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STUDENTS WITHOUT HISTORY? STRUGGLING FOR A LITERATURE WITHOUT HISTORY

STEFANIA LUCAMANTE
(University of Cagliari)

Sommario
Un mancato insegnamento della storia rappresenta un pericolo per la formazione dei nostri ragazzi. Esponenti della cultura italiana (Liliana Segre, Andrea Camilleri, Andrea Giardina, Eraldo Affinati) hanno esternato una genuina preoccupazione di fronte a tale eventualità che produrrebbe un'ulteriore vulnerabilità nelle nuove generazioni se sprovviste di strumenti di difesa dai quotidiani bombardamenti di fake news. La traccia d'esame di storia alla maturità del 2019 in cui si chiedeva di elaborare delle riflessioni sull'aiuto apportato agli ebrei dal ciclista Bartali durante la guerra appare essa stessa generata da un fake news poiché sprovvista di veridicità storica secondo lo storico Michele Sarfatti. La traccia appare emblematica del mancato rigore con cui dovremmo invece avvicinarci alla storia per capire il contesto che ha generato opere letterarie, mai avulse dalla società.

Keywords: History, Italian literature, school education, fake news

2019 marks the first year in which, in addition to a reduced number of hours devoted to its teaching in Italian high schools, the discipline of history has been discarded as a possible topic for the prompt C2 for the written exam on current affairs for the *Maturità* (final examination for high school students). What was proposed this year, instead, was a topic dealing with cyclist Gino Bartali's role in saving Italian and foreign Jews by riding his bicycle from Florence to Assisi to help prepare identity documents for their escape from the Nazis. The prompt openly invited students to reflect whether sports have the power of changing history. Historian Michele Sarfatti did not fail to criticise this topic for

the lack of historical evidence of Bartali's role in saving Italian Jews, something that secured him a place amongst the Righteous in 1983. As Sarfatti notes on his website, there is no clear and irrefutable evidence that Bartali hid documents under his saddle to help Italian Jews to escape deportation. Much of the Bartali myth relies on a book by Alexander Ramati, published in 1978 in the USA and 1981 in Italian with the title *Assisi clandestina. Assisi e l'occupazione nazista secondo il racconto di padre Rufino Niccacci* (1981). In his article on Bartali's role, Sarfatti points out many inaccuracies and lack of evidence that fail to corroborate statements made in Ramati's book. As any serious historian would, Sarfatti cautions readers to read this story as something that *could have* happened, but certainly not as a historical truth as we lack the authentic documents and even a statement from Bartali himself concerning his presumed role in the smuggling of the identity documents. The actors of this courageous action of collecting and distributing the manufactured documents were others, according to Sarfatti, most notably Mario Finzi (deported and killed in Auschwitz), Leo Casini, Giorgio Nissim, and Anna Maria Enriques Agnoletti, to name but a few. Sarfatti asks for respect on their behalf and reminds us that it is through a fastidious research that we can pay respect and bring testimony to those who helped and lost their lives to save many others. The role of history and historiographic discourse, then, reveals its relevance once again in the accurate transmission to future generations of how events occurred. It is rather surprising that a prompt for a state examination should contain such inaccuracies and we cannot hold the students responsible for something they did not do. Rather, what should be of concern is the general state of disregard for accuracy of information that, in turn, reflects poorly on the way we think of Italian education. Something needs to change.

The fact that such inaccuracy is in line with the overall impoverished regime of cultural desertification and with an uncertain moral and political compass under which our young generations are living today, does not diminish the threat to education posed by the absence of a topic directly dealing with history nor with the weakening of its teaching in schools. In short, the danger of leaving our students prey to factual and theoretical ignorance of what preceded the present time is rather alarming. The absence of history and the errors of what is offered as a precarious presence of history turned into some kind of entertainment

(Bartali's myth tied to the role of sports in history) necessarily raises several concerns. Indeed, as writer Eraldo Affinati observes in "Una maturità senza più storia":

> conoscere il passato è faticoso, implica concentrazione e rigore, non basta cliccare su Wikipedia per trasformare l'informazione in apprendimento. Servono tempo, costanza e applicazione: valori obsoleti, non soltanto in aula. (2019:6)
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> (to know the past is tiresome, it implies rigor and concentration, clicking on Wikipedia is not enough to transform information in learning. One needs time, perseverance, and application: these are obsolete values, and not just in the classroom).

He notes further:

> I professori devono ricondurre gli allievi che hanno di fronte al rispetto di un angolo etico che nessuno sa formulare. Il concetto stesso di opera (d'arte e quindi di vita) rischia di venire contraffatto nelle spume della Rete. Come pretendere dai liceali ciò che la grande maggioranza non sa più concepire? (6)
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> (Teachers must bring back their students to respect an ethical stance that no one can formulate. The very concept of work (of art, which is of life, that is) runs the risk of being counterfeited in the foam of the Net. How can we expect from high school students what the great majority of people can no longer conceive?)

Affinati's steady commitment both as an artist and as a teacher makes him the perfect witness for the current uncertain relationship between the arts, history, and the way we hand down both our past and our aesthetic works to younger generations. It should alert us all because the link between events and the aesthetic representation of events (with its possible representative limits) marks perhaps one of the most useful

and stunning achievements we have managed to accomplish. To turn destruction and wars into thoughtful reads, to interpret history and elucidate concepts for a world deplete of violence, these are all accomplishments that could not exist without the artists' knowledge of history. Painful archival research accompanies quite often the creative work of many a writer.

As educators, we should reflect on the tools we are left with to raise expectations about understanding the past in our students. Grasping the intricacies of our own time can hardly be accomplished without knowing what came before us. It is a matter of probabilities, variables, and repetitions that forms our experience and knowledge of the world. In turn, we are supposed to teach this system to our students in hopes that they too will generate knowledge and awareness. It is when adults (school administrators and the Education Ministry) no longer take into consideration the invaluable importance of history as – almost by default – that of a work of art that we can consider ourselves in deep trouble. In other words, and riffing off Affinati's observations, school programs seem to echo and reinforce a current and pernicious anti-cultural populistic sentiment that passively and fatally accepts *fake news*, that fatally accepts or ignores the threat of *revisionism*, that takes shortcuts to introduce a pale idea of history in state examinations such as "the power of sports at changing history." How can we expect our students to develop their critical thinking if very few adults are willing to participate in a moral equation in a collective system of values? On the elimination of the topic of history from schools, Senator Liliana Segre, historian Andrea Giardina, and writer Andrea Camilleri published a public statement or manifesto and a petition for the teaching of history on *Repubblica*. In this manifesto they note:

> La storia è un bene comune. La sua conoscenza è un principio di democrazia e uguaglianza tra i cittadini. È un sapere critico non uniforme, non omogeneo, che rifiuta il conformismo e vive nel dialogo. Lo storico ha le proprie idee politiche ma deve sottoporle alle prove dei documenti e del dibattito, confrontandole con le idee altrui e impegnandosi nella loro diffusione. […] I pericoli sono sotto gli occhi di tutti: si negano fatti ampiamente documentati; si costruiscono fantasiose contro-storie si

> resuscitano ideologie funeste in nome della deideologizzazione. […] Ignorare la nostra storia vuol dire smarrire noi stessi, la nostra nazione, l'Europa e il mondo. Vuole dire vivere ignari in uno spazio fittizio, proprio nel momento in cui i fenomeni di globalizzazione impongono panorami sconfinati alla coscienza e all'azione dei singoli e delle comunità. (2019:7)
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> (History is a common good. Its knowledge is a principle of democracy and equality among citizens. It is a non-uniform, non-homogeneous critical knowledge that rejects conformism and lives in dialogue. The historian has his/her own political ideas but s/he must submit them to the documents and debate tests, comparing them with the ideas of others and engaging in their dissemination. [...] The dangers are there for all to see: we deny widely documented facts; imaginative counter-stories are constructed and deadly ideologies are revived in the name of de-ideologisation. [...] Ignoring our history means losing ourselves, our nation, Europe and the world. It means living unaware in a fictitious space, just when globalisation phenomena impose boundless panoramas on the conscience and action of individuals and communities.)

As Segre, Giardina, and Camilleri write, if children play and take selfies on the Auschwitz tracks, they offend victims. What is more troubling, is the fact that these very children, mocking outrageously tragic events and offending the memory of millions of innocent victims, become themselves unconscious victims of a process of progressive lack of care and educational failure. One wonders if such a state of affairs is a plot against them. Can we blame these youngsters when our politicians revisit, quote and hail the power of Mussolini's propaganda and his *Ventennio* and when extreme right-wing parties like Casapound appear in the political electoral lists? If the "Apology of Fascism" is still considered a crime by the Italian Constitution, the recent public protest voiced by Carla Nespolo, president of ANPI (National Association of Italian Partisans), against the paralysis of our government regarding the

activities – or even the existence – of Casapound, should give us pause for the general tolerance by which we endure everyday verbal violence and revisionist statements against a past that has left fresh traces in many people's lives.

It is with these sombre ideas in mind that I approach one of my favourite topics of research. In looking at current events, I feel selfishly lucky to have grown up and studied in a period in which my research did not seem obsolete, anachronistic, or merely verifiable on Wikipedia, but useful and applicable to my students' general knowledge. It was a *sapere condiviso* (shared knowledge) for which each of us had chosen to take on a role and a specific field. We shared the certainty to contribute with our work to create a memory across disciplines of who we were and wanted to be. The dignity of our work, in short, was not questioned by the very society we worked for because, by studying and teaching literature, we felt we were doing something meaningful. In his recent article on Primo Levi and temporality, Giuseppe Stellardi formulates a definition of the scope of literature that sums up what guides my work and belief:

> Literature (writing it and reading it) is the human activity that – as far back as the recorded memory of our species can go – best expresses, enacts, and performs this temporal essence and destination of our being, on both a personal (or ontogenetic) and collective (or phylogenetic) level. In this perspective, any literary text is, in some ways, a time capsule, an embodiment of temporality, but also a generator of time. (2019:701)

Before a deluge of articles crowded the pages of Italian newspapers about the *querelle* over the absence of a history topic from the high school state examinations, I began to examine my position concerning the dialogue existing between two among the possible forms of what Giuseppe Stellardi calls "recorded memory". A literary text is, indeed, as Stellardi relates, "an embodiment of temporality" in the sense that "expresses, enacts, and performs this temporal essence and destination of our being". Literature constantly records what constructs this "temporal essence" which is us dealing with reality; it records us and events that happen to us and a community to which we belong, or that

we feel close for some reason. Additionally, and simultaneously, a literary text is also as "a generator of time". In Stellardi's words,

> The present of the human person is constituted and infinitely enriched by the obvious or invisible operation of time, and by the multiplication of perspectives that narrative temporality enables; but, as Italo Svevo shows in his trilogy of i*nettitudine*, the cleavage of the present between past and future, memory (nostalgia or trauma) and dream (illusion or nightmare), is also the most potent venom known to thinking beings. (2019:701)

Reading a literary text is an act that necessarily involves our active participation at generating another time, a time for mulling over what we just read (taking all the time we want, of course). Such rethinking amounts to an active reconsideration of what we just read inclusive (hopefully) of the understanding and appreciation of how writers' concerns enrich and transfigure a normative idea not only of how reality is presented in an aesthetic work but also the notion of time such work changes and reflects upon. We are not expecting to be told the truth except the one that the fictive text itself can provide (something that surpasses even the author's intentions) and we feel we are participating in what Sara Ahmed calls a "system for creating truth" (2011:232). Referring to a sentence by Tzvetan Todorov, Ahmed states that "[p]erhaps by creating reality, the fictional world of the novel brings us close to a reality that exists before the act of creation; perhaps to create reality is to imitate reality by imitating its creation" (232). What matters the most is that, as Stellardi notes, a book such as *Se questo è un uomo* reveals the act of literature of retrieving the time and memories of a specific period in the author's existence, but in addition to this, it "creates 'new time' by inserting memories in a narrative fabric and in a context of purposeful action, neither of which was present before" (2019:703).

In my research, I realised that I have always dealt with the multiple perspectives a literary text has to offer. I believe my job as literature scholar has often consisted of monitoring how novels incorporate, transfigure, recount events that are called historical. Or else, in the case of the so-called *Cannibali* writers, I looked at how they carefully

shunned from narratives concerning the past as they knew it (and rejected it). Literature and history share the common impulse to investigate reality, even when (and especially when) literature challenges reality by the means of fiction. In its "act of creation, the novel imitates a reality that existed before creation" Ahmed writes (2011:232), but in its "embodiment of temporality" (Stellardi, 2019:701) literature also generates a different time that is the one devoted to what the writer and the reader likewise make of what they know of life as it is. We can hardly claim this is a peaceful convergence, as it is more often than not, a sort of competition that does not exclude phenomena of hybridisation that just go back to their common past as Hayden White never failed to remind us. But, as Carlo Ginzburg himself relates, novels like the *Recherche* – works of fiction, that is – can offer us *paradigmi indiziari* ("paradigms of evidence") that trigger new ways of looking at historical events. Literature is needed by historiographical discourse precisely because it configures ways of thinking reality that history books cannot.

Literature generates time in a way that is different from what history normally does. Italian migration to the States, Holocaust narratives, the ethical retelling of social problems in Italy, Italian amnesia about our infamous past in the African colonial enterprises, all my work focuses on such relationships, which is more than contextualising literary artefacts. However, by looking at things present in conjunction with what came before us and will eventually follow us, writers do not align with a Newtonian temporality. Quite the contrary, they alter a supposed linearity of past, present, and future by decomposing it and paving the way to a different understanding of those very facts for their readers as for themselves. That "cleavage" of the present that Stellardi mentions, is a deep one where they place an incredible and stupendous array of elements. By looking at events in this way, by expressing the variables of life in an aesthetic form, writers make manifest that the eternal representability of an event – whether in a visual or literary manner – is predicated upon the responsibility of art (as that of the artist).

Art manifests its ethical aspect when the aesthetic creation is functional to the construction of an ethics of resistance that can successfully dissect and debunk any previously established form of gender intolerance, racism, and discrimination, or political injustice. Art is commitment, however, you want to colour it and it does not

matter if it can only describe symptoms, as T.W. Adorno wrote. The artist's act produces narratives whose structure and composition provide useful insight into how things are, by presenting unique knowledge of the world. But, if as it has been recently done in Italy, you take away the historical relevance and do not even bother to teach it to the new generations, as Liliana Segre bitterly criticises, we are left with an utter imbalance between the pursuit of writing about what happened and that of writing what could have happened. Many will not know what actually happened and supports the occurrences narrated in the fictional text. It could all be a gigantic fake past! Without studying history, there would be no use for Ginzburg's "paradigms of evidence" that the realm of the literary provides because the very purpose of their application would cease to exist. If we magnify what happened this year with the prompt C for the *Maturità* examination, then not only will history run the risk of no longer providing students with solid ground for their existence but, as a corollary, literature will become a fictional realm hardly relying on, and interpreting events. Literary artefacts become a virtual and ephemeral expression that does not hinge upon our everyday life, if not to escape it. Escapism, that is, does not need history, does not need any relationship with the real to interpret and represent it. It is just what it says, an escape from reality. Without contextualisation of literary texts, the work of artists becomes a mutilated act of expression detached from their reality.

Different Goals

The terms of the relationship between history and literature reveal an intersection that is not a duality – then – but a textual sharing of time and space that operates with different tools and scopes toward a common goal that is both ontological and epistemological. A history book tends to examine facts according to a moral understanding of the facts and separating the certain from the uncertain, even in the age of the witness, just as Sarfatti explains about the myth of Righteous Gino Bartali. Literature does quite the opposite. It calls into question our own sense of morality, of justness, of ethics. If the community lures us to consider facts in terms of the familiar or the ordinary, a literary text exposes many an oddity of which we are unaware by the means of techniques that are peculiar to its realm: character's agency,

estrangement, *mise-en-abyme*, plot, setting and more. What we owe to our writers is something that shifts between appreciation at their constant attempt at presenting us with a phenomenology of being that conjures rethinking moral clichés and behaviours whilst basing their stories on events that are indeed historical.

With my work, I have tried to create a space in which historiographic studies on the women in the Shoah could resonate in literary criticism of works by survivors and survivors by family or imagination and gender specificity. Memory of these women's most intimate experiences becomes public thanks to the text that emerges from their experience, which is part of history. The complexity with which numerous Shoah literary works renegotiate the limits of representation – as they constantly revisit memory and previous discourse on the event – mirrors the theoretical anxiety in their aesthetic representation. And, to do this takes courage.

In the economy and exchange of writing and reading, the memory constructing the fictional of one person enters into communication with what we, as readers see in such fiction. It defines the traces of our past, that is, that emerge from what we read that belongs to others (writes and characters) and traces of our past called 'experiential background' are what we utilise to complete what we read. We compare our knowledge to that of writers, we learn from their knowledge, we draw hypotheses based on the representation of the world according to their characters and their relationship to the backdrop of their personal experiences, which are fictional only if we consider them as such. Once we start our identification process though, they become flesh and bones before our eyes and we enter their world through our feelings. It is relevant to note that, unlike history books, fiction allows us to better understand facts through the use of passions to fuel our comprehension of what we read. While reading a history book we are asked to remain impassive before events, fiction asks quite the opposite: fiction wants us to enter the event and participate with every character to the unrolling of the story. Partly because my critical thinking was informed during my school years by history books with a heavy Marxian approach in their narratives, partly because I grew up during the so-called "lead years" (*anni di piombo*), I have always been very wary of what Fredric Jameson calls "the ideal of an imminent analysis of the text" (1982:23). As I witnessed in the early years of Postmodernism, a slow distancing of everything cultural from

a defined and locatable political referent, or what Zygmunt Bauman calls the "liquid age," the dissolving of a political act no longer deemed synonymous of the making of a literary act, I kept on thinking that imminent analysis as such was not going to be my tool for literary scholarship.

Too many were, in fact, the issues I would face while working on the novel as a genre that would distance me from history. The analysis of the impact of history on literary facts, particularly on the novel which is my field of research then became not only a priority to understand the transformations of this genre within the twentieth-century Western European and Italian literature, but an actual necessity. Unearthing Jameson's notion of necessity sustaining historiography as a form of narration moulded by emotions that restructure the "inert material" data construct, I believe that, as Jameson states, "the only effective liberation" from all "blind zones" from which an individual seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation" is to recognise "that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (1982:20). But, as he states himself, it is emotions that guide us through this sorting out of data to be narrated and extracted from this heap of material (if history is taught and known, of course). From Jameson's quote, one can deduct my strong belief that any novel – not merely the historical novel – at one point or another will reveal its tension between the act of a single individual framing his/her relationship with the community and what the community, in turn, projects of itself into the individual's act of narrativising it whether in cinema or literature. Over the years, I have come to realise that, as Jameson writes in *The Political Unconscious*, "our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present, and in particular on the structural peculiarities of what is sometimes called the *societé de consummation*" (11). In discussing the merits as the elitism shown by Erich Auerbach in his study on realism and method of analysis in a book on which – I believe – we have all studied at some point how to sort out a narrative's realistic original trait, *Mimesis*, Jacques Rancière notes how "[t]he literary conquest of realism then appears to be the conjunction of two movements connecting surface and depth: the movement that includes the visible surface of the events within the development of a historical

process and the movement that brings all people, regardless of their social elevation, to an equal surface of visibility" (2018:232).

The very first thing that strikes us is the insertion of the modifier 'historical' before the noun 'process.' These two words are used in conjunction or, better put, to explain the 'literary conquest of realism'. Of course, Rancière takes an ideological position that considers literature as an inherent part of society and its by-products. But how could we not consider literature as such? How could we segregate literature from any historical process? The 'equal surface of visibility' is perhaps the merit not only of literary realism but of the novel as a *genre tout court*. It is with the novel that slowly we see characters from all *milieux* emerging from the pages of novels set in London, in Paris, in Moscow, in Milan, in Rome. Or in a concentration camp.

A writer, like a philosopher, does create a vision of a world according to himself. As Nicolò Mineo writes in his introductory pages to the special issue of *Moderna* on the historical novel:

> Scrivere romanzi e capirli significa non solo tentare un approccio conoscitivo, ma, più a fondo, tentare di darsi principi di comportamento, regole di incidenza nella realtà. I mondi possibili possono decidere per i mondi reali. In effetti perché la realtà è una possibilità. Ma significa anche, vorrei credere, tentare di reimmettere la possibilità nella realtà, quando questa sembra tendere ad una uniformità globale. All'interno della 'bolla informatica' il romanzo può forse contribuire a restaurare la complessità, le differenze, il pluralismo. (2006:9)
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> (Writing and understanding novels means not only attempting a cognitive approach, but, more deeply, trying to give oneself principles of behaviour, rules of incidence in reality. Possible worlds can decide for real worlds. In fact, because reality is a possibility. But it also means, I would like to believe, to try to reintroduce the possibility into reality, when this last seems to tend towards a global uniformity. Within the 'informatic bubble' the novel may perhaps contribute to restoring complexity, differences, pluralism.)

Or else we could achieve a simple goal, as Primo Levi suggests, that of writing can make us tell what "we could not tell anyone" (2015:167). Levi is correct, except that the act of publishing involves turning something private into something public. The word says it. Literature incorporates emotions and feelings into the construction of narratives that reveal, interpret, or rethink the impact of history or *a history* in the individual psychology of the author. Affects and emotions, something that has been in plain sight, have become in the meantime one of the most salient components for text interpretation for this approach encompasses the emotions behind authorial intentions, the emotions moving the characters to action (or inaction), and our own emotions as readers. Emotions regulate our reading and understanding of literary facts: we put them against a backdrop that contains the one offered by the writer but we then expand on our own experience and knowledge, decide whether we find characters and stories believable, we make ethical choices as we interpret the story, the ending, everything in short.

The age of the witness

With the advent of, as Annette Wieviorka calls it, "the age of the witness", we see how a shift in the narrator's position changes both the way we think of historiography as the way we think of the historical rendition of a work of fiction. If we look at the position of the writer, we might wonder whether he is a historiographer of his/her time. In this epoch, the writer acts as a witness to events rather than pretending to construct an aura of objectivity for the narratives or, to draw from a famous example, to actively work on "a componimento misto di verità e invenzione". As René Girard reminds us the novel has its truth, *la verité romanesque*, and that truth comes endowed with a frame that is not necessarily determined by elements that we can check in a history book or on a map of the Earth. We rely partly on the voice of the narrator, partly on that of the characters, and partly we construct and complete what we read. Surely, what is read belongs in the realm of reality as in that of fiction and reality, as Maurizio Ferraris said, possesses the indispensable quality of unamendability, something we can never expunge from events and that always surfaces in literature (2012). The fun of this relationship is what we can always make up with

their intersection. With all the space left, that is, to construct and think of alternatives to those events, to different reading of those events which are not 'fake news' but hypotheses on the reality we live that come endowed with aesthetic form. Notwithstanding the fact that a novel, after a due amount of time, remains in my view the best testimony for a given era and period, those novels that attribute importance to historical facts already as part of the authorial intentions and pattern for writing a novel, do look at history as a bundle of relations that carries for dates and battles only partial importance. Enduring questions might find universal responses.

A novel can retell a period, Natalia Ginzburg's *Lessico famigliare* (*Family Lexicon*) is not simply about how the Levi family felt connected by words or linguistic tics, just as a novel like Elsa Morante's *La Storia: Romanzo* (*History*: *A Novel*) is not just about Ida and her children. Both novels, in all their distinctiveness, still retain the power to tell readers many years later how life was for the disavowed during the war and the permanent marks that it left on them. Francesca Melandri's 2017 *Sangue giusto* is a novel that tells the story of an Emilian-turned-Roman fixer (*a faccendiere*), but also connects in an original way the Italian colonial disaster in Africa with Berlusconi's recent ties with Qaddafi and Rome in present times. Igiaba Scego's 2015 *Adua* is a novel about a father-daughter relationship, but its real value could be missed without understanding how past Italian colonialism in Somalia – depicted in the episodes related to the life of Zoppe, Adua's father – when placed against the present of his daughter's life in Rome and her sexual exploitation as a porn star in the 1970s.

Affect theory does much to read through the use of historical facts for the fictional narratives that arise from the analysis and reminiscence of events occurred to one or more characters in novels. Enduring questions seem to be invariably tied to emotions, to vehement passions, to negative feelings, to morality and moral clichés. "Should I be ashamed if […] my instinct as a daughter gets [the] better of morality, of history, of justice and humanity?" asks Helga Schneider in her *Let me go* (2005:144). The text tells us of each woman's narrative about the other that, no matter how many times the other tries to dispel, re-emerges in all its vehemence. Historical and private evidence show that there is nothing the daughter can do to put her mother in a different light

and there is no possibility of reconciliation because the daughter does not fall prey to another moral cliché about forgiving children (especially female children). In all its possibility, that conditional mode "should I" does not warrant an actual giving in to filial instincts or, for that matter, to any forgiveness. "Every now and then" is simply not enough to define a path toward reconciliation.

It should also be noted that Derrida's discussion of the gift of forgiveness does not situate the act of the gift within a context of moral extremity such as the Holocaust. The notion of forgetfulness claimed by Jacques Derrida for the true gift is never part of Schneider's emotional archive. The gift for Derrida "is the *condition* of forgetting" (1991:17) but can hardly take place within a family. If familial bonds pre-exist, the gift cannot be handed on as it can only be given to those who are others. The gift seems unlikely to be extended to a war criminal who is also your mother and is eventually more prone to be bestowed upon others from the community. *Let me go* deconstructs the luxury of forgiveness. It shows how forgiveness can hardly be assumed and bestowed upon somebody, even if this act would put the forgiver in a better moral position. It is not only because the wrongdoer did not ask for forgiveness and showed no repentance that we are not convinced of Schneider's moral commitment to forgiveness. It is the text itself that presents her internal debate, problematises it, and then concludes it with an inconsistent take on the moral matter of forgiveness. The gift, then, is quite not there as the *munus* does not just imply a mechanical act of giving and receiving.

Just like in family novels, Russian novelist Lev Tolstoy contends it is more interesting to narrate the unhappiness peculiar to each unhappy family, their historical component unfolds usually a shameful story, the one child will eventually narrate as a means to come to terms with their parents' moral sphere (right or wrong). Also, narratives of grief tend to be among the favourite subjects for historical novels. Schneider again recalls by her mother's lack of connection and humanity in the present: "If, until yesterday, her absence was a presence that obsessed me, now her presence is an irrevocable absence" (Schneider, 2005:144). The author's refusal to condone Nazi values and awareness of the consequences these had on millions of people, led Schneider to formally reject all the other features of her culture. The causes for her deep separation from Germany are to be found in history. The bond between

the public and the personal ("Like it or not, [she has] never regretted being a member of the Waffen-SS" [156]) produces wounds far deeper than just a personal one. The weight of the responsibility tied to the notion of forgiveness reveals itself far heavier than as if you had only to forgive someone who wronged you: here is the history of a genocide and of people who were more than willing to help with its execution, not just a mother who left you for her ideals. And we readers cannot just sit and read this text without thinking of the unamendability of reality.

But not all intimate accounts have such an evident historical background. I will conclude by briefly talking of the only novel I know of that has been set in Siracusa, Veronica Tomassini's 2010 *Sangue di cane*, and point at the elements that a novel owns to encapsulate and make sense of the reality of a time that signifies a major shift in Italian society. A text shaped as a love letter to the protagonist's lover and disappeared husband, Sławek Tomassini's *Sangue di cane* fiction reads (perhaps even exceeding authorial intentions) as an instrument of denunciation of the impossibility to control both the poetic of lyricism a love letter implies and the social outcry elicited by the narrator's empathetic observations of the discriminated who reside in Siracusa, a city split into two levels, the surface on which we all find ourselves at this very moment and the caves of Ortigia:

> Siracusa è una città straordinaria, contiene sottomultipli del suo barbuto lignaggio di insospettabile provenienza. Sottouniversi polacchi, russi meno, albanesi meno. Sottouniversi polacchi ed è ciò che mi interessa di più. Il nostro sottouniverso intercalava tra gli uni e gli altri ed era compreso tra via Marconi, via Carducci, via Crispi. Iniziava e finiva entro e non oltre, con estemporanee appendici del tutto irrilevanti. E io fui presa al laccio, fu la deviazione folgorante nella mia vita, la svolta quella vera, quella che dà il colpo di mano, che radica e divelle, che demolisce per poi ricostruire. E noi contribuimmo ai lavori, costruimmo la nostra cattedrale nel deserto, il nostro amore. (2010:73)

> (Siracusa is an extraordinary city, containing submultiples of its rough lineage of unsuspected origin. Polish sub-universes, with some Russians, and fewer Albanians. Polish underworlds, and that's what interests me the most. Our sub-universe alternated between the former and the latter and was delimited by Marconi Street, Carducci Street, and Crispi Street. It began and ended within and no further, with impromptu appendages that were completely irrelevant. And I was taken to the snare, it was the dazzling deviation in my life, the turning point, the real one, the kind that triggers a spasm, that entrenches and eradicates, that tears down to then rebuild. And we contributed to it, we built our cathedral in the desert, our love.)

How does one interpret inhabited space? A human agent (the narrator) observes the elements which compose an urban landscape and modifies it in the very act of watching it and recounting it to us. This is a mirroring effect that can be found when a city takes on so much relevance in the construction of a novel. To comply with the term 'inhabited', a space that defines a city demands that its inhabitants be the agents who activate its analysis. Inhabited space is subjective because we don't all look in the same direction when we look at the city nor do we feel the same sense of being with the community in which we live. Further, in referring to the terms of marginality and centrality as in analysing cultural and physical peripheries, geography takes on equal relevance with time and space, but cannot be the same. The novel generates time and history here stops at the threshold of a love story that deals with its own birth and tragic finale; history here stops at the threshold of the original nucleus of Siracusa, the island of Ortigia and makes clear the dialectic between territorialisation and deterritorialisation that refracts fallacious boundaries and makes friable all borders. Right at the intersection of via Carducci (likely to be the actual via Malta), the city, at the crossroads of Roman and Greek civilizations, witnesses the encounter of the two main characters, the author and the Polish immigrant. When geocriticism and corporeal female passions meet, they validate a literary analysis of permeability and defy the idea of historical progression which Serge Doubrovsky, in

fact, claims to be one of the most evident differences between the autofictional and the autobiographical mode.

Siracusa is not interchangeable with other Italian peripheral towns. Rarely visited by literary works, Siracusa's uniqueness – Sicilian town, home to the most important Greek theatre outside of Greece, and Mediterranean port – becomes, by necessity, an added and equally important layer for understanding of the treatment of love in our times. For the writer, the town amounts to the epicentre of personal emotional eruption and the questioning of her own community's moral purity (as that of her own actual *belonging* to it). *Sangue di cane* plays out around the construction of a space inexorably divided into two halves: the grottoes where illegal Poles live, and the surface of the streets on which the everyday life of the Siracusa inhabitants seems to be conducted only through driving. Rhetorical strategies allow for Tomassini's novel to be composed of two horizontal spaces, the Hades, or the underworld where the Poles hide, and the streets of Siracusa, the visible locus populated by Italian citizens. At the threshold delimiting the two spaces, a couple in love tries to make sense of such separation as one of the *aporias* intrinsic to the concept of hospitality. The tragic tones of the novel traverse the structure of the city, with Ortigia divided from the rest of the 'modern' city, and its grottoes as the 'logical' place of the Poles' private Inferno.

The novel reveals the permeability of the city as its layeredness. Its layers of construction far exceed those of renowned touristic sites. The city itself is compared to, and represented as, a disproportioned *latomia* with ambiguous geometries that resemble the odd shapes of the ancient quarries described by Thucydides in *The War of the Peloponnesus*. Thucydides' descriptions of the cruel Siracusa inhabitants forcing the Greek captives into the quarries turned into concentration camps come to mind when reading of Tomassini's porous Siracusa (1951:VII, 87). Her poetic prose carves physical geometries with laconic and repeated reflections that conjure up images of death, "*Siracusa era un cimitero di polacchi"* (2010:72; Siracusa was a cemetery of Poles). Tomassini exposes today's similar necrotic side of the city. Siracusa reveals its palimpsest of strata in this respect as well. The *latomie* – the quarries used to keep the Greek soldiers – equates to the caves beneath the island of Ortigia which function as a site of encampment and cemetery for the Poles. For the Polish community, Siracusa is indeed a city of the dead.

The two spaces delimit two different social classes and the status of the two protagonists: the woman is Italian and middle class, the man, Sławek, is Polish and his history of violence and abuse carves a visible mark in his present existence. The two spaces also define the arrival of the Italian woman into what the narrator calls '*la saga polacca*' (SC 15; the Polish saga). By falling for Sławek, she explores her irresistible attraction for his world of exploited immigrant subjects. Her infatuation with this man leads her to become enamoured of the fierce pride of the Poles. Polish history becomes an obsessive mytheme, almost a subplot, of the love story: the word Poland amounts to a 'porzione irriducibile di un mito' (2010:55; irreducible portion of a myth). Veronica Tomassini tailors her narrator's position vis-à-vis her community to displace the essentialist ideology of individualism that turns the 'self' to an atomised privacy.

To conclude, Bertrand Westphal discusses the relationship between the real and the fictional. He wonders, paraphrasing Umberto Eco, how compatible such worlds can be with the "encyclopaedia of the audience" (2011:95). Audiences deploy their emotions to produce a response to their act of reading/viewing. Passions are known to all audiences and form ties between them and the authors in an empathic and corporeal way. But, as Keen states, '[n]ovelists do not exert complete control over the responses to their fiction" (2006:214), hence readers do not always direct their empathy in the way the author envisions. More to the point, the emotional reaction to the artists' act of aesthetic production prompted by indignation and an ethical urge to expose a societal ill will generate and stir some form of movement in the soul of their recipients (how many times have we said 'I was moved by those lines?'). But how can one be indignant and promote pro-social behaviour without knowing the reasons for the events by which his/her society came to be in that very way, is another matter. How can you even begin to promote the possibility of worlds other than the one you currently live in if you do not know the history behind the very world in which you live? The thrust of any criticism should be that of constantly engaging with the historical content of the aesthetic work and understand the peculiarities of the latter and what makes it valuable generation after generation.

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