

**A Review of David Orsini's *Bitterness / Seven Stories*
By Alfred Turco, Wesleyan University**

David Orsini's collection of stories is very impressive. First of all, a reader must understand the kind of book *Bitterness / Seven Stories* is. It is not a novel comprised of chapters which develop a single narrative line; each story can be appreciated by itself. However, the totality adds up to more than just a sampling of short fictions; for the individual components are interrelated and resonate with each other in all sorts of interesting ways. Each piece deals mainly with intelligent, appealing, and privileged persons frustrated in their desire to recover meaningful and rewarding lives after a terrible experience or an error of judgment. The emphasis often falls on recently matured men and women as they deal with tensions among partners, siblings, or parents. The most interesting figures have a social conscience and are sensitive to the needs of the less favored and fortunate whom they see around them. The time frame is the period before, during, and after WWI; settings shift mainly from Rhode Island to France. Artistic aspiration plays an important part in each story – painting, photography, music, writing, and architecture. Given the social status of the characters, it is appropriate that their dialogue be almost always self-possessed and poised, though often with intimations of more ominous passions beneath the surface.

Untimely deaths and other assorted disasters usually have taken place *before* a story begins. An important surviving person then must try to confront – at times soon after, at other times not until grown much older – the desire to revise his or her life, with varying degrees of success or failure. (More on this issue later.)

David Orsini's prose has been lovingly tailored; many sentences are mini-works of art in themselves: e.g., "She knew as well the rankled caw of a herring gull that was curving the dark glare of its wings while alighting upon the uneasy lip of a wave." The author has a marvelous visual sense – whether describing the austere natural surroundings of a lighthouse in Newport or the busily contented topography of the Bonnières' farm in the Vosges. I get a sense of actually being in the scene – of *seeing* the reality created before me. Mr. Orsini has a galaxy of vivid details ready at hand. It should be stressed that the effect on a reader is not just one of finely tuned description, but registers as well shadings of inner lives which the personages cannot express because they are hidden (perhaps even from themselves) behind a protective layer of character armor. The luminous surface of the writing is capable of intimating depths that the main figures, while cognizant of the causes of their unhappiness, are unable to express verbally beyond a certain point.

In one sense, the book's title does not do the author justice. I mean this remark to be a compliment. A reader might expect a predominant mood of "bitterness" to result from a potpourri of disasters in which persons with whom we have been led to sympathize end up being crushed. Well, there is some of that; but there is also joy and beauty here. That the condition of a person's life can never be the same does not mean that it must be without meaning or, even worse, serve as an excuse for the author to conspire against his

own characters to bring them to a bad end. Only two stories, “Aftermath” and “Bitterness,” present reality in a way that turns hope into desolation. I dared to wish better for Paul in the first and for André in the second of these stories, but both these appealing young men are defeated – partly through what happens to them, but also through their complicity in their own fates. Contrastingly, in “Memorials,” the future lies open for Deirdre because of what she has gleaned from the wisdom of Henrik, the old lighthouse keeper – a man who has over long years made his peace with tragedy to achieve a life he can bear even if it is not the life he would have chosen. Another story – “Ménage à Trois” – has a euphoric if outrageous ending (What would Henry James say?). Likewise, the story “Affinities” moves us by showing how the ineluctability of impending death need not diminish the value of a life that has been lived well. “A More Than Ordinary Life” and “A Sublimation of Desire” conclude with a mood of poignant acceptance as both sets of former young lovers, though reasonably happy with their personal and professional lives, come to sense too late that the road not taken is the one they *should* have taken. My favorite among the stories is “A More Than Ordinary Life,” which (atypically) ends with an unexpected *envoi* that, once fully grasped, has the ring of inevitability. There is much compassion for the un-lived life in these stories – a theme in the work of other modern writers, to be sure; but not one page of this book sounds like anyone but David Orsini.

In short, *Bitterness / Seven Stories* is an impeccably written, sensitively felt work which leaves the reader with much by which to be both saddened and heartened. Each story is effective on its own, while coalescing into an overall pattern that one experiences as a unity.

This book will find an appreciative audience among readers alive to its nuances of style and to its empowering empathy for characters whose lives, like those of most of us, do not turn out as wished or planned. Mr. Orsini is wise to realize that some misfortunes cannot be avoided by careful planning; they just horribly happen to us, sometimes driven by social pressures and natural forces beyond our control, but at other times brought on by the failure of human beings to “collaborate with chance.”

Alfred Turco has recently become Professor of English, Emeritus, at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, after being a member of the faculty there for forty-three years. He has taught in many areas of English and American literature and specializes in international modern drama. A member of the review board of *The Shaw Annual* since 1986, he is the author of two books on George Bernard Shaw as well as of articles on various other figures – including the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun.