

THE BLESSINGS OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

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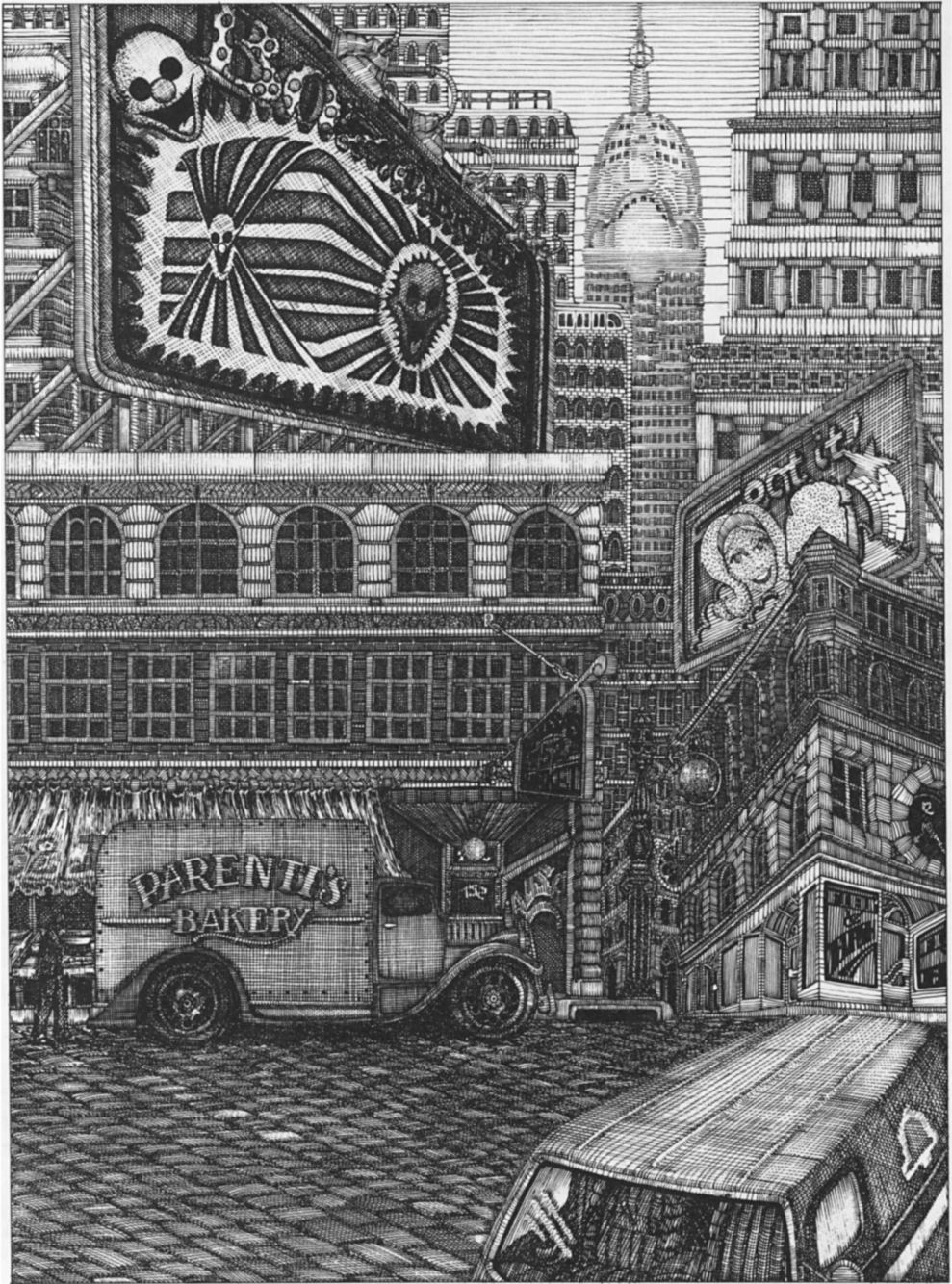
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# THE BLESSINGS OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

MICHAEL PARENTI

When my grandfather died in 1956, my father took over the family bakery. The bread he made was the same bread that had been made in Gravina, Italy, for generations. After two days standing it was fresh as ever, the crust having grown hard and crisp while the inside remained soft, moist, and tasty. People used to say that our bread was a meal in itself.

The secret of the bread had been brought by my grandfather all the way from the Mediterranean to Manhattan, down into the tenement basement where he had installed wooden vats and tables. The bakers were two dark, wiry men, *paesani da Gravina*, who rhythmically and endlessly pounded their powdery white hands into the dough, molding the bread with finesse and strength. My grandfather, and then my father after him, used time and care in preparing their bread, letting it sit and rise twice in one night, using no chemicals and only the best quality flour. The bread was baked slowly and perfectly in an old brick oven built into the basement wall by my grandfather in 1907, an oven that had secrets of its own.

Often, during my college days, I would assist my father in loading up the bread truck at 5:00 a.m. on Saturday mornings. We delivered in the Bronx to Italian families, whose appreciation for good bread was one of the satisfactions of our labor. Papa's business remained small but steady. Customers, acquired slowly by word of mouth, remained with us forever. Papa would chat with them every day on the route, taking nine hours to do seven hours work. He could tell me more than I wanted to know about their family histories.

In time, some groceries, restaurants, and supermarkets started placing orders with us, causing us to expand our production. Papa seemed pleased by the growth in his business but I felt a vague uneasiness about making commercial deliveries to such unconsecrated places as the Jerome Avenue

Supermarket. I began to wonder where it would all lead.

Some months after Papa had begun to build his new clientele, as if to confirm my worst qualms, the Jerome Avenue Supermarket manager informed him that one of the big companies (I can't recall if it was Wonder Bread or Tip Top) was going into the "specialty line" and was offering to supply the Italian-bread account. As an inducement to the supermarket, the company was promising a "free introductory offer" of five hundred loaves. With that peculiar kind of generosity often found in merchants, the supermarket manager offered to reject the bid and keep Papa's account if only we would match the big company's offer at least in part—say three hundred loaves? "Their bread is paper compared to mine," Papa protested. But his artisan's pride proved no match for the entrepreneur's manipulations, and he agreed to deliver three hundred loaves, twenty-five a day for almost three weeks to the supermarket in order to keep their account, all the while cursing them under his breath. This situation, known to the layman as "extortion," is referred to in the business world as a "deal."

During deals of this sort, however, my father developed certain tricks of his own. By artfully flashing his hands across the tops of the delivery boxes he would shortcount loaves right under the noses of the store managers: "Five and five across, that's twenty-five, Pete," he would point out, when in fact it was only twenty-three. We would load three hundred and fifty loaves for the morning run and he would sell three hundred and seventy-five. Not since the Sermon on the Mount had bread reproduced itself so well.

"Papa," I said to him after one of his more daring performances, "You're becoming a thief."

"Kid," he said, "it's no sin to steal from them that steal from you." (*Individual competition in the pursuit of private gain brings out the best of our creative energies and thereby maximizes our productive contributions and advances the well-being of the entire society.* Economics 101)

One day the health inspectors came by and insisted we could not leave the bread naked in the store aisles in open display boxes, exposed to passersby who might wish to touch or fondle the loaves with their germ-carrying fingers. No telling what kind of infected pervert might chance into a supermarket. So my father and I were required to wrap each loaf in a plastic bag, thus increasing our production costs, adding hours to our labor, and causing us to handle the bread twice as much with our germ-carrying fingers. But now it looked and *tasted* like modern bread because

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the bags kept the moisture in, and the loaves got gummy from their own humidity inside their antiseptic plastic skins, instead of forming a crisp, tasty crust in the open air.

Then some of the bigger companies began in earnest to challenge our restaurant and store trade, underselling us with an inferior quality Italian bread. At about this time the price of flour went up and the landlord from whom our family had rented the bakery premises for a half century—or rather his son—raised our rent substantially.

“When it rains it pours,” Papa said. So he tried to reduce costs by giving the dough more air and water, and spending less time on the preparation. The bakers shook their heads and went on making the imitation product for the plastic bags.

“Papa,” I complained, “the bread tastes like rubber and paper.”

“What’s the difference? They still eat it, don’t they?” he said with a tight face.

But no matter what he did, things got more difficult. Some of our old family customers complained and began to drop their accounts. And a couple of stores decided it was more profitable to carry the commercial brands.

I left for a few years to go to graduate school, only to return home in 1959 without a penny in my pocket. I asked my father to support me for a semester so that I might finish writing my dissertation. In return, I offered to work a few days a week on the bread truck. Papa agreed to this, but he wondered: how he would explain to his customers and to his bakers that his son was twenty-five years old and still had no full-time job.

“Kid, how long can you keep going to school, and what for?” he asked. “All those books,” he would remind me, “are bad for your eyes and bad for your mind.”

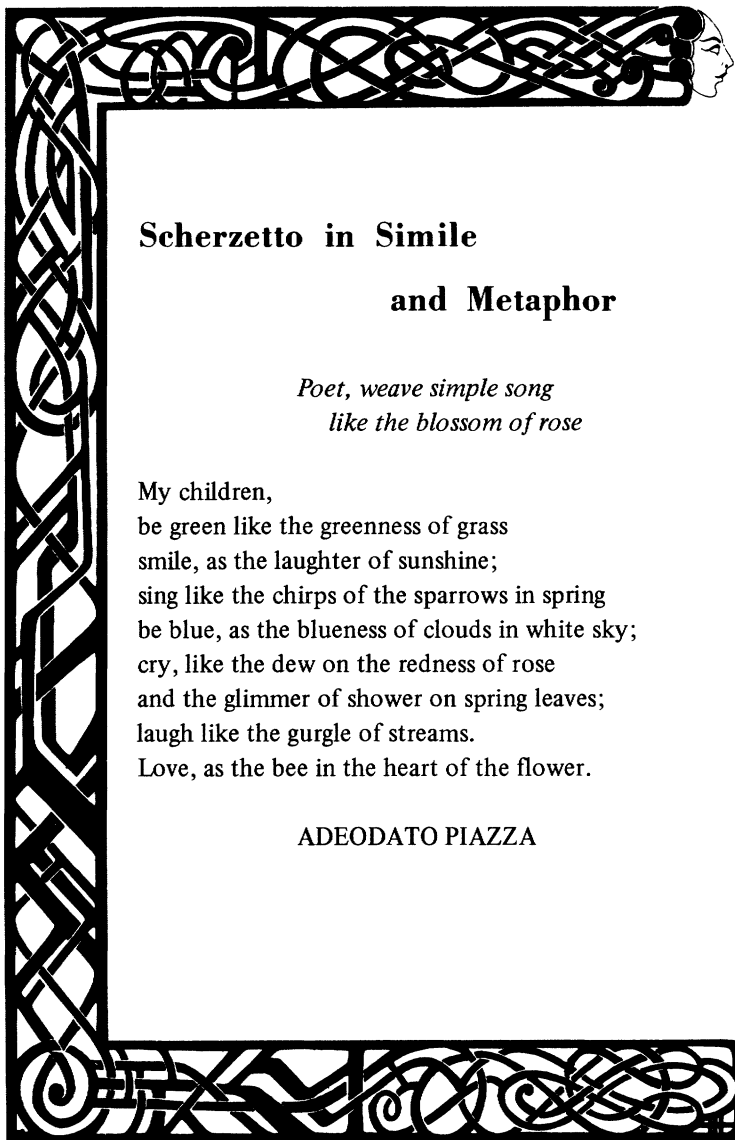
“Well,” I said, “I’m getting a Ph.D.” To this he made no response. So I put in a few days a week of hard labor on the truck. Nor did Papa complain; in fact, he needed the help and liked having me around (as he told Mama, who told me).

When the bakers asked Papa how come, at the age of twenty-five, I was working only part-time, he said grimly and without explanation: “He’s getting a Ph.D.” Hearing this, they looked away politely, thinking that I was coming down with some kind of blood disease. That’s why I didn’t work full-time, they figured. So everyone was satisfied and I was treated with understanding.

On the day my dissertation was accepted and I knew I was to receive

my Ph.D., I proudly informed Papa. He nodded and said, "That's good." Then he asked me if I wanted to become a full-time partner in the bread business, working with him on the truck every day.

I almost said yes.



**Scherzetto in Simile  
and Metaphor**

*Poet, weave simple song  
like the blossom of rose*

My children,  
be green like the greenness of grass  
smile, as the laughter of sunshine;  
sing like the chirps of the sparrows in spring  
be blue, as the blueness of clouds in white sky;  
cry, like the dew on the redness of rose  
and the glimmer of shower on spring leaves;  
laugh like the gurgle of streams.  
Love, as the bee in the heart of the flower.

ADEODATO PIAZZA