

GLORIA LAURI-LUCENTE: *What, in your view, are some of the aesthetic, ethical, political obligations we have, as literary scholars, before the mediocre? We are asking this because there is a rich tradition, going back to the classics and passing through the Enlightenment and later philosophy, to suggest that the mediocre should not be*

*excoriated. Petrarch, for example, associates his epistolary style with mediocrity, or plainness, or familiarity, or informality and friendliness. Dante refers to a 'mediocre' style opposed to the elevated style of tragedy. The mediocre, therefore, is what helps, by default and in contrastive relation, in the identification of the excellent and exceptional. But is this, in practice, an indulgence and an emancipation of the mediocre? Is our stance, before the mediocre, one that forces us into an impossible choice between the contrary obligations to the rarefied and the inclusive?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: I will do my best to reply as clearly as I can. As I have already said, classical *mediocritas* and mediocrity are two faces of the same medal. The mediocre can be read in a positive or negative manner – its meaning depends exclusively on our point of view. So, positively, the average may imply the golden mean which rejects both excess and self-limitation, while positing the middle way as the paramount strategy to reach wisdom and conquer moral and spiritual harmony. This, of course, applies to life as well as to literature and the many manifestations of humanity. Negatively, the average may not at all be conducive to equilibrium and good judgment, especially if we regard it as the expression of an uncritical posture vis-à-vis certain phenomena. In other words, if you prefer to be a follower of the common ways of a lethargic majority and renounce your critical faculty for an inside-the-whale attitude, then you are certainly embodying the worst side of the human mind (i.e. triviality and foolishness), while abdicating your own dignity. I repeat, mediocrity is an ambivalent term, even though its usage gives us a clear indication. Indeed, it is superfluous to add here that the term is normally used almost exclusively in association with ignorance, superficiality and lack of cultural and humane sensibility. But, as I have already hinted, in many respects, the perception of mediocrity depends on one's point of view. I mean to say, that sometimes genius, or something close to it, may be perceived as the expression of an average mind. Chekhov, for example, explored the problem in an oft-quoted short story, "The Grasshopper" ("Poprigun'ja"), which I consider a minor masterpiece, certainly the hypotext of at least a couple of stories by Raymond Carver, who greatly admired Chekhov. "The Grasshopper" aims to demonstrate how, behind the screen of daily routine, an ostensible mediocrity can conceal greatness and uniqueness. Thus, Chekhov dramatizes his non-disjunctive approach to the theme by showing a superficial wife, Olga Ivanovna, who is convinced of possessing a talent for painting. That's why she is ready to betray her husband as soon as she meets a young painter who seems to her a romantic genius. Surprisingly, Olga's husband continues to love her with genuine deep-set love while working as a physician in the two local hospitals and doing research for his dissertation. After having contracted a virulent diphtheric infection, the betrayed man dies in painful agony, while all his colleagues proclaim that he was the best and, from a medical angle, the greatest among them: "Compared to all of us, he was a great man, a remarkable man! What gifts! What hopes he inspired in all of us [...] Good Lord, you wouldn't find another scientist like him if you looked all over the world". Only then, as she stands by her dead husband, does Olga understand that he was a great man, always ready to sacrifice himself. She also understands – and this is an implicit message embedded in the final scene – that her spasmodic quest of celebrity was essentially a mark of her blindness and mediocrity. The title refers to one of Aesop's well-known fables, "The Grasshopper and the Ant" – Olga, needless to say, is the fabular grasshopper whose indistinct brief life is by no means capable of understanding the real and fathoming the future.

IVAN CALLUS: *What are your thoughts on mediocrity and the University?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: Well, the question may prompt an apparently superficial and also judgemental answer which hopefully will not be interpreted as being too reductive, especially if we consider the academic experience I come from. At any rate, it may be fitting to reply frankly that the Italian university system mirrors Italian society in its best and worst aspects. The best aspects come from our illustrious tradition on which I will not insist. As to the worst ... the list would be very long.

On the other hand, our ruling class has made every effort to reduce to zero degree the effect of meritocracy in order to give room to mediocrity – the same mediocrity in which they have found a fertile soil for corruption, immorality and caste privileges. As a result of a sequence of appalling university reforms, the mediocre has become a common denominator in our campuses. Students and academics are severely infected by an overarching contagious mediocrity. Of course, there are many exceptions among academics and students as well.

Yes, I know, the context is a bit depressing. Paradoxically as it may be, I personally consider it still important to cling to research work, passionate engagement and a sense of duty which, in many cases, have been ousted by didactic laxity, self-defence and administrative survival.

IVAN CALLUS: *And on mediocrity and contemporary Italian life? Italy is held to be the home of the Renaissance, which we would hope is still an evolving tradition. Italy, or a certain tradition of Italy, one could say, is therefore also the name (or a name) of the very principle of the mediocre transcended. At the same time, Italian letters, culture, politics are passing through some quite singular times, right now. What are your thoughts on this?*

FRANCESCO MARRONI: Partly, I have already replied to this, while talking of the Italian University system. *Mala tempora currunt sed peiora paruntur*. This is my reiterated answer, but I wish to imagine that something will change before long. I cannot say what and how, but a change seems to me the only possible response when you are aware of being on the brink of the abyss. Admittedly, the Renaissance and the Italian genius are not, and cannot be, redeeming factors. Mediocrity remains, even though our cities, squares, monuments, churches, and what not, are the most beautiful in the world. The beauties of such cities as Rome, Venice, Florence, the geniuses of Dante, Leonardo and Michelangelo cannot redeem the present times. But I do not wish to conclude with a tiring jeremiad. On the contrary, I trust that the new generations will think for themselves – in my daily experience as an academic, I meet many students and young scholars whose paramount aspiration is to strive towards a different society...

IVAN CALLUS: *In a nutshell, then: a response, please, to this final question. The mediocre: are we to respect it or resent it?*

Well, if we inscribe the notion of mediocrity within the contemporary context, we can only conclude that mediocrity is a sort of blindness. Are we to respect or resent it? I find a most appropriate reply in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind".

## **Media și excelența. Posibilități literare și ambiguități culturale**

Francesco Marroni este critic literar și romancier italian, cu o mare vizibilitate internațională, cunoscut îndeosebi pentru studiile sale despre epocile Victoriană și cea Edwardiană, precum și pentru cercetările sale din domeniul literaturii contemporane și al literaturii comparate. În interviul său cu Gloria Lauri-Lucente și Ivan Callus, acesta vorbește despre reprezentările mediocrității în studii umaniste și filosofice din literatura engleză și cea italiană și aduce o serie de reflecții asupra calităților penetrante ale mediocrității în viața și cultura contemporană. În acest interviu polifonic, sunt amintiți numeroși scriitori și gânditori: Dante, Petrarca, Shakespeare, Locke, George Eliot, Trollope, Gissing, Dostoevski, Chekhov, James, Orwell, Svevo, Moravia, Calvino, Tabucchi, Manganelli și d'Arrigo.