

David Ward, “Mysteries about Mysteries”

Giancarlo De Cataldo (2002) *Romanzo criminale* (Turin: Einaudi), 628 pp., €16, ISBN 88-06-16096-6, paperback

De Cataldo (2007) *Nelle mani giuste* (Turin: Einaudi), 333 pp., €15.80, ISBN 978-88-06-18539-8, paperback

Lucarelli, Carlo (2002) *Misteri d'Italia. I casi di Blu Notte* (Turin: Einaudi), 262 pp., €14.00, ISBN 88-06-15445-1, paperback

Lucarelli (2003) *Nuovi Misteri d'Italia. I casi di Blu Notte* (Turin: Einaudi), 213 pp., €14.50, ISBN 978-88-06-16740-0, paperback

Lucarelli (2007), *Piazza Fontana. Lo Speciale di Blu Notte. Misteri Italiani* (Turin: Einaudi), 136 pp., €23.50, ISBN 978-88-06-18524-4, paperback + dvd

Simone Sarasso (2007) *Confine di stato* (Venice: Marsilio), 414 pp., €18, ISBN 978-88-317-9249, paperback

Tobias Smith (2003) *The Dark Heart of Italy* (London: Faber & Faber), 307 pp., £8.99, ISBN 13: 978-0-86547-724-7, paperback

At the conclusion of the chapter on the Piazza Fontana bomb atrocity, in his *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Tobias Smith throws in the towel. The whole affair is such a web of intrigue, corruption, deceit and impunity that it beggars understanding. This particular part of the dark heart, he is forced to concede, is so obscure, its mysteries so deep as to be impenetrable. Football, and the fortunes of his local team, Parma, to which he turns with some relief in the following chapter, though not devoid of its own mysteries, turns out to be more amenable to investigation. Time and again throughout his book, Smith comes up against the same paradox: how can Italy be populated both by the lovely and delightful people one meets every day, and whom Smith meets in Parma and with whom he has become firm friends, and by large sectors of a truly awful ruling class whose distinguishing traits seem to be dishonesty, corruption and a belief in their own impunity? Italy, so goes the blurb on his cover, is both “Europe’s most beautiful” and “most disconcerting country.”

Faced with this quandary, Smith falls back on a less than convincing explanation that features in the title of his book. Italy has a dark heart. Underneath reassuring surface impressions, there is something rotten in the state of Italy, a level of corruption and dishonesty, a presumption of impunity that has become part of the nation’s make-up, or at least that of the ruling class, a dark heart that seems always destined to emerge at crucial moments and muddy the waters.

No-one can deny, of course, that Italy, especially the Italy of the last 60 years or so, has had its fair share of mysteries and that lurking behind those mysteries are stories of corruption and intrigue. But if Italy is awash with as yet unsolved mysteries it is far more likely that they are the effects of causes that have their origins in politics and ideology, rather than in the hidden recesses of the nation's heart, as Smith's title implies. To locate those mysteries in some unfathomable dark heart, as if there were some peculiarly "Italian" reasons why post-World War II Italy should be such a land of mystery is to do little more than scratch the surface of a question that has its origins in politics rather than in the nation's DNA.

In recent years, Italian journalists, documentary makers and writers have taken a magnifying glass to their nation's mysteries by way of a variety of analytical approaches. The case of the television programs *Blu Notte* and *Blu Notte-Misteri Italiani*, transmitted by the Rete Tre, and now viewable on-line thanks to the excellent RaiClick, is a case in point.¹ In the course of their seven seasons these programs have offered in-depth analyses of almost every Italian mystery, from the massacre of Sicilian peasants at Portella della Ginestra to Piazza Fontana to Ustica, to the bomb at the train station in Bologna. The transcriptions of these programs are now available in print form, as is a separate book and dvd on Piazza Fontana, all authored by the leading light behind the program, Carlo Lucarelli, one of Italy's most successful mystery story writers, or *gialli*. Indeed, the *Blu Notte* investigations take on something of the form of the mystery story with which Lucarelli the writer has had so much success over the last 15 years or so. Yet, to the inquisitive mind seeking solutions and closure to the mysteries *Blu Notte* examines, there is something less than satisfying about the program. Although analyzed and researched in great detail and from a variety of standpoints, supported by personal testimony, archival research and what other investigators have discovered, the mysteries Lucarelli deals with remain, at the end of the day, just that: mysteries. To be sure, we know a great deal more than we did before viewing the program, but there is always something that is shrouded in mist. We know who materially planted a bomb, but we do not know who gave the orders, organized the cover-up, or what purpose the atrocity was supposed to serve. It is a characteristic of the post-modern detective novel not to give its readers a conclusion, but Lucarelli's programs are far from post-modern, and he is the first to remind his viewers, as he does on numerous occasions, that although mysteries may seem the stuff of fiction they are real events involving real people and real victims.

Still, the two writers I will examine in this review owe a great debt of gratitude, which they acknowledge, to Lucarelli. But both Giancarlo De Cataldo and Simone Sarasso have abandoned a journalistic approach to these same mysteries in favour of a more overtly fictional one which, although based on recognizable and well-known events and people (some of whom wear thin fictional disguises, but whose identities are easily revealed after even minimal research). Their preferred genre and format to narrate the mysteries of Italy's political life is the *giallo*. Indeed, it is almost as if Italian mysteries, rather than in journalistic investigations, have found in the *giallo* a very effective, accessible and powerful form of representation. The three novels I will consider, two by De Cataldo and one by Sarasso, are, in fact, mysteries about mysteries.

De Cataldo, a Taranto-born magistrate who has lived in Rome for the last 30 years, is the author of two such *gialli*: *Romanzo criminale*, a huge editorial success and now a major Italian

film, and *Nelle mani giuste*. The first of these novels takes its readers through 15 years of Italian history, covering the period from 1977 to 1992, and so including the Moro kidnapping and murder (why was his place of detention never located?); the murder of the investigative journalist Mino Pecorelli (who wanted him dead?); and the bomb at the Bologna train station (who planted it and who organized the plan?). The novel follows the rise, rise and then fall of a band of criminals led by an entrepreneurial delinquent called *Il Libanese*, who in real life were known as the *Banda della Magliana*, after the Roman quarter most of them lived in. From fairly humble beginnings—the kidnapping and ransom of an aristocrat—the band expands to such an extent that it soon comes to dominate the entire Roman drug market.

Even though the members of the criminal gang have vague, unthought-out sympathies for the extreme right, they are not at all politicized. In fact, it is politics that seeks them out, either through invitations to the seminar's held by a neo-fascist ideologue *Il professore* (who is, in real life, Aldo Semerari), which bore the band's members to tears, or with exponents of the neo-fascist *Nuclei armati rivoluzionari*, with whom they work out a weapon sharing agreement (their guns are kept, incredibly, in a the basement underneath the Ministry of Health), and especially during the early phases of the Moro kidnapping. Not surprisingly, the activities of the band attract the attention of the Mafia, as well as of Raffaele Cutolo (not in disguise in the novel) head of the *Nuova camorra organizzata*. Contacted by one of the shadier sections of the Italian Secret Services and enlisted to help find the prison where the Red Brigades are holding Moro prisoner, Cutolo approaches the Roman experts, the Magliana gang. Even though the search is soon called off as a counter order comes down from above that Moro is more useful dead than alive, *Il Libanese* is astute enough to know that the three-way tryst of Mafia, shady sections of the Italian Secret Services and criminal gang is the start of something good. In return for doing the Secret Services' dirty work, the gang will receive protection and impunity, or at least a great deal of tolerance for their criminal activities. If some zealous magistrate locks them in prison, an equally zealous member of the Secret Services will see that evidence disappears, charges are dropped or, if imprisoned, that they are freed relatively quickly or, at worst, receive privileged treatment. So close does the relationship between gang and Secret Services become that later in the novel one of the former, *Il Dandy*, the new leader, is offered the ultimate protection, he is made a member of the P2.

The Secret Services soon knock on the gang's door: one of them, *Il Nero*, who has by far the strongest attraction for neo-fascism of all the members, is recruited to murder a journalist, known as *Il Pidocchio* (The flea), guilty of publishing articles that detail the connivances of a well-known politician and the Mafia. Although no real names are mentioned, it is no stretch to see that the politician is Giulio Andreotti and the journalist Mino Pecorelli, editor and owner of the press agency *Osservatore Politico* (OP). In later years, Mafia collaborators have claimed that the Pecorelli murder was ordered by the Mafia as a favor to Andreotti (whom a court of law absolved of any involvement in the murder). On another occasion, a member of the gang, the *Nembo Kid*, is recruited to murder a Milanese banker—Roberto Rosone, an associate of the banker Roberto Calvi, found dead under a bridge in London—only to fail, and to be killed himself.

But as well as attracting the attention of neo-fascists, Secret Services and the mafia, the gang also attract the attention of the police, in particular that of Inspector Nicola Scialoja.

Investigating the kidnapping of the aristocrat, he stumbles upon the close relationship the gang has with the Secret Services, at whose head, he discovers, is a figure known as *Il Vecchio*, whose hobby of collecting automated puppets tells us that he is based on Federico Umberto D'Amato, who for many years ran the *Ufficio affari riservati* of Italy's Secret Services. It is he, acting free of any governmental or legal constraint, who pulls the strings in the Italy of the 1980s, it appears. Armed with a warehouse full of dossiers, the contents of which seem to terrify the entire Italian ruling class, he enjoys *carte blanche*: "*Il Vecchio* gives the orders, God carries them out" (215), De Cataldo tells us. Once *Il Vecchio* appears on the scene, the novel takes on the form of a contest between his character and the policeman, with the latter trying against all the odds to incriminate the former. *Il Vecchio*, it appears, is behind, knows about and ultimately controls everything that happens in Italy, including bombs and murders. His job is to turn everything and anything that happens to what he sees to be the advantage of the nation. At a certain point Scialoja, speaking of the "deviated" Secret Services of which *Il Vecchio* is head, explodes thus: "If they know what's going on ahead of time, they do nothing to stop it. If they find out later, they cover it up. If they can't do anything else about it, they lead us up the garden path with red herrings, and with fake and ambiguous documents" (541).

But none of *Il Vecchio*'s intrusions and micro-managing of Italy's internal affairs would make any sense in the absence of a project that supports and legitimates, at least in his and his masters' eyes, his illegal and criminal actions. And one would have to be blind not to see that the glue holding together everything that he represents in *Romanzo criminale* is anticommunism. At all costs, come what may, and at any price, the Italian left, the Communist party, no matter what name it goes under, and no matter how great a distance it has put between itself and Moscow, must not be allowed to come to power, even if it were to win at the ballot box in a fairly contested democratic election. All crimes committed in the pursuit of discrediting and delegitimizing the communists are pardoned; those responsible for putting the anti-communist strategy into practice can count on protection and immunity, even if they are *Mafiosi*, neo-fascists and drug-dealing criminals. This is what lies behind the Strategy of Tension, the attempt to ascribe blame for the placing of bombs in public spaces to left-wingers and the decision that a dead Moro, rather than alive, would best serve the anticommunist agenda. As Lucarelli puts it in *Blu Notte*: "Destabilize in order to stabilize," to scare the Italian people away from the prospect of change.

When no holds are barred, when the rules of the game are ignored, when illegal activity finds legitimacy, it is not surprising that a climate of corruption and impunity is created. Such a policy opens the door to abuse. To claim to be defending one's nation against the insidious communist threat serves as a ready excuse for all kinds of nefarious behaviour, even when the last thing that those making those claims are concerned with is the political health of their nation. If in present-day Italy there is a high degree of corruption, if significant sectors of the ruling and political classes claim impunity as their right, the reasons for this do not lie, as Smith seems to suggest, in some defect of the national self. In any case, how can dishonesty and corruption be peculiarly national characteristics (unless we have all become citizens of one supra-national country)? Climates of dishonesty, corruption and impunity are created by circumstance, chance and bad luck, and if such a climate exists in present-day Italy, as I think it clearly does, it is at least to some extent, and perhaps even to a great extent, a side effect of the connivance with and tolerance of illegality and corruption that have been part of the nation's political life in the

second half of the 20th century. The mysteries that have surrounded many of the events, and most of the bombing outrages of the last decades are not really mysteries at all; they are cover-ups, all of which have a story and a history behind them. Mystery, in fact, seems little more than a literary and melodramatic term for cover-up: a cover-up of a cover-up. But a cover-up of what?

Although *Il Vecchio* is portrayed in the novel as a lonely figure he is far from being a one-man army. Behind him, in fact, is the foreign policy that the US pursued at the end of WW II. *Il Vecchio* is a child of the US Office of Strategic Services and of *Gladio*, the semi-clandestine para-military force the US put into place in Western European countries in the post WWII years that was supposed to spring into action not only if Europe were ever invaded by the USSR, but also if undesirable domestic left-wingers were to come to power, or were seen to be on the verge. Neither De Cataldo nor Sarasso do anything to hide US involvement in Italy's domestic affairs and assign to the US a central role in the Strategy of Tension, and the cover-ups it necessitated. Although Lucarelli's investigations do not point the finger of blame at the US as unequivocally as De Cataldo and Sarasso do, a glance at the Tables of Contents of the two print versions of *Blu Notte* reveals, through an interesting omission, the centrality of the US role in Italy's domestic affairs. Absent from the two books is the text of the documentary Lucarelli dedicated to the "Secret Relationships between the America and Italy." I do not know the reason for this exclusion, but I do not believe that censorship, self-inflicted or otherwise, had anything to do with it. It is far more likely that the decision was editorial and aimed at eliminating repetition. In fact, the documentary on the US/Italy relationship deals with many of the mysteries and characters—Lucky Luciano; Prince Juan Valerio Borghese; Strategy of Tension—that are put under the lens of other documentaries and are already covered elsewhere. Behind many an Italian mystery, it appears, there is a US presence or the presence of its agents and operatives.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ostensible reasons for the anticommunist prejudice that had reduced Italy to a state of limited sovereignty, a nation that did not entirely control its own affairs, would, on the face of it, seem to lose their validity. Who now was going to send their tanks rumbling over the Italian border once the communists seized or were voted into power? In the post collapse of the Wall period, there had been significant changes in Italy that promised well for the left. Thanks to the investigations of the magistrates in the North, which resulted in the decimation of the political parties who had governed Italy uninterrupted since 1948, to a new largely first-past-the-post electoral law, and to the fact that the left emerged from the turmoil fairly intact, the stage looked set for a new election and a left-wing victory. But, as De Cataldo's second and most recent novel, *Nelle mani giuste*, set in the early 1990s, details, even though they no longer have the USSR at their backs, the Italian left still represents a threat to an established Italian order, and for this reason must be kept out of power. One cannot help but feel sorry for the Italian left, just as the Wall comes down, another is immediately built. This time, though, it is not so much the US that is hostile, as the Mafia.

Nelle mani giuste is very much the continuation of *Romanzo criminale*. Some of the characters appear in both novels and the second begins more or less where the first one left off. Scialoja is again one of the central characters, though in the second he has a more exalted role. He has been chosen, in fact, by *Il Vecchio*, who has now passed away, to be his successor and has been entrusted with the warehouse full of documents that is his most precious inheritance. In

both novels, Scialoja continues to be besotted with an increasingly high class prostitute who moves easily between the worlds of criminal underclass, police and Secret Services. In the first novel, one of the sub-plots is the contest for Patrizia's heart fought out by Scialoja and *Il Dandy*; in the second, the same battle is fought between Scialoja and Stalin Rossetti, an agent in the Secret Services, involved in Gladio and closely connected with the Mafia. In both novels, there are sex and drugs galore, but no rock and roll, unless one includes the cameo appearances in the former by the singers Franco Califano, the criminals' idol, and Fred Bongusto. In the second novel, however, the Mafia comes to centre stage. Deprived of their point men in the parties of government, harried by magistrates in Sicily, whom they decide to kill off, terrified by what the legislation a potential left or centre left government might enact, the Mafia seeks to establish a channel of communication with the Italian State. It does this by making it clear that if such channels are not opened-up there will be a bloodbath, a foretaste of which is the series of bombs that are planted and explode in Florence, Rome and Milan, as well as the attempt to kill the TV talk show host Maurizio Costanzo (who had been outspoken about opposing the Mafia) with a car bomb, in May, June and July 1993, as well as another potentially horrific bomb placed outside the Olympic Stadium, timed to go off at the conclusion of a football match, but which did not explode. Scialoja has been converted to the cause of negotiating with the Mafia and attempts to persuade his political interlocutors that this is the only path they have open to them. His most privileged interlocutor is a left-wing member of Parliament, called Mario Argenti, and modelled, I think, on Luciano Violante, who once headed the Italian Antimafia Commission. Here Scialoja runs up against a brick wall as Argenti categorically rules out any pact, however informal, and any concession to the Mafia. A power vacuum is thus created that leaves Italy open to endless terrorist violence, this time organized and carried out by the Mafia (with the help, of course, of their accomplices in the Secret Services). Eventually, the power vacuum is filled by *Forza Italia!*, the birth of which causes the mafia to breathe a sigh of relief. De Cataldo makes no claims that there are direct contacts between the Mafia and the rapid birth of Silvio Berlusconi's party, but he does make it clear that, at the very least, for the Mafia it represented a reassuring alternative to a center-left government. The right hands, or more accurately the safe pair of hands to which De Cataldo's title alludes belong to Berlusconi. *Forza Italia!* subsequently and unexpectedly won the imminent elections after which the Mafia, De Cataldo tells us in a concluding note, abandoned its terrorist tactics. There are other side plots, one concerning the suicide of Ilio Donatoni, who in real life appears to be Raul Gardini, whose company had entered into cahoots with the Mafia; another concerning the journalist Emanuele Carù, who is clearly Giuliana Ferraro, and who plays the part of a cheer-leader for Berlusconi and *Forza Italia!*; still another about a private drug rehabilitation centre in Romagna.

Nelle mani giuste, however, is not half the novel that is *Romanzo criminale*. Giving the impression of having been written in a hurry, it has none of the verve of the dialogues between the gang members and of the narrative register adopted by De Cataldo, who displays here a decidedly Pasolini-like touch. In addition, the fact that Scialoja takes over the function of *Il Vecchio* seems more dictated by the narrative need to have him at the centre of the story than to verisimilitude.

But overall De Cataldo's decision to narrate events that are well-known to anyone who reads the newspapers and makes efforts to keep themselves informed in narrative rather than journalistic form, even though it has its pitfalls, pays off. There have been plenty of studies of and reports on the role of the deviant and deviated Secret Services, on their role at Piazza

Fontana, in the Moro assassination, and in the bomb at Bologna. Yet, just how much of this information is common knowledge, just how much of it has entered the public consciousness is open to doubt. The advantage of literary representation of real events, especially the scandalous and upsetting events of *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste*, as well as for *Confine di Stato*, to which I will turn soon, is that such events are, as it were, kept at bay, cushioned by the veneer of fiction that surrounds them. The fictional apparatus keeps the events at bay, but never to such an extent that they are enveloped in a fictional web and shed their status as recognizable and plausible events. In both of De Cataldo's novels, readers are drawn into the stories by the novelistic elements and by the formal rules of the genre, to which De Cataldo stays fairly faithful. And this, at times, is their major defect. Both *Romanzo criminale* and *Nelle mani giuste* tend to cling rather too closely to the rules of their chosen genre. There is little that is original, for example, in calling the head of the deviated Secret Services *Il Vecchio*, the Grand Old Man, and depicting him as a tormented individual continually frustrated by the perfidity of the average human being. Furthermore, in the figure of Patrizia, the prostitute, De Cataldo seems to have taken on board a great deal of the Neanderthal sexual politics of many a *noir*.

Its less strict adherence to conventional form is what makes Simone Sarasso's *Confine di Stato* such an exhilarating and interesting read. Written by a young man born only in 1978, decades after most of the events he describes took place, the novel takes the form of a film script, with a prologue, followed by opening titles, descriptions of camera shots, and each chapter introduced as if it were a scene from a shooting script.² Continuing the cinematic analogy, the author has called the Marsilio revised edition of the novel, which first saw the light in 2006 published by the small Orbetello Press, his "director's cut." The text, then, even down to its typographical appearance, is far more formally adventurous and experimental than either of De Cataldo's novels. In addition, Sarasso takes far greater liberties with the historical record. Although the events he deals with are based on available evidence, Sarasso would have his readers believe that the same character, a certain Andrea Sterling, a psychopath who is recruited from a psychiatric hospital by the Italian Secret Services and who goes on to be an important operative in Gladio, a *gladiatore*, is responsible in the spring of 1953 for the murder of Wilma Montesi (who is called Ester Conti in the novel); in the autumn of 1962 for placing the bomb in the plane that killed Enrico Mattei (Fabrizio Riviera in the novel), head of ENI, the Italian Energy Authority; in the winter of 1969 planted the bomb in the bank in Piazza Fontana; and in the spring of 1972 blew-up Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (the *Editore* in the novel) as he was attempting to blow-up an electricity pylon that would have caused a major black-out in Italy and been the sign for the Revolution to begin.

Behind each of the episodes there is something murky: the Montesi murder hides a civil war within the ranks of the Christian Democrat Party that aims to discredit one faction of the party and pave the way for the ascendancy of another far more conservative one; in the Mattei murder, the US petroleum companies—the Seven Sisters (not to be confused with the former name of a group of US women's colleges)—ask the CIA, who ask the US mafia, who ask the Italian Mafia and Gladio to remove someone—Mattei—whose Italy-first policies were threatening their financial interests; in the Piazza Fontana bomb, it is Gladio's involvement in the Strategy of Tension, its attempt to apportion blame to the left, thus delegitimizing it, and opening the way for a coup d'état; and how the people behind Gladio saw in Feltrinelli the man they needed to eliminate to stave-off the threat of a left-wing insurrection. Indeed, in *Confine di Stato*, Feltrinelli is the real enemy of Gladio, so much so that the Piazza Fontana bomb plot was

hatched with the express intention of incriminating him, thereby destroying his and the left's credibility. Feltrinelli, who had long attracted the attention of the CIA, though, was "four steps ahead" (367) of his pursuers, got wind of the plot and avoided arrest, only to be hunted—unsuccessfully—in joint CIA-Gladio operations in Austria and Cuba, which feature a guest appearance by Pete Bondurant (a character Sarasso borrows from James Ellroy), but only finally tracked down in 1972 by Mario Rossi (Andrea Sterling's code name).

Both De Cataldo and Sarasso have chosen to write ambitious and controversial novels that approach the scandalous and shocking events they narrate head-on. It is as if both of them eagerly grab an opportunity offered them to rip off the mask that has covered-up so many of Italy's mysteries. In their tellings of the partly-hidden, previously only half-told story of Italy's mysteries, at stake for both of them, I think, there is something of a settling of scores, a desire to set a distorted historical record straight. If this is the underlying politics of the novels, an almost inevitable by-product of this is a loss of subtlety insofar as the US is portrayed largely as a puppeteer manoeuvring an inert, passive but obedient puppet. Yet, over-stating one's case for effect is a perfectly legitimate rhetorical strategy that is certainly not limited only to novelists, and does nothing to mar the novels in any significant way. Still, evidence that US/Italy relations are not quite so straightforward is supplied by the paradox that both De Cataldo and Sarasso come up against: namely, that of the literary form they adopt. It would appear that an effective way to denounce the nefarious activities of the US is by way of that most American of literary forms, the detective novel. Despising, and for good reason perhaps, the politics of the US, both Sarasso, witness the guest appearance by Bondurant and the massive influence Ellroy has on him, and De Cataldo, whose Scialoja character has US cousins, adore its popular culture, know its value and the service to which it can be put.

All three of these detective novels are situated on the fine-line that separates that which is invented, but which is historically plausible, from that which is pure invention, *fantapolitica*. Sarasso and De Cataldo have written fact-based novels that in order to tell their stories better, and in more accessible, powerful, attractive and memorable ways free themselves from the facts on which their novels are based, but without ever forsaking them. Although their stories would not stand up in a court of law, they stand up well in the court of literature. And, stripped perhaps of some of the literary accoutrements and embellishments that are par for the course for their genre, they may also make a welcome guest appearance in the court of history.

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¹ These programs can be seen via RaiClick at;
http://www.raiclicktv.it/raiclickpc/secure/list_folder.srv?id=1894

² Sarasso's blog can be consulted at: <http://confinedistato.blogspot.com/>