

## *New Zealand ... should be a village next to Bologna*

*La Nuova Zelanda ... sarà un Paese vicino a Bologna*  
Vincent Moleta

JULY 3, THE LAST YEAR BEFORE the Millennium, better still, the eve of the 'Great Jubilee'. It's a rainy night in Island Bay. The sea is rough off Trent Street, it's cold and windy as we strain to see the Tasman through the dark. We sense and smell the sea as we leave Moleta in his family house.

And I wonder if – after one full century – this is the same place where an Italian family first landed after a long journey from a small volcanic 'southern' island lost in the Sicilian sea. Much more, I ask myself which is the greater span – the century or the nautical miles between the small Mediterranean lake and this Ocean. And what of the distance now and then? The same, more or still indifferent?

Meanwhile – as Moleta writes in one of the first pages of his book (a life diary?) – the wind blows in a way to which we are accustomed, on Wellington, on Perth, on Stromboli, on the sea that separates and unifies everything.

Firstly, the title. *New Zealand ... should be a village next to Bologna*. Again the distance, so great that no common imagination (as least not that of a southern Italian peasant still in the early seventies) could

grasp. And in the distance lies the inner meaning of Moleta's book.

It seems to me that – even beyond his intentions – the full range of stories, anecdotes, quotations making up the 157 pages, leads constantly to one silent theme: the distance and the secret tool used by Moleta to cancel it – culture and scholarship.

Secondly, the language. Professor Moleta's mastery of Italian is undoubted; he can make the Italian reader laugh as well as think; nevertheless I cannot stop myself from thinking that this book is not an Italian book, and that, therefore, it should have been written firstly in English and – maybe – later translated into Italian by an Italian, in order to prevent it from being felt as 'intrusive'. But this remark (which is also a candid appreciation of Moleta's insight into some Italian habits) should be linked to our claim of being the only ones (spanning from Dante to Leopardi) entitled to criticise 'il Bel Paese' and in this noble, masochistic art we have no rival. And we don't want to have one.

Thirdly, the story. Here we come to another told/untold side of Moleta's book: he speaks at length

about minor – even if piquant – events of his academic and personal life, but flies with lightness over the hard core of this same life so that the reader has to guess and to restore piece by piece, trying to figure out a complexity and a richness carefully hidden under a very formal attire. Strangely enough, Moleta is outspoken – even if with a certain delicacy – about other characters and reticent about the main character of the book: himself.

Fourthly, the target. As far as my direct experience is concerned anyone writing a book, a note, a paper has an audience in mind, even if virtual: so who is Moleta's audience? It appears to me that Moleta's listener is himself and in this sense his book is rather precious, a rare exercise of deep levity.

Fifthly, the author. Here, frankly speaking lies the interest of the book. A great scholar, a splendid curriculum vitae, but – above all – a complex, difficult man. A New Zealand born, still Italian-rooted boy, a monk in England in his early twenties and then – moving from that particular background – building up his living through books, manuscripts, early Renaissance painting and a rich personal life.

At the turn of this century, and of the millennium, all this – as we can find in the book – sounds like one of the last test cases of a globalisation lost for ever. ☞

ROBERTO PALMIERI is the *Ambassador of Italy to New Zealand*.