The Expatriate and the Ex-Patriot: Joyce’s Friend Roberto Prezioso

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An expatriate and an ex-patriot: both terms can easily apply to James Joyce, or to Roberto Prezioso, or we can think of Joyce as mainly an expatriate, and that Prezioso is more suitably defined as an ex-patriot. We shall play a little with words—what better way of remembering two people who played with words all their lives?

Compared to other Triestine friends of Joyce’s, much less is known about Roberto Prezioso, and most of what has been written about him is pure legend. But he was one of the most intriguing characters to cross Joyce’s personal and creative life in Trieste, one that perfectly fits in the cosmopolitan harbour of the Austrian Hungarian Empire, a place full of merchants, freemasons, conspirators and spies.

I would like to start with a quotation from James Joyce’s only play, Exiles, which to some extent owes something to Roberto Prezioso, as he was one of the several men who inspired the creation of the character of Robert Hand:

Not the least vital of the problems which confront our country is the problem of her attitude towards those of her children who, having left her in her hour of need, have been called back to her now in the eve of her long-awaited victory, to her whom in loneliness and exile they have at last learned to love. In exile, we have said, but here we must distinguish. There are those who left her to seek the bread by which men live and there are others, nay, her most favoured children, who left her to seek in other lands that food of the spirit by which a nation of human beings is sustained in life. (3: 142)
“Here we must distinguish”: please keep these words in mind for a few moments. It is the text of a leader written by Robert Hand, a journalist, for a Dublin newspaper, about the return of his friend Richard Rowan, a writer, to Ireland. The title of his article, by the way, is “A Distinguished Irishman”. Richard Rowan is to be “distinguished” from emigrants (or exiles) who are such because in need of “the bread by which men live”—his need is for the “food of the spirit by which a nation of human beings is sustained in life”. His different need makes him distinct from others, and at the same time he is a distinguished person because he is a renowned writer. The text is based on a real article, a review of Chamber Music written in 1907 by another friend of Joyce’s, Thomas Kettle (Ellmann 261). It was Joyce himself who had left his country “to seek in other lands that food of the spirit” and hoped one day Ireland would acclaim him on his return as one of “her most favoured children”.

But after this first digression let us see how the quotation from Exiles can be applied to Roberto Prezioso as well. And here again we must distinguish: between countries and nationalities, first of all. Austria and Italy, being an Italian in Austria or an Austrian in Italy: Prezioso was and felt Italian, but his actions would eventually make many people question his real national feelings—or doubt whether he had any at all. Secondly, between friendship and love: a rather emotional and slightly ambiguous person, Prezioso would end up by spoiling his friendship with Joyce, not fully realizing the quality of his own feelings towards Nora Barnacle, but not only towards her. A third distinction regards exile: Prezioso ended his life away from Trieste. Like Joyce, he could only belong in pre-war Trieste, but his reasons for never going back were quite different.

Prezioso was born in Trieste on May 30, 1869. His father Angelo was an affluent merchant from Conegliano Veneto who had married a Triestine girl, Adele Fariseo. The couple, who lived at no. 28, via del Lazzaretto Vecchio, had seven children, three boys and four girls: Roberto was their third child and first son. Roberto Prezioso would grow up as an Italian subject in an Austrian city until his eighteenth year of age. Then, like all Italian-speaking Triestines, after completing his studies at the local Ginnasio Superiore, he had to choose between an Austrian or an Italian university. This also meant choosing his national identity. He chose Bologna and went there to study Mathematics in October, 1887, then changing to Law after a couple of months. He was to graduate in 1891, with a disser-
tation on the “Historical and Juridical Development of Bulgaria”. In 1890, he had already volunteered for the Italian Artillery, serving in Bologna and Spilimbergo, thus confirming his choice of a national identity. Or so it would seem. So far, Roberto Prezioso can hardly be distinguished from any other young Italian Triestine of his age. What really made him different was his ambition, which would lead him to take some rather peculiar steps in life.

After fixing his residence in Udine, where his family had relatives, around 1894 he returned to Trieste. There he met Beatrice Cozzi, whom he married on July 18, 1894. A second digression is inevitable here: in Exiles, Robert Hand’s first cousin and fiancée (though there are some doubts about their engagement) is called Beatrice Justice. Joyce seems to have thought of Prezioso not only when he called his character Robert, but also in choosing Beatrice’s name. Though there have already been a number of interpretations of the names used by Joyce in Exiles (see Brivic, for instance), I am tempted to add one more: Prezioso was an Irredentist journalist with a Law degree, married to Beatrice and advocating justice for the Italian subjects of the Austrian Empire, just as Robert Hand is a journalist and a nationalist, engaged to Beatrice and advocating justice for the Irish subjects of the British Empire.

Marriage was not the only important event in Prezioso’s life that year. In his book about the first fifty years of Il Piccolo, a celebratory more than informative publication, Silvio Benco, referring to the year 1896, writes:

Più tardi entrò in redazione, molto giovane ancora, agilissimo ingegno, il dottor Roberto Prezioso, allontanatosi poi dal giornale per una missione di studio al Brasile, e tornatovi dopo un anno con mansioni più larghe. (Benco 105)¹

In the whole book, this is the only mention of the man who would substitute Teodoro Mayer as editor of the newspaper from 1902 to the beginning of the war, and Benco’s memory proves faulty. In the spring of 1895 (one year earlier), Prezioso applied to the Imperial Maritime Government of Trieste to become a naturalized Austrian subject. On the back of a document of the local Police headquarters, a copy of a reply to an enquiry from the Maritime Government, dated June 1895, we can find a note containing an exchange of information between two police officers:
- Der Dr Prezioso ist Mitarbeiter des *Il Piccolo*?
- Ja! ... seit ungefähr 8 Monaten als Übersetzer fremdsprachiger Telegramme und Notizen.²

Which means that between October and November of the year 1894 Prezioso was already working for the newspaper, even though only as a “translator of foreign telegrams and dispatches”. And his trip to Brazil cannot have taken place in 1896 either, as on May 10, 1895 he was recognized by the local government as the new Vice-Consul of Brazil in Trieste—a practical result of his successful visit to that country. By the way, Prezioso, who spoke eight languages, reportedly learnt Portuguese on board the ship taking him to Brazil. His diplomatic career would continue until the end of the century, and on September 3, 1898 he would eventually be appointed acting Consul, when the old Consul Sully José de Souza retired. Prezioso certainly looks very proud in his diplomatic uniform in one of the very few pictures of him that have reached us.

There are a great number of facts in Roberto Prezioso’s life that still need some explanation: why did he want to become a naturalized Austrian? This would probably make things easier for him in his career as a journalist. Why did he go to Brazil? He seems to have won some sort of study grant, but information on this point is rather vague. How could he, an Italian and later a dual Austro-Italian subject, be appointed consul of Brazil? When and why did he leave the Brazilian consulate? How could he be a diplomat and a “translator of telegrams” at the same time? Research is still continuing.

From Cesare Pagnini’s work on the Triestine newspapers we learn that in May, 1902 Teodoro Mayer, owner and editor of *Il Piccolo*, rented the steamship Arsa and organized a trip along the coast of Istria in honour of Gabriele D’Annunzio, the most fervent nationalist of Italian writers, who was in Trieste for a performance of his tragedies. Mayer invited the most influential Italian nationalist intellectuals in the Trieste of that time: Felice Venezian, Attilio Horts, Giuseppe Caprin, Riccardo Pitteri, and others, and Roberto Prezioso was there, together with fellow-journalists Silvio Benco and Francesco Salata (Pagnini 259). He was at the climax of his career at the newspaper, and later that same year Mayer, who had begun to spend most of his time in Italy, acting as the Irredentists’ “secret ambassador” in Rome, passed on the editorship to Prezioso. From now on, Prezioso would be *Il Piccolo*’s acting editor and under him (though still
under Mayer’s guidance) the newspaper would become the official voice of Triestine Italian nationalism, or patriotism. Joyce’s work for Prezioso is set in such a context: a series of articles on Ireland, with special emphasis on her longing for independence and freedom from foreign rule, was perfectly in line with the paper’s editorial policy. Joyce’s first article, “Fenianism”, was published on March 22, 1907; the last one would appear five years later.

Prezioso had known Joyce for some time, as a pupil of his first at the Berlitz School, then privately. They soon became friends, and Prezioso was ready to write introductions for the writer when the latter went to Rome in 1906, and in 1909, when Joyce was in Ireland: passing as a correspondent for Il Piccolo della Sera, he managed to get a free ticket to a performance of George Bernard Shaw’s latest play (which he eventually reviewed for the paper), as well as a train ticket to Galway.

When they met, Prezioso was in his late thirties. He was handsome and always smartly dressed, he had a charming personality and, as editor of the Piccolo, he was one of the most influential men in Trieste. His wife Beatrice had given him two sons, Luciano (born in 1897) and Sergio (born in 1901). Prezioso’s role as a husband and father was apparently faultless, nevertheless he did enjoy success with women (see Ellmann 316 and n. 72), and he was rumoured to be bisexual and to have a romantic affair with Aldo Mayer, Teodoro’s son (Maddox 156).

Prezioso was one of the many Triestines who immediately recognized Joyce’s genius. He was keen on sharing the writer’s literary and musical knowledge, and often visited the Joyces at home in their flat in via della Barriera Vecchia, where they lived between 1910 and 1912. The accident that would put an end to such a fruitful friendship happened around 1911. Ellmann (316) points out that no article by Joyce was published in the Piccolo della Sera between December 22, 1910 and September 5, 1912.3 In those years Joyce was very busy giving private lessons and writing, as well as trying to get Dubliners published, so he might have been less attentive than before to his wife’s needs. But we know that Joyce encouraged other men’s attentions to his wife, he even urged Nora to encourage them, enjoying as he did the thought that she might be unfaithful to him. But only the thought of it. Adultery, regarded with a special interest for “the husband or cuckold” (Notes to Exiles, 165) is a recurrent theme in Joyce, and at this time he was experimenting, at his own risk,
with the subject matter of his works. It has been observed that this might have been a case of triolism, in which Prezioso’s attraction to Joyce could have been sublimated, if not fulfilled, in sharing his partner. Such seems to be the case with Robert Hand in *Exiles*, where in the course of Robert and Richard’s confrontation in the second act Robert says:

... You love this woman. I remember all you told me long ago. She is yours, your work [this is actually Vincent Cosgrave speaking]. [Suddenly:] And that is why I, too, was drawn to her. You are so strong that you attract me even through her. (87)

So Prezioso started paying visits to Nora alone, and she felt flattered by his courteous manners, and by the fact that she could be attractive to another highly cultivated, intelligent and sensitive man. The situation seems well described in a note Joyce wrote for *Exiles* (173):

Bertha [Nora] is fatigued and repelled by the restless curious energy of Richard’s [Joyce’s] mind and her fatigue is soothed by Robert’s [Prezioso’s] placid politeness.

One day Prezioso finally expressed his admiration more openly, saying to Nora “*Il sole s’è levato per lei*”, i.e. “The sun has risen for you today” (Ellmann 316.) This comment was interpreted as something more than a mere reference to a beautiful day and a beautiful lady, and Nora promptly reported the compliment to her husband, certainly more amused and flattered than shocked by Prezioso’s advances. She would never say if anything else ever happened between them. Joyce, apart from making notes for *Exiles* and *Ulysses* (where Bloom would say to Molly “The sun shines for you”) assumed the role of the betrayed husband (though, to use a modern term, he was still only a common-law husband), confronting his friend in the street and, according to an eyewitness, making him cry. The eyewitness was Tullio Silvestri, a painter and Joyce’s friend, who remembered seeing them—probably outside the Caffè “Stella Polare” —and reported the incident to Richard Ellmann (316-7. See also Crivelli 216). In Joyce’s notes for *Exiles* (172) we can find yet another comment, which refers to the conclusion of the play, that suits the conclusion of this episode:

*Exiles* - also because at the end either Robert or Richard must go into exile. Perhaps the new Ireland cannot contain both. Robert will go.
The “new Ireland” in our case is Nora, whom Prezioso used to call his “Little Ireland” or, in Italian, “Irlandina”. Robert, I mean Roberto, went. After a while he tried to restore some sort of relationship with the Irish couple, as he published three more articles by Joyce in 1912, even though the embarrassment caused by his attempt to seduce Nora remained, and their friendship was ruined. The style of an unsigned article in the Piccolo of February 11, 1912, praising Joyce’s series of lectures on Hamlet at the Società di Minerva, makes one think it may have been written by the acting editor himself:

La sua genialità originale e un po’ bizzarra converti questi commenti che avrebbero potuto riuscire aridi in amabili causeries. Le parole, le mode e i costumi Elsabettiiani suscitarono nel dotto conferenziere ricordi letterari e storici, che riuscirono di alto interesse al pubblico, che fu tutto suo per tante ore.4

In 1913 he wrote Nora notes and a postcard from Venice, from which his embarrassment and wish to repair the damage are evident:

I hope all you well. Excuse me, please, for last Tuesday. I was in a miserable condition. I came here for resting, but even here I cannot sleep. Venezia is full of hungarian jews, who hope to be taken for english lords. But it is nevertheless a charming residence, a dream. In a few days we shall see us again!5

Years later, Nora would still dream of Prezioso weeping in the street, as Joyce noted down in 1916 in the “dream book” he kept, where he annotated Nora’s dreams and his own interpretations:

3) Prezioso weeping
   I have passed him in the street
   My book “Dubliners” in his hand

His interpretation was:

... Again a suffering and aging wooer [Prezioso, 47 in 1916, was thirteen years older than Joyce]. His complaint that I pass him (it is to be read the other way round) is a secret disappointment that for her so far it is impossible to unite the friendship of two men through the gift of herself differently to both for that which seemed possible in the first case is almost impossible in the second case. (Quoted in Ellmann 437-8)
In 1916 both Joyce and Prezioso were exiles. They had both left Trieste in 1915, Prezioso in May, and Joyce at the end of June. The circumstances in which Prezioso left Trieste were to say the least adventurous, but in order to understand them we have to go back to mid-August, 1914. What happened then can be reconstructed through documents kept at Trieste’s State Archives as well as in the Central State Archives in Rome. In 1914 Prezioso had not forgotten his early diplomatic career, and thought he might use his expertise again in a very delicate situation. In the second half of August he received a visit from a rather ambiguous Austrian diplomat, Baron Leopold von Chlumecky, the man in charge of “Italian questions” within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year later, Prezioso would write:

Nella seconda metà dell’agosto 1914, mentre io stavo crucciandomi per l’impossibilità in cui mi trovavo (dato il terrorismo che l’Austria aveva instaurato al principio della guerra) di far pervenire nel Regno, in particolare alla stampa, preziosissime informazioni da me raccolte e che in seguito avrei potuto procurarmi sulla situazione politico-militare austriaca, ricevetti un giorno la visita del barone Leopoldo von Chlumecky ....

Chlumecky’s proposition sounded quite attractive to Prezioso’s ears:

Il Ministro degli Esteri ha bisogno di poter contare su persona intellettualmente e per ogni altro riguardo adatta, per esserne aiutato nel suo fermo proposito di rendere sempre più intimi i rapporti fra l’Austria e l’Italia....

Le ricerche fatte dal governo a.u. per trovare la persona adatta fra gli italiani dell’Austria lo hanno condotto a fissare la sua attenzione su di Lei ... Ella certo non immagina che a Vienna si ignorino o si conoscano anche solo imperfectamente i Suoi sentimenti e la Sua attività politica. Ma né di questi né di quelli il Ministero a.u. degli Esteri si adomba ... Il Suo rifiuto ... non potrebbe essere spiegato che in un solo modo: che Ella fosse già deciso, o magari impegnato, ad agire di concerto con i partiti estremi del Regno d’Italia per trascinare l’Italia a romper fede al trattato d’alleanza e a muovere guerra alla nostra Monarchia.

He was asked to go to Italy on a diplomatic mission, and to use his influence as editor of the Piccolo to convince Italian public opinion (through Italian newspapers) that Italy would have gained “a lot” (that is, territories) from remaining neutral in the war. Prezioso could not but accept, otherwise he would have been considered an interventionist, suspected of plotting against Austria, and imprisoned. The Ministry sent him
a diplomatic passport directly from Vienna, with which he was then able to move freely between Trieste and Italy, and to play the double-cross game the Austrian government was very likely to expect him to play. Made naïve by ambition, Prezioso fell again, the chosen victim of the government’s game, as he had succumbed in the Joyces’ marital game. As editor of Il Piccolo, Trieste’s Italian nationalist newspaper, he had to be neutralized right at the beginning of the war, and the best way to do so was to make him free to improvise as a double-crossing spy.

On May 23, 1915, the police secretly organized a “popular attack” against Palazzo Tonello, seat of the newspaper’s offices, and the building was set on fire. But Prezioso and his family had been safe in Varese, near Milan, since the beginning of the month. He would never return to Trieste, not even when his mother died, on July 6 that same year.

Between August, 1914 and the first months of 1915 Prezioso did try to convince a few Italian newspaper editors of the advantage for Italy of an exchange between neutrality and some territorial concessions, as well as autonomous governments for the cities of Trieste and Fiume. He talked to Luigi Albertini of the Corriere della Sera, but unsuccessfully, and to Senator Alfredo Frassati, editor of La Stampa, who would speak to the leader of the opposition in parliament, Giovanni Giolitti, known to be against intervention.

To be brief, the only result Prezioso obtained was that both Italians and Austrians accused him of double-crossing (and it would be hard not to admit they were both right).

In Trieste, the police started enquiring about him and about his son Luciano, who was then 19 (Sergio was only 15, too young to serve in the army) in 1916. They found out about his flight to Italy with a diplomatic passport, so they decided to search his house in Scorcola, where they found and requisitioned 75 suspicious objects and books, as well as 103 postcards and letters. Among the most incriminating items they found, one is particularly worth mentioning: a red-white-and-green bar of soap with the coat of arms of Savoia! Almost all the postcards were pictures of monuments to Italian kings and patriotic heroes, then there were papers regarding Prezioso’s military service in Italy, and the books were mainly written by nationalist authors. Replying to an enquiry from the local military court, this is how the police described him:
... er ist italienisch radikal gesinnt und war Mitglied der aufgelösten Lega Nazionale, associaz. u. società Ginnastica, associaz. Patria, unione economica, società Alpina delle Giulie u. war Teilnehmer beim Bürgerkomitee zu Ehrung des 100jährigen Geburtstages Josef Garibaldi[s].

Further on in the same document, he is described:

... derselbe ist mittelgroß, hat braune Haare, braune Augen, Gesicht Oval, Nase u. Mund reg.8

A resemblance can be noticed with the description of Robert Hand in *Exiles* (30), who is “middlesized” and whose “hair and eyes are dark”.

The letters written by the police about Luciano Prezioso in that same year are interesting inasmuch as they allow us to participate in a romantic and dramatic sub-plot, or secondary story, in Prezioso’s biography. Before leaving, Luciano had a girlfriend, Maria Conforti, called Mimi—a name that may be a synonym for tragedy. Requisitioning Prezioso’s house, they found a passionate letter she had written to Luciano, in which she exhorted him to leave and fight for their country, Italy. She was arrested, and Luciano eventually married a girl he met in Lombardy, Giulia Morelli.

During the war, Prezioso would try to defend himself from the accusations of plotting against Italian intervention, sending long memorials to the Prime Minister, Antonio Salandra, and to Luigi Albertini, editor of the Corriere della Sera. After the war, an Irredentist Grand Jury in Trieste tried him, and he was acquitted of all charges, probably because Silvio Benco, one of his friends at the newspaper, as well as one of the leaders of the Triestine nationalists, put in more than one good word for him.

Roberto Prezioso died in Milan on January 14, 1930. In his last years away from Trieste he is said to have been successful in business. But those years must have been bitter ones, away from his city, suspected of having betrayed his best friends, and probably realizing that all his ambition had only allowed him to be “second man in charge”, to content himself with being always in someone else’s shade, all through his life: as acting consul, acting editor, acting male companion in his ill-fated encounter with the Joyces.
[Later, Dr Roberto Prezioso, still very young and with a very sharp intellect, joined the newspaper’s offices, which he would soon leave to go on a study trip to Brazil, coming back after a year with more important functions.]

[Is Dr Prezioso a collaborator of the *Piccolo*? — Yes! ... for about 8 months he has been a translator of foreign telegrams and dispatches.] Archivio di Stato di Trieste: Polizia riservata 1868-1905, b. 217, f. 6.

Maddox (156-7) places Prezioso’s courtship in 1913, but this seems less probable, also because in that year the Joyces had already moved to a new flat in via Bramante.

[His original and slightly bizarre genius transformed these potentially dry commentaries into charming causeries. The Elizabethan words, fashions and traditions inspired the able lecturer literary and historical memories that fascinated the audience which was all his for many hours]. *Il Piccolo*, February 12 (1912): 2. Translated by John McCourt (in Crivelli 219-20).

The Cornell Joyce Collection, Scholes 1082. Reproduced in MacNicholas, 10.

[In the second half of August, 1914, as I was fretting about the impossibility I found myself in (owing to the terrorism Austria had introduced at the beginning of the war) of forwarding into the Kingdom of Italy, particularly to the press, extremely valuable information I had collected and that I could have procured later on about the Austrian political and military situation, one day I received the visit of Baron Leopold von Chlumecky] Archivio Centrale di Stato, Roma. Fondo Salandra, sc. 8 f. 65.

[The Ministry of Foreign Affairs needs to be able to rely on a person intellectually and on all other accounts suitable, in order to be helped in its firm intention of making relationships between Austria and Italy more and more intimate. ... The research carried out by the Imperial Government to find the suitable person among Austrian Italians has led us to fixing our attention on you. ... You certainly do not think that in Vienna your sentiments and your political activity are ignored or known even only imperfectly. But the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not worried about either. ... Your refusal ... could only have one explanation: that you are already determined to act together with the extremist parties of the Kingdom of Italy, maybe already engaged in doing so, in order to force Italy to break the alliance treaty and declare war on our Empire.]
[He is an Italian radical and has been a member of the now closed associations National League, Gymnastics Society, National Association, Economic Union, Alpine Society of the Julian Alps, and he took part in the citizens' committee to honour Joseph Garibaldi's 100th birthday.]—[he is middle-sized, has brown hair, brown eyes, an oval face, regular nose and mouth.]
Opere citate, Works Cited


