

Resta, Antonio. *Belfagor: Indici 1946–2010, I–LXV*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2012. lxxi, 288 pp. Paper, € 60 (ISBN 978-88-222-6103-8)

Reviewed by IAN JACKSON

The journals most worth reading tend to function as the lengthened shadow of an editor — or the collective reflection of his friends. They are also the most greatly missed, for when they cease publication, the sense of loss seems personal: so much have we accustomed ourselves to their distinctive editorial habits and endearing little ways.

How many a journal has had a long, lackluster career suddenly transformed by a momentary blaze of glory kindled by a congenial, live-wire editor! *Apollo* comes immediately to mind, a conventional art-and-antiques monthly galvanized into life by Denys Sutton, connoisseur and *bon vivant* — or *The Burlington Magazine*, revived from its academic torpor for a decade or two by Benedict Nicolson, a shambling alcoholic editor of genius. During his brief wartime tenure as editor, Stanley Morison boasted that he had made the *Times Literary Supplement* “difficult to read again,” a condition almost unimaginable to readers of today.

Then there are those autocratic journals that live and die with their founders. This is the natural form of expression for a coterie or a movement, poetical especially, and almost always literary. Leavis’s *Scrutiny* or Eliot’s *Criterion* are perhaps the most familiar examples of attempts to offer a carefully vetted soapbox to fellow-travellers in literature.

Far rarer is the *scholarly* journal of a “founder-despot,” to use a favorite term of the All Souls librarian J. S. G. Simmons. Yakov Malkiel’s *Romance Philology* owed much of its charm and all of its abrasiveness to its formidably intrusive and opinionated editor, who maintained uniformity of tone by subjecting all contributions to (in his words) “a thorough verbal toilette.” François Chate lain’s *Revue du Moyen-Age Latin* (1945–90) was the most delightfully eccentric and monomaniacal of medievalist periodicals. John Pinsent, in turn, was a Liverpudlian Chatelain. Known to its devotees as “Pinsent’s Paper,” his *Liverpool Classical Monthly* (1976–95) was recognizable by the editor’s dinosaur emblem, a reminder of his self-proclaimed antediluvianism and his increasingly marginal status while the bean-counting philistines of the university closed in on his department, amalgamating it into extinction. Raffaele Spongano’s *Studie*

Ian Jackson (P.O.Box 9075, Berkeley, CA 94709), as noted on page ix of the book under review, is a “*biblioantropo di Berkeley*.” An annotated checklist of his contributions to *Belfagor* appears in the penultimate issue of the journal (30th September, 2012) under the title *Corrispondenza di Berkeley*. His most recent book is *Teach yourself Malkielese* (2006), a satirical guide to the prose of the romance philologist Yakov Malkiel.

problemi di critica testuale (1970-) was ecumenical but also very much a personal publication that featured scattered but charming editorial vignettes (on spare pages), printed unpublished Renaissance dialect satire from manuscript, and included extracts from the editor's correspondence with Italian postal officials, documenting a long-running feud conducted on both sides with good humor and delicate irony. (Tibor Wlassics, founder-editor of *Lectura Dantis* (1987-98), was astonished to find this grand old man of Italian philology, active into his hundredth year, hand-addressing the mailing labels for the journal on strips of gummed tape). There was nothing especially eccentric about Armando Petrucci's *Scrittura e Civiltà* (1977-2001), but the spirit of a founder-despot was revealed, epigrammatically, in the phrase with which he described its demise: "After 25 years, I strangled it!" The remark captures the ambivalent feelings of an editor towards his grown-up progeny, for a journal can so easily get out of hand and absorb his life-forces.

Rarest of all is the learned journal of distinctive personality that passes its flavor on to the next generation of the family. In English, the only notable example is *The Gentleman's Magazine* under John and later John Bowyer Nichols. In Italian, it is the bimonthly *Belfagor*. The journal was founded by Luigi Russo (1892-1961) soon after the fall of the Fascist government. Russo was a leading Italian literary critic and director of the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa who had already edited a handy school edition (1943) of the original *Belfagor*, Machiavelli's fable of the archdevil deputed to reconnoitre the earth to discover why men in hell were so eager to blame women for their downfall. The elderly but still vigorous Benedetto Croce, the leading Italian intellectual of the first half of the century, sent his blessing from Naples. (Croce was more powerful than many politicians; he had the advantage of knowing everyone, was independently wealthy, a senator for life, and the *éminence grise* of the publishing house of Laterza in Bari, all of which combined to make him essentially untouchable — and one of the most inextricable thorns in Mussolini's side). *Belfagor* soon established itself as the leading Italian *rassegna di varia umanità* (or review of the general humanities, a phrase adapted from *pensieri di varia umanità* in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*), eventually becoming for the second half of the century what Croce's *La Critica* (1903-44) had been to the first. Indeed, in our age of academic overspecialization and spoon-fed popular lassitude, *Belfagor* has remained perhaps the only journal in the world to combine rigorous scholarship with an astonishingly wide-ranging humanistic curiosity. Amazingly, it does this almost without footnotes.

For many years it was possible to enjoy a full and varied cultural diet by subscribing to three or four Italian journals. The Roman *La Civiltà cattolica*, founded by the Jesuits in 1850, would print every fortnight what your parish priest would tell you if he were too intelligent and well-read to be a parish priest. The Florentine *Nuova Antologia* (1866-) supplied the establishment

table-talk of bankers or politicians of taste and probity, while the readers of *Il Ponte* (1945-) could eavesdrop on the discontents of an honest lawyer or civil servant. And from Bari in the south, *Belfagor* offered the experience of conversing with dozens of eminent or unconventional professors, all extraordinarily learned, most of them irreverent, and some thoroughly heretical, with not a bore or a poseur among them. The journal positively reveled in its "sulfurous atmosphere." Contributors to the journal over the years have included most of the leading Italian (and European) historians and philologists, among them E. H. Gombrich, Leo Spitzer, Eugenio Garin, Delio Cantimori, Franco Venturi, and Paul Oskar Kristeller. Strictly bibliographical articles, owing to the journal's aversion to most things strict, have rarely appeared in *Belfagor*, but it still has much to offer the philologist, the student of books, and the librarian who reads. The editor has a passion for bibliographical exactitude. Such important figures in editorial theory and the critical study of texts as Carlo Dionisotti, Gianfranco Contini, and Sebastiano Timpanaro have contributed to *Belfagor* — to say nothing of the great bibliographer Roberto Ridolfi, who brought the journal into his and Olschki's Florentine orbit after the death of the founder, co-editing during the period of transition (1962-3). A career such as Ridolfi's is perhaps possible only in Italy, where the literary ecosystem fosters scholars who can play more than one note. As editor of *La Bibliofilia* for forty years (1944-83), he had a dedicated venue for his bibliographical articles; as an *elzevirista*, his elegant and erudite commentaries on current affairs appeared in the daily press, notably on the third page of the *Corriere della Sera*, while *Belfagor* received his more substantial scholarly divertissements.

The journal has always regarded itself as a lively sort of encyclopedia that simply happens to have been issued piecemeal every other month, a combination of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and his *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*. Odd half-pages at the end of an article are ordinarily filled with references to the treatment of similar subjects in earlier issues. When a contributor dies, he or she is commemorated with a bibliography. And the supplementary pages of the *limonaia* at the end (originally yellow, hence the name, then dove-grey, and finally plain white) offer indices to certain series, such as *Ritratti critici di contemporanei* and (latterly) the table of contents of the corresponding issue of a few decades earlier, indicating an exceptional continuity of intellectual and cultural interests over the years. Thus, the reader of *Belfagor* has always been provided with a partial running index, a *portolano* or an *isolario* that offers at least a navigator's guide to its coast and islands.

Antonio Resta has now furnished a comprehensive atlas to the first sixty-five years of *Belfagor* in the usual format of the journal. The index is divided into several parts, the first and most substantial of them recording the journal's *collaboratori* and their articles, followed by a list of books reviewed or noticed along with a register of their reviewers, and finally a general subject-index and

an inventory of the contents of various series or rubrics. The preface is by the nonagenarian editor, Carlo Ferdinando Russo, retired professor of Greek at Bari, who had been associated with the journal as a sub-editor from the very beginning and who took over control on his father's death. His genially anecdotal text, "*Chi va piano*," is inspired by Croce's letter to his father, advising a gentler, more measured approach than the impetuous Russo might have favored — he was, after all, the author of an *Elogio della polemica* (1933). Gabriele Turi adds a valuable historical conspectus, "*Il Riflesso civile di una rivista di 'varia umanità'*," followed by a reprint of Luigi Russo's "*Proemio a Belfagor*" from the first issue.

The index is all the more necessary now that the reader can no longer count on the gentle reminders and regular encouragement of the editor. After sixty-seven years he has, alas, brought the journal to a close with the last issue of 2012, but Russo's *Belfagor* is as little subject to the ordinary dictates of mortality as Machiavelli's archdevil. Olschki is making the entire back run of 402 issues available on the web (www.torrossa.it) with Resta's index updated to cover the last two years. If any journal can survive transformation into a periodical without periodicity, it is *Belfagor*, which has always maintained in perfect equipoise the timely and the timeless.