FACT AND FICTION: NARRATING, CRIME, MURDER AND MYSTERY IN SARASSO, DE CATALDO AND SAVIANO

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Since the age of eight, Andrea Sterling has been confined in a psychiatric hospital. Here, in line with the methods of his day, the 1940s, he is subject to electro-shock treatment to cure his violent tendencies. Two enlightened doctors take his case to heart and do whatever they can to rehabilitate him, bringing him into what they hope will be beneficial contact with the world outside the hospital. But to no avail. Sterling is so thoroughly and irredeemably violent that his forays into the outside the world lead to more violence, forcing the doctors to bring their trial to an end and play their last redemptive card: they enroll Sterling in a training course for Police Officers, the unwisely named Pubblica Sicurezza. Here his talents are recognized, not by the Police Authorities, for he is too violent to be let loose on the unsuspecting public, but by a bigwig in the Christian Democrat party, who involves Sterling in one of the battles in the internecine war being fought out within the party that aims to discredit a member of one of the factions, thus paving the way for a takeover by a far more conservative party leadership and ruling class. We are now in 1953, and Sterling is present and has a leading role in the orgy that will lead, first, to the death of a young Roman girl Ester Conti, and to the consequential demise of a high-ranking Christian Democrat whose son was present at the orgy that ended in death, scandal and a cover-up to save someone's blushes. Sterling is paid well for his services, but he is in it not only for the money, but also for the joy of action. After a brush with the Official Secret Services, who tell Sterling they cannot use his talents, he is recruited by the unofficial

Secret Services, who then went under the name of the Stay Behind Operation, later to be called Ultor, a kind of secret army that was supposed to jump into action if and when Italy were to be invaded by the Soviet Union, a scenario considered likely by the US, who set up the Stay Behind operation. Their fear was that immediately after WWII, WWIII would break out, a war fought between the US and the USSR that would take place on the battlefield of continental Europe. It is into this clandestine operation that Sterling is recruited. He is given a new name, Mario Rossi, and after a period of training, he begins what can only called a glorious gladiatorial career: in 1962, together with some Mafiosi he puts the bomb in the plane that kills a certain Fabio Riviera, President of the Ente Petrolifero Statale (EPS); in 1969, it is he who puts a bomb in a bank in the centre of Milan; and in 1972, it is again he who, with the help of some CIA agents, tracks down a terrorist known as l'Editore, and kills him just as he is about to blow up a high tension electricity pylon near Segrate, Milan, which would have caused a massive power outage, the sign for the revolution to begin.

This, in an overly hurried synthesis, is the story of the novel *Confine di stato* by Simone Sarasso. Described thus, the novel seems incredible and far-fetched. Yet, a closer glance at the novel, one that goes beyond its central character, Andrea Sterling/Mario Rossi, reveals a landscape that is less *fantapolitica*, the political novel's version of science fiction, and far more that of the last 60 years or so of Italian history: the story of the death of Ester Conti is, in all but name, the story of the death of Wilma Montesi, the first great scandal of the First Republic; there can be no doubt that Fabio Riviera is based on Enrico Mattei, head of ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi), who did die after a bomb exploded in his plane, although the crash was initially passed off as an accident; the bomb in Milan is clearly the bomb that was placed in the Banca nazionale

dell'agricoltura in Piazza Fontana; and the figure of l'Editore is also without doubt Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, who actually was found dead under a high tension electricity pylon. On closer inspection, Sarasso's fiction turns out to be limited to the figure of Sterling/Rossi, a useful and efficient literary pretext that allows the author, under the cover of false names, but against the background of a clearly visible and recognizable Italian historical landscape, to narrate the mysteries of the last 50 years.

This kind of narrative strategy has been adopted by at least one other contemporary Italian *giallisti*, whose books have filled the shelves of Feltrinelli and other book stores: namely, Giancarlo De Cataldo, author of *Romanzo criminale* and, more recently, its sequel, *Nelle mani giuste*. In De Cataldo's novels, like in Sarasso's, there is an invented character, a police inspector, although he does not play the same kind of *fac totum* role as Sterling/Rossi. De Cataldo's detective, rather, plays the role of the honorable man with a thirst for justice, at least in the first of the two novels. But like Sarasso, what De Cataldo does do is, first, to set his novels against the background of some of the recognizable events of recent Italian history—the Moro kidnapping; the bomb at the Bologna train station etc; and second, to include in the foreground of his novels, characters who with a minimum of homework we can identify as the real protagonists of the seedier side of Italian history: for example, the *Banda della Magliana* criminal group, the real life Mino Peccorelli, the murdered owner of the press agency *OP* (*Osservatore Politico*); and the head of the Italian Secret Services, who figures in the novel as *Il Vecchio*, but who is in real life Federico Umberto D'Amato (we know this because *Il Vecchio* has the same hobby as D'Amato, collecting automata, automated puppets); the second novel does

much the same thing, featuring a character who is clearly Giuliano Ferrara, another who is Luciano Violante, and another who is Raul Gardini.

It is worthwhile, I think, to reflect a little on these non-fictional fictional narrative forms that writers like De Cataldo and Sarasso, but others too, have adopted in recent times, to tell the story of Italy's recent history, especially the history of the mysteries that have marked every decade of the last half century. Many of these forms are mixed, drawing on the resources of both fact and fiction to tell their stories. De Cataldo's novel draw heavily on the *noir* genre, for example. Although his central detective figure is Roman through and through, he certainly has some literary US cousins. Sarasso's novel actually takes the form of a film script, and draws heavily on the novels of James Ellroy, especially his *American Tabloid,* which tells the story of the Kennedy years. Sarasso's latest project is a six-part graphic novel entitled *United We Stand*, available only on-line, and at a price. But other writers who grapple with Italian mysteries take not too dissimilar tacks: Carlo Lucarelli's recent book on Italian criminal organizations, as well as his TV shows *Blu notte* and *Misteri d'Italia*, also draw heavily on the form of a film script. Indeed, in the course of his programs, Lucarelli is never slow to remind us that we are about to see or read is like a film, but—he adds—this is reality. And although I confess I have not yet read them, it appears that books like Patrick Fogli's *Il tempo infranto,* about the bomb at the Bologna train station and Giuseppe Genna's *Italia de profundis* also tread a similar mixed genre path.

Behind what I would like to call their non-fictional fiction, lies Sarasso's and De Cataldo's starting premise: namely, their shared conviction that the mysteries that have peppered Italian

post-war history are not mysteries at all, but cover-ups that have prevented the whole story from being told. Driving their writings is a desire: that of telling the hithertofore untold, covered-up story of the mysteries of Italian post-war history. Their writings are animated by a thirst for knowledge that is also a thirst for justice insofar as those responsible for the bombs and murders of Italy's recent history, either those directly responsible or politically responsible, have never been brought to justice. In fact, the mysteries of these 50 years are mysteries insofar as from the jig-saw that would complete the picture important pieces of information—the proof that is needed in a court of law—are missing, unreliable or can and have been contested. The mysteries that these novels investigate are mysteries because we do not know unequivocally who really was behind the Pecorelli killing; who wanted Moro dead rather than alive, and so obstructed the attempts to find his whereabouts; who placed the bomb in Mattei's plane; and in the bank in Piazza Fontana; and at the Bologna train station, and why?

But if in a court of law, the absence or unavailability of information brings the story to a truncated end, for narrative that same absence is the beginning of a story that seeks to go beyond what is missing and do what courts of law have been ill-equipped to do, and that is tell the whole story. Neither Sarasso nor De Cataldo, as far as I can tell, claims to have found the missing link, the crucial piece of evidence that would once and for all tell the whole story and, using detective parlance, close the case. There are, then, no scoops in these texts, no *colpi di scena*, no last minute discoveries, of the sort that are so common, for example, in court room dramas. The premises on which these novels rest are threefold: first, that there is a mystery; second, that the mystery is not a mystery (but a cover-up); and third, that the mystery that is not a mystery will remain a mystery insofar as no unequivocal solution to that mystery will be

forthcoming. This goes a long way toward explaining the form that so many of these novels take: namely, that of the detective story (whether or not there happens to be an actual detective character), that of the noir, that of a quest narrative that never actually accomplishes its quest.

None of this sounds very promising, at least not at first blush. It would appear that these are texts that go nowhere and achieve very little. In fact, the opposite is true. These unpromising conditions, the absence of the famous smoking gun, the hand in the cookie jar are what make the fictional strategy possible. The fiction, in fact, is a polemical response to the obfuscation of hard facts and to the truth that hard facts might bring that have prevented the full story from coming out. Both Sarasso's and De Cataldo's novels, then, are motivated by a desire to denounce that which cannot unequivocally be denounced. It is this paradox that lies behind their narrative strategies. Pasolini found himself in a similar position all those years ago when he wrote of knowing who was responsible for the strategy of tension, but did not have any proof. He despaired of ever having the hard evidence that would have condemned those he was convinced were responsible for the crimes committed in Italy in the 1960s and early 1970s. Writers like De Cataldo and Sarasso, it seems to me, go beyond Pasolini's frustration at the absence of hard fact, of incriminating evidence by taking on board in their writings the mysteries of post-war Italy, and dramatizing them as a springboard from which to launch an enquiry—hence the detective format—into what plausibly could be or could have been behind it all. What makes such a strategy possible is the belief of the two writers that the mysteries of recent Italian history are, yes, cover-ups, but that these cover-ups are not so shrouded in mystery as to be unfathomable. In fact, between the lines of their novels, but not so far

between as to be unnoticeable, is the suspicion that behind Italy's mysteries is the long hand of the US' Cold War anticommunist foreign policy that ruled Italy from afar and reduced First Republic Italy to a state of limited sovereignty, *sovranità limitata*. Of the two, Sarasso goes further in this direction. In his portrayal, the death of Feltrinelli is the result of a joint US/Italian operation. But De Cataldo too is not shy about pointing the finger of blame at US complicity in Italy's post-war history.

In the absence of hard evidence, however, their novels are vehicles for conjecture, for hypotheses, for the what could be of history. The detective genre is well suited to this kind of enquiry, but just as well-suited, in more general terms are literature and writing. It is as if literature and writing have been handed the task of saying in conjectural, but plausible terms, protected by the safety net of fiction, what otherwise could not be said in other fora, on account of a lack of proof, or is so scandalous and destabilizing that to say it out loud, shorn of the comforting alibi of fiction, would cause scandal. The fictive offers a comfort zone, a measure of protection, but it is from under the cover that the protection affords that riskier ventures may be undertaken. Fiction, then, tells a story that could not be told, say, in a court of law. Indeed, nothing that Sarasso and De Cataldo say would stand up as evidence in court, but there is no reason why it should, and there is no reason why the truth value of the conjectures their novels contain should be put to question.

In fact, truth seems to have been the casualty, when these mysteries have entered the courts of law. The mysteries of Italian history have not fared at all well in a court of law. I am referring, of course, to the series of acquittals or successful appeals that have led to a situation of near

total impunity. What I would like to suggest is that if the whole story cannot be told in a court of law, a conjectural, but no less illuminating story can be told in narrative form. Such stories may not lead to convictions, but more importantly, given what seems to be the objective impossibility of convictions, they do lead to the knowledge and consciousness of history that courts of law seem unable to guarantee. In fact, the discourse of the court of law, in the absence of the kind of incriminating evidence that would close the case, is far less well-suited for dealing with mysteries than narrative discourse. The discourse of the court of law is fact-based and flounders, revealing its limits, when clear cut facts are absent or can be contested. Indeed, there is—and has to be—a relative lack of sophistication in the discourse of the court of law. In the face of ambiguity, doubt, missing information, the case collapses. Courts of law demand unequivocal proof, they demand clear-cut yes/no answers to the questions they raise; in court one is guilty or not guilty. As the famous lawyer in the OJ Simpson murder case said: "If the glove don't fit, you gotta acquit."

But even those facts that seem most unassailable often turn out to be far more slippery, contestable and open to question than their robust outer shell might suggest. There has, in fact, been a many a court case that has collapsed when a set of facts said or was made to say something different, even diametrically opposed to the initial meaning given to them. To stay in the realm of California court cases, the example of Rodney King comes to mind. The video tape that 15 years ago seemed to tell the very singular, unequivocal story of a black man being beaten up by racist LA cops was made to say something very different to the members of the jury who saw in it a black man resisting arrest.

Closer to home, the court case that was supposed to prove to the world that Giulio Andreotti was in cahoots with the Mafia placed at its very center the fact that, as reported by the *pentito* Baldassare Di Maggio, Totò Riina kissed Andreotti (a scene that is given high visibility in the film *Il divo*). As we all know, the case collapsed not least because the veracity of that central fact was called into question. I do not want to get into a debate about the extent to which the prosecutors played their hand well or badly. My point, rather, is that a charge based on facts stands or falls on its ability to withstand a challenge. The reason I am belabouring this rather obvious point is, or so it seems to me, that one of the limits to the text to which I will now turn in concluding, Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, does just this: stand or fall by the veracity of the facts his books recounts. Indeed, as Jason Pine has pointed out in a review of *Gomorra*, Saviano's account of one of the central episodes of the book, the cross-fire killing of a 14 year old girl, has been contested. On several blogs written by journalists and friends and family of the victim, all suggesting that Saviano's is a refashioned account of what happened. I am not here to question Saviano's journalistic integrity, nor his code of ethics. What matters to me more is that in a text that stands or falls on its factual accuracy, the more the facts it contains are contested or proved false, the quicker the case the text makes collapses, and the less efficacious it is as a vehicle of denunciation. This, in a text like *Gomorrah*, that aims to be efficacious insofar as it alerts readers to and details what the *camorra* really is, is always a risk inherent in the fact-based narrative strategy in pursues. Neither De Cataldo nor Sarasso are wedded to the same narrative strategy, and herein lies, I would suggest, one of the clues to their efficaciousness.