

# Italy

Angela Bubba interviewed **Biancamaria Frabotta**.

Interview date: 14 February 2020

*Biancamaria Frabotta, born in Rome in 1946, is one of Italy's most important poets and critics. Following her first chapbook, Affeminata (1976), she has gone on to publish ten more collections of poems, including Il rumore bianco (1982), Appunti di volo e altre poesie (1985), and, most recently, La materia prima (2018), which was included in an edition of her collected works, Tutte le poesie 1917-2017 (2018). Until her retirement, Frabotta taught modern Italian literature at the University of Rome La Sapienza.*

*Frabotta was interviewed on 14 February 2020 by Angela Bubba, an Italian writer, journalist, and Ph.D. student in Italian literature at the University of Rome La Sapienza.*

**Bubba:** Let's start with two key words, "home" and "origins," which could have emotional, physical, linguistic, and spatial meanings. Let's talk about your childhood: what are your first memories?

**Frabotta:** I obviously remember images, because our memory is a retrospective device. These images show an extraordinary shyness towards my mother, who used to hold my hand. Naturally we seem two creatures who are discovering something special. With regard to "home," I have to mention two places: the Roman house—Villa Bianca—and my grandparents' house in Civitavecchia, where my mother was born. In the Roman house we used to live like in a matriarchal society. I remember my grandmother—her name was Bianca, too—forcing me to sleep with my hands on top of the sheets just like Saint Catherine of Siena: that is an indelible memory.

**Bubba:** What was your vision of the future as a child? What were your dreams about the future?

**Frabotta:** I think that it is impossible to have a vision of the future, because we always live in a condition of eternal present, like when you are getting older. Whatever happened caught the attention of my whole little soul. For example the scarlet fever I contracted—as a result I had to be separated from my other relatives so that I wouldn't infect them. Then I had the first panic attacks of my life, because if you separate a little girl from the rest of the world she immediately feels guilty for doing something she can't even conceive of. To me, that was the vision of the future—namely, the present.

**Bubba:** What do you associate with the place where you grew up—an object, a word?

**Frabotta:** I would say that, at that time, there was not much attention to details. That comes later, like the myth. What connects me to the place where I grew up, you ask? I remember my father, who tried to teach me to play the piano, and my catastrophic performance in front of relatives, because I fell off the stool. As you can see, they were all failed attempts, because I was forced to do what I didn't want to do. There were few things that I really loved. I have many more memories of the other house, the one in Civitavecchia. Not everyday-life memories, because children devalue daily life. From those days I remember a beautiful balcony that overlooked a railroad—my grandfather was a railroad worker, and he was a real hero to me. My other grandfather was a banker, but poetry never came from him; poetry came from grandfather's railway.

**Bubba:** Did you talk about the war with your parents or grandparents?

**Frabotta:** I was born with the Italian Republic, in 1946, so I didn't know what living during the war really meant. My sister was born during the war, in 1940, and she lived the fear of having my father far from home, my father hiding in the house when the German raids took place. But I heard a lot of war stories—mythical stories—for example the story of my father who, after 8 September<sup>1</sup>, took off his uniform, buried his weapons and said to his soldiers, "Everybody go home." And he came back home from Puglia simply by walking.

**Bubba:** When and how did you first hear about Europe?

**Frabotta:** When I read Carlo Cattaneo [*laughs*]. Actually, I heard about Europe for the first time when I attended high school: one day, Minister Colombo came to my school and said, "The students with the best grades will win a study trip." I won and it was my first trip to Europe. I was fifteen, sixteen years old.

**Bubba:** What were your impressions?

**Frabotta:** We went by bus from Rome to Monaco first. I saw something that had nothing to do with Italy. I remember a little about Strasbourg, in particular the cathedral. Then we went on to Dachau; it was extremely moving, even though Dachau was not officially an extermination camp. But what struck me most were the objects. In Dachau, I discovered the importance of everyday life. In the museum, I could see the glasses, the watches, the cutlery, and all the objects of everyday life. I understood what a terrible thing it was to be deprived, from one day to the next, of what makes life normal.

**Bubba:** Is Europe home for you? Do you feel at home thinking about Europe?

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<sup>1</sup> 8 September 1943, the date the armistice was declared between Italian and Allied forces.

**Frabotta:** No. These kind of feelings deal with the stigmata of the first discovery. Europe makes me think of my love for Carlo Cattaneo, one of the greatest European intellectuals, and of his idea of the United States of Europe. Europe was a discovery that came through books. You know, when I grew up and started travelling, I snubbed Europe. I've travelled a lot with my current husband—a physicist, Brunello Tirozzi—and [at first] we always chose destinations outside of Europe. The most extraordinary trip was to Australia, to the sacred places of the Aborigines.

**Bubba:** Where do you feel like you belong? How did the feeling of belonging change during your lifetime?

**Frabotta:** Sure, it has changed. I loved Brazil and the Amazon very much. They are places where I took incredible risks, [risking] many diseases—but the landscape in which I felt most comfortable was Africa. That was very different from today. I felt I belonged to Africa, to South Africa. I have extraordinary memories there. It was an affordable Africa. Today there is a barrier between us and Africa that is marked by terrifying wars. Writing about Africa today would be like writing about the deaths at Auschwitz. There can be no poetry about these things, they're too immoral.

**Bubba:** What was the most important thing you learned at school?

**Frabotta:** When I went to public school, I had a teacher who loved me. I always had intense relationships of affinity with certain professors. During high school I had a curious experience. There was a gymnastics teacher who was a bit fascist but who seemed to believe in me a lot. He asked me, "Do you want to talk about Pasolini's novel, *Violent Life*, in front of your classmates?" I accepted, but I only read a little idyllic passage, leaving out the roughest aspects. I found out that I was very shy, and much less cheeky than I wanted to seem.

**Bubba:** What was your favourite book when you were a child?

**Frabotta:** First of all *Little Women* by [Louisa May] Alcott, and a series of books for young boys, those I liked very much. Then I discovered stories about the theme of the double, for example *Heidi* and *Marygold*. Then came the reading experience of my life, *War and Peace*. I feel like I have never left that book.

**Bubba:** Was there a key lecture or class or professor at university that changed your life?

**Frabotta:** Of course. Walter Binni and his lessons changed my life. He was a member of the Constituent Assembly and he started teaching at Sapienza during my first year of university. The first lecture of his I heard was on Giacomo Leopardi. It was such an experience. Binni was one of the most popular and active anti-fascists in Perugia, along with [Aldo] Capitini, then he was elected to the Constituent Assembly. I graduated under

Binni, with a thesis on Carlo Cattaneo. I graduated in modern literature. I took the exam on French literature with Macchia, then I attended a course on Eliot with Lombardi.

**Bubba:** What did you dream of becoming when you were young? Did you want to teach at university and do all the other things you've done?

**Frabotta:** I knew that I wanted to go to university, but I had to shake off my mother's dreams, which did not coincide with mine. I was a very beautiful girl, and I enjoyed my beauty and the desire I aroused in boys. I was always the centre of attention, but I did not think I was getting anything out of my beauty. My mother, on the other hand, thought I should marry an ambassador. But I have to tell the truth: she did not teach me and my sisters to cook [or] to sew, because she wanted us to study. I swung back and forth between the love of history—it was very strong—and the love of literature. History intrigued me very much, and literature—at that time, to me, literature meant above all Giacomo Leopardi and Ugo Foscolo. I started teaching contemporary literature only many years later.

**Bubba:** Did you study foreign languages? What languages do you speak?

**Frabotta:** I am not good at translating, especially from Latin and Greek. I would never have studied classics. In secondary school I was very bad with all the translations, but I used to write beautiful essays. Once the teacher—Professor Strinati—asked us to write a theme on Catullus and Horace. Everyone chose Catullus; I was the only one to choose Horace. I speak very few foreign languages. One reason is that when I travelled, I was quite often the guest of an Italianist, and so when I went to America I spoke Italian. I've got of a bit of a tin ear for languages!

**Bubba:** What knowledge, what key message did you pass on to your students?

**Frabotta:** Freedom—but not in a rhetorical sense. The freedom to follow what shines inside you, also in a contradictory way. You may be full of contradictions, but you must not obey pre-established ideologies—political, literary, or religious ones. You know, freedom guarantees you creativity.

**Bubba:** Was your first job in the academic environment?

**Frabotta:** At first, I was a tutor for students, and I had a fellowship. At that time, I was married to my first husband, Renzo Paris, and we went through some difficulties, financially speaking. And then, what can I say? There were people, like Paola Maino, one of Bernardo Bertolucci's loves, who wanted to help me. Paola Maino invited me to work in an art gallery, but I was very bad at that. A lot of times, when people asked me the price of the paintings, I used to invent ridiculous, absurd, and unaffordable prices. So in the end Paola Maino said to me, "This job is not your strong suit."

**Bubba:** What were your parents' jobs?

**Frabotta:** My mother had wonderful hands. She did not attend secondary school, because my grandparents didn't have the money to let her study, but she painted, sewed all the clothes, the masks for Carnival . . . she was extraordinarily creative. I think I got my aesthetic sense from my mother, the cult of beauty; on the other hand, I took after my father where poetry is concerned. My father worked at the Bank of Italy, but he did not love his job. He was always waiting for the summer, waiting to go to Civitavecchia, where we used to spend the holidays. I say I took after him when it comes to poetry because he fell in love with all the people around him, and he was ready to give us everything.

**Bubba:** Are you satisfied with the job you chose?

**Frabotta:** I didn't know if it was possible to work at university or not, so I decided to try working in schools. I had a scholarship to study Foscolo, and the topic of the qualification exam for the school was on Foscolo. I thought, "How lucky I am!"—but they rejected me [*laughs*]. This was my great good fortune because I never abandoned university.

**Bubba:** How did your job affect your family life?

**Frabotta:** Which family? [*Laughs.*] My job has never taken me away from my family of origin, even when my job made me more "famous." I was a feminist leader and, through feminism, I achieved an excessive notoriety. I was being interviewed with Federico Fellini! With Alberto Moravia! I always gave my opinion, but I thought it was a kind of deceit, because I could not be compared with these great intellectuals. Fellini always seemed a genius to me—what was I doing with him? So I began to be mistrustful of the media, and I thought, "They will abandon me." And so it was.

**Bubba:** Did you admire any politicians?

**Frabotta:** Yes, of course. At that time I had already got my degree, I mean in 1968: a crucial year. There was a general meeting, I remember, I took part in it but I was very perplexed, because the partisans were attacked—it was said that anti-fascism was over. I was immediately a little wary. Anyway, I was enormously affected by the influence and the charm of Rossana Rossanda. But before that, I was a Social Democrat—though whenever I thought about social democracy I envisioned how life was in Sweden, not in Italy.

**Bubba:** Do you remember the first time you voted?

**Frabotta:** Sorry, I don't remember. But I remember very well the vote involving *Il Manifesto* and the candidate Valpreda. I took part in that election [Pietro Valpreda was an Italian anarchist].<sup>2</sup>

**Bubba:** Do you ever feel lonely with your political views?

**Frabotta:** Yes, especially in my workplace. In my workplace the puzzle that strung my life together—Carlo Cattaneo, feminism, '68, etc.—was not really appreciated. I felt that all of my colleagues didn't really accept me. That's why I never thought about my career, and in fact I became a distinguished professor very late.

**Bubba:** What would bring you to the street to protest?

**Frabotta:** Well, to me it is very difficult to go out of my house to protest, because I am physically weak. What's more, I have never liked protesting very much. To go against something, I mean—I prefer to protest in favour of something, not against. It seems to me that there is something that puts aside a piece of me . . . a piece of me full of hope. You know, the last word of my latest book is “hope.” Basically I am a positive person.

**Bubba:** Do you feel European?

**Frabotta:** Yes. I can say that.

**Bubba:** What does the word “citizen” mean to you?

**Frabotta:** The word “citizen” came out recently. When I was younger, people used to talk about “civil society.” By the way, feminism was very important, because it taught me not only independence, but also the necessity of looking for a new way of doing politics, which means referring more to civil society—citizens—than to the parties.

**Bubba:** Is there something that Europe promises? Is there something that frustrates or frightens you about Europe?

**Frabotta:** Europe does not seem to promise so much. First of all because in the globalised world it takes on a different size. When I went to teach European literature to the girls of Santa Cruz (Bolivia), they didn't know Flaubert. For me it was blasphemy, but then I understood that it was normal: [for them], we Europeans were not the centre of the world. I thought that Europe was the centre of the Western world for a long time. I didn't love Asia very much, or China, either, or the Middle East.

**Bubba:** Are there European countries that you have not visited yet?

**Frabotta:** I think I have seen them all, except Norway.

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<sup>2</sup> Pietro Valpreda was an Italian anarchist. He was arrested in 1969 in the wake of the Piazza Fontana bombing but was later acquitted for lack of evidence. In 1972, the newspaper *Il Manifesto* endorsed him as a candidate for Parliament.

**Bubba:** Some say that “politicians destroy bridges, artists rebuild them.” Do you agree?

**Frabotta:** In a way, yes. It seems to me that there are few bridges today. The keyword today is walls, not bridges. Certainly, what an artist does is to create bridges with everything that is part of the artistic life of all eras.

**Bubba:** Is Europe a political or a cultural project—or neither?

**Frabotta:** The current Europe is very different from the original project, which was an anti-fascist project. It seems to me that the national ideas—which are about to become nationalistic ideas—are coming back. Everyone looks out for their own private interests, and there isn’t a great future in that. But the political class is renewing itself, and I hope that the younger ones don’t forget our history. I have heard from Liliana Segre, who has an enormous level of awareness, that fascism is coming back, and because of that it is to be recommended that the knowledge of history be preserved. Without history there is no memory. Younger people should remember this.

**Bubba:** What is intellectual freedom?

**Frabotta:** Intellectual freedom should not be confused with the freedom of intellectuals. For me, it is, in the most authentic sense, a vocation to defend human beings as free creatures. Freedom is independent of specific cultures.

**Bubba:** Could freedom be considered limiting?

**Frabotta:** This question has more to do with the unconscious. In the unconscious, freedom can be perceived as a limit that forces us into something that we have not chosen. The unconscious chooses us, defines us, even when we don’t want it to.

**Bubba:** Is a lack of borders synonymous with freedom for you?

**Frabotta:** I don’t think it is an illusion. There are some basic words; the words that founded Europe are the same [that sparked] the French Revolution. Those words are never illusory. If you believe them to be illusory, it means that we have renounced those values. There is something that limits freedom of movement, like speed. Speed can warp time, spaces, places.

**Bubba:** What does “border” mean to you?

**Frabotta:** The border between two countries, for example, is always a place where blood has flowed. We must not forget this. It is often a disproportionate waste of blood when compared to the importance of these boundaries. The border between human races is pure nonsense. Viruses are democratic: they do not distinguish between gender, race, or religion.

**Bubba:** What is, for you, the biggest threat to Europe?

**Frabotta:** Europe's biggest threat is that it can no longer bear the brunt of its great past, divided between a pagan culture that is part of the classical age and the ideals and values of Christianity. Do you remember what Pontius Pilate said? He is always considered indifferent, but what he said, in full, is: "I wash my hands of the blood of this just man." That's what Pilate really said, because the Romans did not deal with the religious issues of the country.

**Bubba:** Have you ever been ashamed or proud of Europe?

**Frabotta:** Yes, sometimes. In Europe there have been heinous massacres. Europe seized by force the right to call itself Europe, through endless massacres. Think of the Huguenots—they are terrifying.

**Bubba:** Is the EU perhaps also a creature of new conflicts for the continent?

**Frabotta:** I don't know, but I think there is a symptom of oldness - not biological, but it is the weight of time that passes. The more time passes, the more history accumulates. Think of the myth of "young America" in the nineteenth century. We are the "old continent." In the American renaissance there were many geniuses. Pavese translated them, considering them to be the future, a culture against fascism, against the ancient times of Europe.

**Bubba:** What does it mean to be an old person in Europe today?

**Frabotta:** An old person lives better in Europe than in the rest of the world. I think that if you've been to America, you can more easily understand the importance of Italian healthcare, for example.

**Bubba:** What emotion do you feel when you hear the word "religion"?

**Frabotta:** Religion is an instinct for me, if it is dissociated from superstition and temporal power—I am very suspicious of the Catholic Church, even if Pope Francis himself is beyond reproach.

**Bubba:** Was your family involved in the Church or another religious community?

**Frabotta:** My father was a Franciscan tertiary, my mother had a conventional religiosity. Actually she was thinking of something else. Christianity was very important to my father. I never got married in church, and my father suffered a lot because of that.

**Bubba:** Was religion a dividing or connecting force?

**Frabotta:** It depends . . .

**Bubba:** Were there occasions, such as legal reforms or political events, that changed the character of the mainstream churches or main religious communities?

**Frabotta:** Yes, I mean, the trend towards modernisation—but it was a negative change. Then there is divorce, and abortion. Abortion was more complex, but you have to remember that in the past, in the history of the Church, abortion was allowed. The right to life, the right of the embryo, is something that, in different eras, has had different variations. And, of course, the Protestant Reformation—

You know, I'm thinking about the concept of purity. Think about an author like Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was absolutely against abortion.

**Bubba:** What are the roots of Europe? Does Europe have “Judaean-Christian” roots?

**Frabotta:** Christianity really influenced the fall of the western Roman Empire, and in my opinion that is something that I consider progressive, because it is very hard to respect the barbaric behaviour of the Romans. Women and children were not considered equal, they didn't have any rights.

**Bubba:** How is Europe changing as a result of migration?

**Frabotta:** Not much. If we study the migration data, they are very limited. Migration was vital for the US, where there is a multi-ethnic society. In Italy the “migration problem” is only a topic used by obnoxious politics for their own propaganda.

**Bubba:** Do you attach any importance to encounters with other religions?

**Frabotta:** I don't feel any particular emotions towards the idea of encountering other religions, but I am a very curious person. What I find repellent is the mortification of the female body which occurs in Islam. I never loved the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci because of her belligerent character in dealing with this topic. However, the mortification of the female body in Islam is undeniable. I can't go to a country where women's bodies are treated and perceived in such a pathological manner.

**Bubba:** What is your hope for Europe's future generations?

**Frabotta:** I believe that young people live in an eternal present because there is so much time, and youngsters don't pay much attention to their future or to the project of building something durable. Simone De Beauvoir once said, “I spent so much time writing *The Second Sex* when I was young—unbelievable!”

**Bubba:** Are you pessimistic or optimistic about the future of Europe?

**Frabotta:** The falling birth rate is a melancholy thing. Children aren't being born because there is fear, a fear [that is] a little unjustified. The more primitive a society is, the more children it has. I think of Africans, for example. Biology is slow, and the idea of

being able to have a child when the body is no longer suitable for childbirth is something very sad.

**Bubba:** How do you imagine your country in fifty years?

**Frabotta:** It is difficult to imagine. I hope that Italy will be defended more than it is today. Its nature, its cities, its beauty. I hope more value is placed on these things than it is today.

**Bubba:** Would you like future generations to feel more European than Italian, Spanish, French?

**Frabotta:** For me, national sentiment is important. The feeling of one's own language is fundamental.

**Bubba:** Because language is our first homeland.

**Frabotta:** Of course. It is. Feeling European does not mean anything in this sense.

**Bubba:** It seems that you can feel either European or Italian, Spanish, French—do you agree?

**Frabotta:** I believe that the sense of belonging to one's country has diminished, at least linguistically. Think of English, considered a *passé-partout* language.

**Bubba:** How do you imagine Europe in fifty years?

**Frabotta:** Europe could be considered a non-essential part of the globalised world.

**Bubba:** Do you think the rest of the world will change more than Europe?

**Frabotta:** If you think of something other than language, you will feel like a citizen of the world. It will be a globalised world, even more globalised than today.

**Bubba:** Do you have any advice for me, for my generation and future generations?

**Frabotta:** It is essential to follow what you really love, without any fear or anxiety. It is beautiful to live loving what you do. After all, I can say that I am happy, considering what I've done in my life so far.