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PAST THROUGH HISTORICAL
CRIME FICTION, FILMS,
AND TV SERIES

Murder in the Age of Chaos

BARBARA PEZZOTTI

ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES



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Murder in the Age of Chaos

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Introduction

This book is an investigation into the Italian past and present through crime fiction.¹ It is not a history volume, but a study of how the experiences of war, dictatorship, political violence, and terrorism have been refracted and constructed through the prism of crime literature and cinema. By taking as its point of departure the privileged relationship between the crime genre and history, the book intends to examine the ways in which historical *giallo* novels, television series, and films have become a means to comment on and intervene in the social and political changes of the country.²

Literature is a powerful instrument to investigate the past. History volumes are necessarily influenced by the contemporary socio-political and cultural framework of a historian and are subordinate to an epoch-specific topical paradigm of scientific reflection.³ By contrast being free from the constraints of historiography, fiction writers are able to penetrate “the interstices of history”⁴ and interpret obscure events, “recreating the missing pieces.”⁵ Indeed, historical fiction recovers “memory from silence” often uncovering “the lies of official history” by filling the gaps historiography cannot fill.⁶ Ultimately in Lukács’s words, historical fiction “offers a truer, more complete, more vivid, and more dynamic reflection of reality than the receptant otherwise possesses.”⁷

On its part, cinema is a powerful mediator among history, memory, and politics. Rosenstone has celebrated the ability of cinema to enact a connection between past and present through its narrative and visual

prerogatives.⁸ As O'Leary points out, cinema provides “effective frames for understanding historical events” and a film is “symptomatic both of its time and of the code of representation of the medium itself—in terms of its elisions, omissions and evasions as well as of its emphasis.”⁹ A film as a commercial product to be marketed and consumed can also provide a further insight into acceptable and unacceptable aspects of a given past.¹⁰ Finally, it carries a political function as it is “subtextually linked to contemporary national issues.”¹¹ In other words, historical cinema challenges the perception that memory is primarily about the remembrance of the past and demonstrates that they also pertain to the present.

For Halbwachs, memory and recollection are intrinsically social phenomena.¹² A society can have a “collective memory,” and this memory is dependent upon the framework within which a group is situated in a society. Thus, there is not only an individual memory but also a group memory that exists outside of and lives beyond the individual. Consequently, an individual's understanding of the past is strongly linked to this group consciousness. As Straub explains, collective recollections as communicative constructions of a shared past may serve two different purposes. First, they can be regenerative inasmuch as they serve the purpose of stabilizing the already existing traditional cultural-specific components of the social or individual life, such as norms, values, and rules. Second, they can be innovative. In this case, they create a break with the continuities of an established socio-cultural life. Therefore, they can generate a new understanding of the historical process and its disruption, a new version of the past, a new outlook on the present, and a new group-shared expectations for the future.¹³ According to Ricoeur, continental memories of wars are reconstructed through both remembrance and amnesia.¹⁴ This is particularly true for Italy. As Rusconi points out, for a long time national history has not been a principal moment of the democratic public discourse, and the incapacity to narrate the collective past in a convincing manner remains the main destabilizing factor in contemporary culture.¹⁵ Indeed, in Italy, diametrically opposed memories of the past intended as recollection of basic historical facts (and not only of their significance) still coexist. As Foot shows, the Italian anomaly rests not as much as in the plurality of its narrative but, rather, in their pursuit of institutional legitimacy.¹⁶ This attempt at manipulating history for propaganda purposes is evidence of the politicized nature of memory in Italy.¹⁷

Writer Vincenzo Consolo stated that “the writing of historical fiction as a genre has nothing to do with escapism or nostalgia, nor does it defer to

utopia.”¹⁸ According to Della Colletta, following Alessandro Manzoni’s example, contemporary Italian writers, such as Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Elsa Morante, and Umberto Eco, wrote historical novels that “imply a revisionist attitude with respect to the historical records. Invention, therefore, becomes a way to fill in the gaps in the archives and tell the stories of those who did not have a voice in the historical world.”¹⁹ Analyzing literary novels set in ancient Rome, in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the eighteenth century, Rebane argues that the new wave of historical fiction of the 1980s and 1990s in Italy “is characterised by the innovative ways of depicting, exploring and questioning the collective past.”²⁰ According to Rebane, the historical novel in particular unfolds its “powerful potential for a critical diagnosis of contemporary society” by representing “a search for new collective identities endangered by major socio-political transformations within and without Italy”²¹ such as the increasing economic and political power of the European Union. Equally interestingly, Ganeri associates the recent revival of historical narratives with the fear produced by the information-technology revolution and by the impact of multimedia languages on the selection processes of historical memory.²² In other words, working on the past would represent a natural form of resistance, because of its capacity to exalt that which the techno-communicative transitions tend to undermine from within: the value of the present and its root with the past.

What about crime fiction, specifically? Hampered by prejudices, this genre has been ignored by scholars for a long time, and only in the last few decades has become object of a lively scholarship.²³ The crime genre has engaged extensively with history, in Italy and abroad. Historical crime fiction has in fact developed into the fastest growing type of crime fiction.²⁴ Browne explains this impressive growth with the fact that “the reader gets the same kind of thrill at a safe distance that he or she gets from more contemporary and directly threatening true crime literature” and in the context of a new and revitalized general interest in history worldwide.²⁵ This may be true for crime narrative set in the distant past, but it may be argued that the success of crime narrative set in the near past speaks rather of the interest in making sense of the present by returning to its roots. In some cases, as Said acutely puts it, “[w]hat animates such appeals [to the past] is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past is really past, over and done with, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms.”²⁶

Spurred by the international success of Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*,²⁷ several Italian writers of the 1990s and 2000s employed the form of the historical novel, mostly concentrating on more recent—and particularly troubled—periods of Italian history, such as the Risorgimento (1815–1870) and Fascism (1922–1943). The focus of crime narrative is especially on justice and the law and relates to the hot topic of personal and collective responsibilities in the past and in the present. This is not surprising as the crime genre lends itself to exposing, denouncing, and addressing social and political injustice, often as a response to specific political and social climates experienced by the authors.

In spite of recurring prejudices, today there is a growing recognition in the social sciences of “popular” criminological texts, such as film, television drama, crime fiction, and true crime, as valid social documents, which shape both public and academic understanding of crime, justice, and victimization and offer alternative means of engaging with criminal events and “knowing” about crime.²⁸ This volume builds on recent scholarship on international historical crime fiction that highlights the importance of the genre for dealing with the past and the present. For its special relationship with topics such as legality, culpability, and responsibility, a crime novel is also a mostly suitable medium for recounting history.²⁹ The formula of the investigation allows tackling history from a hypocaliptic prospective: that is, a micro-story—the investigation itself—that illustrates a macro-story or history, functioning as a wider investigation into a society and its times.³⁰ More importantly, in historical crime novel, the detective's enquiry into the past often allows crime writers to draw a parallel between the past of the investigation and the present of the reader and to comment upon contemporaneous events.³¹ Finally, by discussing some recent Italian novels, mainly historical crime stories, as New Italian Epic—that is an “hypothesis of convergence currently existing in Italian literature”³²—the collective scholar Wu Ming (2003) identifies their acting at the level of social imagination, in the spheres of symbols and in the dimension of myth as a way to represent history in a problematic way, and a practice of resistance and willing to change the present.

From the above account, it follows that the relationship between history and crime fiction and film is particularly interesting and worthy of an investigation. Yet, apart from a collection of essays and some articles on individual authors, the historical *giallo* has never been studied systematically from this point of view.³³ While it is widely recognized that Italy's popular culture is in the front line in tackling everyday problems

and conflicts,³⁴ historical crime fiction and films have seldom been studied through their political and social aspects. My book is the first monograph in English that investigates Italian historical crime fiction and films. It does not provide a complete survey of the Italian output. Rather, its aim is to highlight the fruitful relationship between history and crime narrative. It places historical crime fiction and films in the larger cultural, social, and political context of contemporary Italy, exploring the ways in which fictional representation of past crimes mirror contemporaneous political and social anxieties in Italian society and often investigate an unsolved past. Above all, by analyzing historical crime fiction, television series, and films set during three troubled periods of Italy's recent history—namely, the Risorgimento, Fascism and the Second World War (WWII), and 1968 and the Years of Lead—this volume investigates if and how the sub-genre has been able to intervene in topical debates in Italian politics and society.

Taking into account the vast production of crime narrative in Italy, I have focused on the crime fiction, films, and television series of the 1990s and 2000s when several Italian authors emerged and became nationally and internationally famous, generating a renaissance in Italian crime fiction, and historical crime narrative in particular.³⁵ However, previous relevant books such as Leonardo Sciascia's *L'affaire Moro* and *Porte aperte*³⁶ and films such as Pietro Germi's *Un maledetto imbroglio*,³⁷ Damiano Damiani's *Girolimoni*,³⁸ and Elio Petri's *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*³⁹ are equally analyzed. This book concentrates on famous writers, such as Leonardo Sciascia, Andrea Camilleri, Carlo Lucarelli, Marcello Fois, Giancarlo De Cataldo, and Maurizio De Giovanni; film directors, such as Elio Petri, Pietro Germi, Damiano Damiani, and Marco Tullio Giordana; and television series such as the *Commissario* [Inspector] De Luca series; the *Commissario Nardone* series; and *Romanzo criminale. La serie* [Crime Story. The series]. It also analyzes lesser known authors, providing the most wide-ranging examination of the development of this sub-genre in Italy.

In order to investigate the relationship between fictional works and history more effectively, I give an account of the main historical and social events and the political debates that may have inspired the novels. Apart from Introduction and Conclusion, my book is divided into three chapters: the first dedicated to historical crime novels set during the Risorgimento, the second analyzes *gialli* set during Fascism and WWII, and the third tackles the so-called Years of Lead characterized by terrorism from the left and the right. The aim of this volume is to find out if the writers use the historical setting simply as a backdrop for their stories or, rather, if

they weave it into the very fabric of their novels turning the storytelling into a more general investigation into history. Other questions this book addresses are does the alleged fixed and repetitive structure of the crime genre allow a meaningful investigation into the past? Has historical *giallo*, in both book and filmic versions, been able to intervene in topical debates in Italian politics and society? Using Straub's terminology, does the new wave of historical crime fiction and film contribute to a "regenerative" or, rather, "innovative" recollection of the past? Do the analyzed novels, television series, and films reflect, as well as reflect upon, the social and political changes that have occurred in contemporary Italy? Do they address the topic of personal and collective responsibilities? Does historical crime fiction tell us something about Italian national and regional identities? Finally, do the novels show a relationship between the historical setting and the sub-genre used (such as whodunit, hard-boiled, or noir) for the crime story?⁴⁰

This book is a "time machine" traveling into crucial periods of Italy's recent history through historical crime fiction. In investigating some of the most important Italian crime writers, it also explores the transformations that have occurred in Italy's social and political fabric in the last 40 years. It is the first study to examine comprehensively the many fascinating ways in which the *giallo* confronts history and its open wounds. It disputes the idea that crime fiction is a mechanical and repetitive exercise and makes a case for the genre as a privileged space for social and political critique. In so doing, the *giallo* more often than not becomes a thorn in the flesh for whoever wants to accommodate history for political purposes or forget the past and its victims.

NOTES

1. This book uses "crime fiction" as the label for the genre as a whole. See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to Present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998). Detective fiction is considered as a sub-genre of crime fiction, where the focus of the story is "on the detective and the process he or she uses to solve the crime" (Wayne Wiegand, ed., *Genreflecting. A Guide to Popular Reading Interests* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006, 148). As for the variants in detective fiction, the private eye novel refers to a story whose main protagonist is a private detective, while in a police procedural the police detective "must function within the rules of the police department; he or she

- lacks the freedom of the private detective. Although the pattern may vary because of the personality of the detective, most police detectives work as part of a team (as opposed to the private detective, who is often a loner)” (Wiegand, *Genrelecting*, 150).
2. *Giallo* (pl. *gialli*) is the term commonly used to define crime fiction in Italy. It means “yellow” from the color assigned to the covers of one of the first Italian series of crime fiction launched 1929 by the publisher Mondadori. In my book, I use the term *giallo* in its widest meaning—that is to say, a story where there is a crime and an investigation takes place—as commonly accepted by authoritative scholars, such as Giuseppe Petronio, *Sulle tracce del giallo* (Rome: Gamberetti, 2000).
 3. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
 4. Antonio La Placa, “Il giallo di ambientazione storica,” *Delitti di carta* 8 (2001): 95–100 (99).
 5. Claudia Canu, “Mille e una maniera di indagare la Storia: il caso di Giorgio Todde,” *Il romanzo poliziesco, la storia, la memoria. Italia*, ed. Claudio Milanesi (Bologna: Astraca, 2009), 499.
 6. Maria Pia De Paulis-Dalembert ed., *L’Italie entre le XXe et le XXIe siècle: la transition infinie* (Paris: Presse Sorbonne, 2006), 161.
 7. Georg Lukács, “Art and Objective Truth,” in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur D. Kahn (London: Merlin, 1970), 25–60 (36).
 8. Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5.
 9. Alan O’Leary, *Tragedia all’italiana. Italian Cinema and Italian Terrorism, 1970–2010* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), viii–ix.
 10. Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema since 1945. The Politics and Aesthetics of Memory* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 18.
 11. Andrew Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film,” in ed. Lester Friedman, *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (University of Minnesota Press and UCL Press, 1993), 109–129 (117).
 12. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952). Translated as *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1992).
 13. Jürgen Straub, “Collective Memory and Collective Past as Constituents of Culture: An Action-Theoretical and Culture-Psychological Perspective,” *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Psychologie* 52 (1993): 114–121 (120).
 14. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).
 15. Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Possiamo fare a meno di una religione civile?* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 1999), 14.

16. John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2010), 27.
17. Richard J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani eds, *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation* (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave McMillan, 1999).
18. In Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing. 1860–1994* (London: The Athlone Press, 1995), 127.
19. Cristina Della Colletta, *Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1966), 18.
20. Gala Rebane, *Re-making the Italians: Collective Identities in the Contemporary Italian Novel* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 13.
21. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
22. Margherita Ganeri, *Il romanzo storico in Italia: il dibattito critico dalle origini al postmoderno* (Lecce: Piero Manni, 1999), 11.
23. For Todorov “detective fiction has its norms; to ‘develop’ them is also to disappoint them; to ‘improve upon’ detective fiction is to write ‘literature’, not detective fiction” (Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1977], 42–52, 43). According to Eco, a lack of social innovation in crime fiction translated itself into a repetition of formulae, schemes, and conventional expressions (Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979], 114–72). This misconception is still widespread even though the history of crime fiction demonstrates that this genre has always been incredibly resilient to any rules imposed upon it. See Heta Pyrhönen, *Murder from an Academic Angle. An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 20 and Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezzotti eds., *Serial Crime Fiction: Dying for More* (London and New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2015).
24. Ray B. Browne, “Historical Crime and Detection,” in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 223.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 1.
27. Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1980) translated by William Weaver as *The Name of the rosa* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).
28. Nicole Hahn Rafter, “Somatotyping, Antimodernism, and the Production of Criminological Knowledge,” *Criminology* 45, no.4 (2007): 805–834.
29. Ray B. Browne, Lawrence A. Kreiser, and Robin W. Winks, *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000), xiv.

30. See Carlo Ginzburg, “Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario,” in *Crisi della ragione*, ed. Aldo Gargani (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 57–106; and Andrea Cortellessa, “Ipcalittici o integrati. Romanzo a chiave di un falsario collettivo con ambizioni di conflitto sociale,” *Indice dei libri* XVI, nos. 7/8 (1999) in <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/rassegna/140799.html> (Consulted on 5 September 2014).
31. Claudio Milanese, “Le roman criminal et l’histoire. Introduction,” *Cahiers d’études romanes*, 15, no.1 (2006): 9–19 (13).
32. Marco Amici, “Urgencies and Visions of the New Italian Epic,” *Journal of Romance Studies* 10, no.1 (2010): 7–18 (8).
33. See Anna Bertini, “Il giallo storico di Corrado Augias,” *Studi novecenteschi* XXXVII, no. 79 (2010): 173–202; Elgin Kirsten Eckert, “Youth Raped, and Denied: The *Ventennio* in Andrea Camilleri’s Narrative,” *NeMLA Italian Studies*, Special Issue “Italy in WWII and the Transition to Democracy. Memory, Fiction, Histories,” vol. XXXVI (2014): 195–212; Claudio Milanese ed., *Il romanzo poliziesco. La storia, la memoria* (Bologna: Atræa, 2009); Barbara Pezzotti, “Colonialism in One Country: The Italian Risorgimento in Marcello Fois’s Historical Crime Fiction,” *AULLA Conference Proceedings* (2011), 35–45; Barbara Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction: An Historical Overview* (Jefferson, IN: McFarland, 2014), 213–235; Barbara Pezzotti, “The Detective as an Historian: The Legacy of the Resistance in Macchiavelli and Guccini’s Crime Series,” in *NeMLA Italian Studies*, Special Issue “Italy in WWII and the Transition to Democracy. Memory, Fiction, Histories” XXXVI (2014): 213–235; Antonella Santoro, “I romanzi storici di Andrea Camilleri,” *Quaderni d’Italianistica* XXII, no. 2 (2001): 159–182; Luca Somigli, “Fighting Crimes in Times of War: Detective Fiction’s Visions and Revision of Fascism. A New Social Novel?,” in *Uncertain Justice: Crimes and Retribution in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. Nicoletta di Ciolla (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 15–35); and Mark Chu and Marco Amici, “Unearthing Collusions: The Socio-Political Dimension of Crime in the Conspiracy Novel,” in *Uncertain Justice*, 35–70.
34. Massimo A. Bonfantini, “Il nero senza paura,” in *Quattro lezioni dal giallo al noir*, ed. Massimo A. Bonfantini and Carlo Oliva (Bormio: Comunità montana Alta Valtellina, 2005), 61–77 (63); Carlo Oliva, *Storia sociale del giallo* (Lugano: Todaro Editore, 2003); and Barbara Pezzotti, *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction. An Historical Overview* (Jefferson, IN: McFarland, 2014).
35. According to Istat, the print run of “romanzi gialli e di avventura” [crime and adventure novels] increased from 15.6 million in 1996 to 21.8 million in 2001. In the meantime, “romanzi e racconti” [novels and short stories], a category that excludes crime fiction, decreased from 62.4 million to 38.4 million in 2001. See <http://www.istat.it>. Moreover, according to La

Porta, from 1994 to 2003 the sales of crime fiction grew by 450 %, while Italian crime fiction increased from 7 to 24 % of the total (Filippo La Porta, “Contro il Nuovo Giallo Italiano (e se avessimo trovato il genere a noi congeniale?),” in *Sul banco dei cattivi. A proposito di Baricco e di altri scrittori alla moda* [Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2006], 58–59).

36. Leonardo Sciascia, *L'affaire Moro* (1978) in *Opere 1971–1983*, ed. Claude Ambroise (Milan: Bompiani 2001), 467–599; translated by Sacha Rabinovitch as *The Moro's Affair* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987); and *Porte aperte* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987) translated by Joseph Farrell as *Open Doors* (London: Vintage, 1993).
37. Pietro Germi, *Un maledetto imbroglio*, 1959; *The Fact of Murder*, 1959.
38. Damiano Damiani, *Girolimoni*, 1972; *The Assassin of Rome*, 1972.
39. Elio Petri, *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*, 1970; *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, 1970.
40. According to Horsley, both detective fiction and the hard-boiled formula are “loose groupings of texts” (Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 1]. Classic detective fiction, also called whodunit or golden age-style detective fiction, usually indicates a pattern of death–detection–explanation in which “the reader’s attention is focused on the process by which a brilliant or at least uncommonly perceptive detective solves a case so intricate and puzzling that ordinary minds are baffled” (Horsley, *Twentieth Century*, 12). The hard-boiled formula is what Raymond Chandler defined as an American variety of detective fiction whose writers “wrote or aimed to write realistic mystery fiction” (Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* [New York: Vintage, 1988], 13). Several scholars have tried to give an account of the fluidity of the genre, identifying more specific terms for the great variety of novels present within these two groupings. Noir fiction (or roman noir) is a literary genre closely related to hard-boiled genre with a distinction that the protagonist is not a detective but instead a victim, a suspect, or a perpetrator. Other common characteristics include the self-destructive qualities of the protagonist. A typical protagonist of the noir fiction is dealing with the legal, political, or other system that is no less corrupt than the perpetrator by whom the protagonist either is victimized and/or has to victimize others. See William Marling, *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain and Chandler* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). For the Italian noir, see Massimo Carlotto and Marco Amici, *The Black Album. Il noir tra cronaca e romanzo* (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2012). The terminological debate about crime fiction sub-genres is a fascinating topic, but it is not a focus of this book.

The Foundation of the State: *Giallo* and the Risorgimento

The wars of the Risorgimento (1815–1870) united the Italian peninsula after centuries of political fragmentation. The Savoy family was able to create a new nation, the Kingdom of Italy, but in doing so often disregarded regional, cultural, and economic differences, and its governments imposed—rather than negotiated—new laws. This generated deep resentment, especially in the south of Italy and on the Italian islands. Many patriots who had fought for a unified Italy felt their ideals of freedom and social justice had been betrayed. These issues were long neglected or obscured in the official history of the country, with its rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism and its focus on the glorious birth of a nation.¹ Writers—such as Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907), Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912), Edmondo De Amicis (1846–1908), and Carlo Collodi (1826–1890)—joined the nation-building effort of biographers and painters by disseminating in their works “paternalist messages to bridge class, religious, and territorial fractures.”² In contrast, some post-unification Italian literature appropriated the topic of the Risorgimento from an alternative point of view, expressing the voice of the oppressed and delivering a counter-history of this crucial period.³ Post-WWII literary writers have used a Risorgimento setting to investigate some evils of Italy’s contemporary history, such as social injustice, discrimination, and women’s status in Italian society.⁴

In more recent times, crime fiction in particular has built on this literary tradition as a response to political events in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the aftermath of the *Tangentopoli* [Bribesville] scandal (1992) led to the demise of most of the traditional parties that had ruled Italy in the previous 50 years.⁵ The subsequent void of power allowed the birth and rise of new political formations. Among these the Lega Nord [Northern League] reignited among Northerners an anti-south sentiment, reutilizing old stereotypes commonly applied to Southerners as being lazy, corrupt, and backward, and advocated the separation of the north and the south of Italy.⁶ The electoral success of the Northern League, which has gone as far as calling for the creation of an independent state called “Padania,” “reveals the emergence of new political subcultures and indicates a further weakening of the concept of a unified state created by the Risorgimento.”⁷ Among others, crime writers, such as Andrea Camilleri (b. 1925), Piero Soria (b. 1944), Marcello Fois (b. 1960), Giorgio Todde (b. 1951), Giancarlo De Cataldo (b. 1956), and Matteo Collura (b. 1945), have reacted to this new political climate by setting their stories in the period of the Risorgimento. This new wave is characterized by a particular emphasis on the topic of identity.

Crime fiction is an urban literary form *par excellence*. In Italian crime fiction traditional settings have been northern cities, such as Milan or Bologna, where several crime writers have formed groups to support the culture of the *giallo*.⁸ By contrast, starting from the 1990s some crime novels, and especially historical crime novels, have been set in towns and villages in the south of Italy and more precisely on two Italian islands, Sicily and Sardinia, which suffered most from the colonialist attitude of the Kingdom of Italy. As Canu puts it, “if the urban dimension had been the ideal setting for denouncing the dynamics of a corrupt society, it is now the human beings, with their ties to the land, to the traditional values of ancient customs and a variety of spoken languages who allow the novelist investigate and make the past relevant.”⁹ Indeed, in the genre the investigation into a crime often grows into an inquiry into society itself and specifically into personal and collective identities. The confined space of the island (which constitutes an amplified version of the device of the locked room of classic detective fiction) seems to magnify the issue of a still elusive common identity, which is particularly relevant in the novels of Camilleri, Todde, and Fois. Alternatively, the genre has tackled the topic of the Risorgimento in the form of a spy novel, characterized by a vertiginous change of setting, from Italy to Austria, France, and the

UK, and a mix of real historical figures, such as Victor Emmanuel II, Garibaldi, and Mazzini, and invented characters with a particular focus on the adventurous aspect of the story. De Cataldo's *I traditori* [Traitors]¹⁰ gives an interesting account of the unification period from 1844, the date of the Bandiera brothers' expedition to Calabria, to 1871, the year after Rome was integrated into the new Kingdom of Italy.¹¹ It follows the story of Lorenzo di Villelaura, a Venetian aristocrat who becomes a spy for the Austrians first (and then for the Piedmontese) after being arrested and tortured following the failure of the Bandiera brothers' expedition. His story intertwines with the adventures of other fictional characters as well as real ones, such as Mazzini for whom Lorenzo officially works. In this novel, De Cataldo avoids writing a hagiography of the Risorgimento and depicts the main historical figures, such as Mazzini and Garibaldi, objectively exposing their flaws and contradictions, but also acknowledging their passion for a united and fairer Italy. Historically accurate, the novel paints a fascinating fresco of this crucial period of Italian history. It fits in with the consolidated literary tradition of depicting the ideals of justice and equality being crushed by the cynicism and opportunism of governments and of individuals who exploited the situation for their own good. More interesting for our purposes is Soria's *La primula di Cavour*, set between 1856 and 1858.¹² Unlike the other crime novels set in the Risorgimento, it gives a "northern" perspective to this troubled period of Italian history. The novel relates the adventures of Aimone, Barone del Lupo, a spy for the Kingdom of Piedmont in charge of convincing a reluctant Napoleon III to support the Savoy family in their war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The story is a hymn to the Savoy family, its grandeur and liberalism, and Camillo Benso Count of Cavour, the "architect" of the Italian unification. It is also a celebration of the astuteness and moral superiority of Piedmont in Italy and in Europe.

Finally the true crime novel, such as Collura's *Qualcuno ha ucciso il generale* [Someone Has Murdered the General] (2006),¹³ aims at "recovering memory from silence" filling "history's gaps and the lies of official history."¹⁴ *Qualcuno ha ucciso il generale* relates the story of Giovanni Corrao (1822–1863), an officer who fought with Garibaldi and who was murdered in an ambush some days before the first anniversary of the Battle of Aspromonte.¹⁵ The book, a work of literary journalism, mixes fiction and biography to shed light on a forgotten episode of the Risorgimento. Of humble origins, Corrao spent his life fighting against the Bourbon rule of Sicily; he participated in the Sicilian Revolution of 1848 and joined

Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand. Appointed General by Garibaldi himself, he was accepted in the Savoy army, but resigned in order to follow Garibaldi in his quest from Rome in 1862. He was murdered in Sicily the following year. The investigation into his death was never concluded, but in his file the word *mafia* appears for the first time in the history of unified Italy. The investigators suggested Corrao was killed by the Sicilian criminal organization with which he was plotting a revolt against the Savoy rule. However, according to various witnesses, two policemen disguised as hunters had been seen wandering around the countryside near Corrao's farm. This line of investigation was never taken into consideration. As Collura remembers “[n]on si trovò chi l’aveva ucciso, e una decina di anni dopo il rapporto dei carabinieri e tutte le carte relative a quel delitto erano misteriosamente scomparsi” [The culprit was not found and ten years later his police file and all the documents about his murder had mysteriously disappeared].¹⁶ Corrao's death could therefore constitute—and this is Collura's conspiracy theory—one of the first *delitti di stato* [State crimes] of unified Italy. In spite of being praised by Garibaldi (“Giovanni Corrao. È tal nome che onora la Sicilia e l'Italia. Egli fu onesto e valoroso” [“Giovanni Corrao. Such a name honors Sicily and Italy. He was honest and brave”]),¹⁷ Corrao was soon forgotten. His existence came to light only in 1960 when his embalmed body was found in the *Cappella dei Cappuccini* in Palermo.

The book alternates reconstructions of the general's life, and chapters that relate the writer's search for truth. In a fictionalized episode, the book describes Corrao's disappointment when he realizes that Victor Emmanuel II, King of Italy had chosen “il principe di Sant'Elia, noto reazionario filo-borbonico” [Sant'Elia prince, a notorious pro-Bourbon conservative]¹⁸ to represent him during a religious celebration in Sicily. This choice is symbolic of the compromise the Savoy family made in order to reign over Sicily, betraying the expectations of many patriots, such as Corrao. The narrator also denounces the Savoy family's opportunism: as he remembers, after persecuting Mazzini and Garibaldi, they exploited them for their own purposes: “sarebbe cresciuto, in quei giorni, il numero dei ‘cospiratori’, degli ‘assassini’ e dei ‘delinquenti’ che in Sicilia, come in Lombardia, in Liguria come in Emilia, in Veneto come in Toscana, impugnavano le armi per un ideale rivoluzionario che avrebbe donato ai Savoia il Regno d'Italia” [in those days, the number of “conspirators,” “assassins” and “bandits” would grow. In Sicily and Lombardy, in Liguria and in Emilia, in the Veneto and in Tuscany they took to arms for a

revolutionary ideal that would deliver the Kingdom of Italy to the Savoy family].¹⁹ Some of these conspirators would then become national heroes. However, this was not the case with Corrao whose intransigence, loyalty to Garibaldi, and inability to compromise in post-unification Italy made him an awkward character that needed to be eliminated. As Collura puts it: “[s]arebbe stato certamente ricordato nei libri e nei monumenti se, in vita come in morte, dopo le calunnie, non fosse calato su di lui un ben orchestrato silenzio” [he would have been remembered with monuments and in books if, in life as in death, after the lies, an orchestrated silence had not obscured his memory].²⁰ In depicting Corrao’s desire for justice and freedom, frustrated by the arrogance and cynicism that had corroded the new Kingdom of Italy since its origins, “Collura talks about us, about Italy today.”²¹

As the narrator says, in order to explain what really happened to Corrao and other revolutionaries “bisogna inoltrarsi come in una caverna buia, cercando a tentoni i segni lasciati dalla Storia e che gli storici non sono riusciti a individuare nelle loro incursioni spesso ostacolate, se non addirittura rese inutili, dagli ingannevoli sedimenti delle dicerie” [you need to penetrate a dark cave, groping for signs left by history. Historians could not identify them in their forays, which were often hampered, if not negated, by the misleading sediments of gossip].²² In other words, Collura claims the role of the writer goes beyond the limits of historiography by giving an interpretation of historical events. Through the search into a macro-story or history, *Qualcuno ha ucciso il generale* is a powerful example of the historical narrative that recovers memory from silence.

After this brief excursus on true crime, the following pages give an account of the works of Camilleri, Todde, and Fois, and their meditation on a still-elusive Italian identity. This chapter concludes with the analysis of a spy novel set in pre-unification Piedmont, the abovementioned *La primula di Cavour*.

ANDREA CAMILLERI’S *IL BIRRAIO DI PRESTON*

Andrea Camilleri (b. 1925) is the most popular contemporary Italian writer in the world, with an estimated 65 million books sold worldwide and translations—in addition to the most commonly spoken languages—in Greek, Norwegian, Turkish, Lithuanian, Japanese, Estonian, Hungarian, and even Gaelic.²³ Best known for his contemporary crime fiction series featuring Inspector Montalbano, Camilleri is also the author

of several historical novels, all set, like the Montalbano series, in the fictional Sicilian village of Vigàta. Among them, *Il birraio di Preston*²⁴ is particularly relevant as it presents a crime story in post-unification Italy that centers on the difficult relationship between Government authorities and the local population and on the pervasive corruption that characterized the new Italian state from the very start. The dichotomy between center and periphery is at the core of most literary fiction set during the Risorgimento. However, what distinguishes Camilleri from his predecessors is his focus—supported by the use of the crime fiction tropes—on criminality and corruption. While Sicilian authors such as Verga, Capuana, De Roberto, and Pirandello ignored or played down the role of the mafia in Sicily in order to concentrate on the clash between Sicilian and northern Italian culture and the Italian state and its institutions,²⁵ Camilleri gives a non-apologetic account of the mafia and its interweaving with the new Italian state in *Il birraio di Preston*. In so doing, Camilleri discredits the alleged moral superiority of the north versus the south of Italy, without concealing Sicily's responsibilities.

Like many other Camilleri books, *Il birraio di Preston* is inspired by real historical events that occurred in Sicily. However, as with his other historical works, Camilleri concentrates on a less-known event or “micro-story” buried in official documents. In this novel, history is only in the background, but through dealing with apparently unimportant historical events, Camilleri is able to tackle relevant issues in post-unification Italy. In so doing, not only does Camilleri follow Ginzburg's theory of the micro-story, but he is also inspired by his master Leonardo Sciascia who once stated: “I want to show something by representing an imaginary or invented story; when I say invented I mean found: found in history or chronicles.”²⁶

Il birraio di Preston revolves around the decision of Caltanissetta prefect (Fortuzzi from Tuscany who becomes Eugenio Bortuzzi in the novel) to inaugurate the new Caltanissetta theater with an obscure opera, Luigi Ricci's *Il birraio di Preston* in 1874. At the time, the local population saw this decision as an imposition and protested against it. In the novel, the setting is moved to Vigàta and the prefect uses Emanuele Ferraguto aka Don Memè, a local Mafioso, to get rid of whoever opposes the performance: a school principal mysteriously disappears and a carpenter is arrested under false pretenses. A group of followers of Giuseppe Mazzini decides to take advantage of the situation and set fire to the theater. Deputy Puglisi is the only one who understands the real reason for the fire—officially dismissed

as an accident—but is killed before he can identify the instigators. The novel ends with the murder of Don Memè ordered by the prefect in collusion with a Sicilian Member of Parliament. This tragic ending highlights the corruption of the state, which exploits local criminal organizations to pursue its interests, and the equally corruptive power of Sicilian criminality that nestles in the very heart of the Italian state. As Kolski argues, Camilleri represents “post-unification society as built on corruption, underpinned by the mafia ‘presence.’”²⁷

Camilleri explains in a foreword to his novel that the episode was included in the parliamentary inquiry entitled “Inchiesta sulle condizioni della Sicilia 1875–76” [Inquiry into conditions in Sicily 1875–76] and published in 1969. In a parliamentary audience reported in the inquiry, Sicilian journalist Giovanni Mulè Bertolo commented that Fortuzzi “voleva studiare la Sicilia attraverso le figurine incise nei libri. Se un libro non aveva figure non aveva importanza...Stava sempre chiuso tra quattro mura, avvicinato soltanto da tre o quattro individui a cui s’ispirava”; “Fortuzzi wanted to study Sicily through the engravings in books. If a book had no plates, that didn’t matter...He was always shut up within four walls, with only three or four individuals around him, on whom he depended for advice.”²⁸ This inspired Camilleri to write a novel about the difficult relations between Sicilians and the new Italian state as represented by northern officials. The story gives ample space to the confrontation between Bortuzzi, who, like the new Italian state, wants to control every single aspect of his subjects (as represented by the imposition of the opera *Il birraio di Preston*)—and the Sicilian population which stubbornly and somewhat irrationally reacts to what is perceived as an abuse of power (“E noi invece ci dobbiamo agliuttiri, volenti o nolenti, una musica che manco sappiamo cos’è solo perché così vuole l’autorità! Cose da pazzi!”); “And yet we get the music if Luigi Ricci, whom we know nothing about, shoved down our throats willy-nilly. Simply because the authorities says so! It’s sheer madness!”²⁹ Interestingly, in *Il birraio* Bortuzzi confesses that he does not like books without illustrations as they are boring: “Sapete Ferraguto, vi rivelo una hosa. A me m’annoiano i libri fitti di scrittura, mi honfondono. ‘apisco meglio dalle figure. E per fortuna i libri del Serradifalco ne sono pieni di figure”; “You know, Ferraguto, I’m going to tell you something. Books with dense writing bore me. I understand images much better. And fortunately Serradifalco’s books are full of images.”³⁰

The story assumes the tone of a farce, especially in the chapters dedicated to the performance of the opera, when actors and audience exchange their respective roles. The actors participate in the audience's reaction to the play as they openly and loudly comment upon what is happening on stage:

[Singing] Facciamo un liquore
che arreca piacere.

“A tia piace!” esclamò ad alta voce uno che stava assittato nei posti proprio sotto al soffitto. “A mia la birra pare pisciazza, a mia mi piace il vino!”

[...] “Ma perché questi sei strunzi ripetono sempre le stesse cose? Che credono, che siamo zulu? Noi quello che c'è da capire lo capiamo a prima botta, senza bisogno di ripetizione!”

*“We make a drink
That brings good cheer.”*

“Yeah, cheer for you!” a voice yelled from the seats just under the ceiling. “To me it tastes like piss! I'll take wine anyway!”

[...] “Why are these six assholes always repeating the last lines? What do they think, that we're we are a bunch of savages? We can understand whatever there is to understand at the first go, without any repetition!”³¹

In these pages, Camilleri displays all his talent by emphasizing the inherent theatricality of writing and providing the reader with comic relief in an intense narration.³² However, the novel ends tragically with the destruction of the theater and the death of several people, including detective Puglisi.

Il birraio di Preston is also notable for its structure. It does not follow a chronological order: the 23 chapters are not consecutively placed and are often autonomous or interchangeable. Each begins with an incipit derived from a heterogeneous selection of works from Marx and Engles's *The Manifesto* (1848) to Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (1872), and Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979, translated as *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, 1981).³³ Each chapter contains intertextual in-jokes through which Camilleri pays homage to Sicilian writers from Giovanni Verga to Gesualdo Bufalino. In inserting these references into the narrative, Camilleri de facto advocates for a place in the Sicilian literary tradition that criticizes the way Italian unification was carried out.³⁴ Only at the end of the book, does the reader realize that the concluding chapter, designated “capitolo primo” [first chapter] is in fact

the first chapter, which acts as a prologue. Interestingly, this section, which presents an internal intradiegetic narrator, gives the official version of the story/history 40 years after the event. This character-turned-narrator is the now 50-year-old Gerd Hoffer, the son of a German engineer living in Vigàta who appears in the novel's opening Chap. 2. In retelling the story, he declares:

E quindi il mio intendimento, a quarant'anni e passa dall'avvenimento, è quello di mantenermi nei limiti d'una onesta testimonianza e di ordinare questa storia entro i confini di una ricostruzione saldamente ancorata alla verità dei fatti, quale essa emerge da atti istruttori, documenti, lettere, testimonianze.

It is therefore my intention, some forty and more years after the event, to keep within the bounds of a straightforward testimony, and to organize the story in accordance with a reconstruction based solidly on the facts as they emerge from the documents of the investigation, letters, and testimonies.³⁵

Interestingly, this official version exonerated the guilty of all responsibility, while accusing detective Puglisi of foul play. The reader, on reading Gerd's account, will have already become familiar with elements of the story—told in the previous chapters—which contradict “documenti, lettere, testimonianze.” Indeed, Gerd's version of the events is unreliable precisely because it is based on official documents that offer a convenient (for the authorities) interpretation of facts. This is an effective *escamotage* with which Camilleri highlights the discrepancy between the official version of events and real facts. It also emphasizes the need to read through and beyond the lines of official documents—and official history with it—in order to understand the complexity of the unification process.

The crime story within *Il birraio di Preston* helps the reader to make sense of the chronology of the novel. However, *Il birraio* is not a classic detective story. In spite of the presence of a detective, Puglisi, the novel does not have a classic investigation or a solution. In a postscript to the novel, Camilleri invites readers to take an active role by establishing their own sequence of and “solving” the crime. The task of making sense of the story is challenging because each chapter follows different characters whose vicissitudes eventually comprise the entire story.

This complexity is not only functional to the crime story but also serves the purpose of describing a community. The novel is, in fact, a choral story of a Sicilian village facing the challenges of history. The many characters are

often not individually shaped but are symbolic of a wide range of social and cultural classes: from the authorities of an authoritarian state, to Mafiosi, to people marginalized by unification. Everybody speaks their own language in a sort of Bakhtinian heteroglossia; written communication may take the form of letters, reports, poetry, and graffiti, and people also communicate by gestures. Besides the hybrid language of the extradiegetic narrator, standard Italian interlaces with Sicilian dialect, the prefect speaks Florentine, a general and a colonel have strong Piedmontese accents, a *questore* [police commissioner] speaks Milanese when he does not want his secretary to understand him, and Roman is spoken by a *mazziniano* [Mazzini follower] from the capital city. Camilleri engages the reader directly by reproducing graphically the phonetic peculiarities of Florentine, Piedmontese, Milanese, and Roman speech. The register of these types of communication may vary from literary and formal to vulgar, often juxtaposed at times for comic effect. However, the most effective display of this variety in speech is represented by the frequent dialogues in the story, which also give the flavor of a provincial environment according to the Verghian model.

This multiplicity of languages is symbolic of the lack of communication between the authority of the new Italian state and the local people. As Concolino-Abram explains, the figure of the foreigner has belonged to the comic tradition of Italian literature since the sixteenth century.³⁶ With their incomprehensible language, foreigners bring misunderstanding and a hilarious chaos to the story. Their way of communicating makes them ridiculous or negative characters. In *Il birraio di Preston* there is a foreign character, engineer Fridolin Hoffer, Gerd's father. However, he is not the real outsider in Camilleri's novel. He is described as completely integrated into Vigàta social fabric—in spite of his comic pronunciation of Italian language—thanks to his activity as a volunteer firefighter. The real foreigner is in fact prefect Bortuzzi, whose Italian *toscanizzato* [from Tuscany] and his methods are incomprehensible to the average Sicilian. His indispensable go-between becomes Mafioso Don Memè who explains Sicilian culture and habits to Bortuzzi:

“Vostra Eccellenza mi permette di parlare latino?”

Il prefetto si senti bagnare la schiena da un rivolo di sudore. Fin dal momento che si era imbattuto in rosa-rosae aveva capito che quella era la sua vestia nera.

“Ferraguto in honfidenza, a scuola non ero mi'a bravo.”

Don Memè allargò il sorriso legendario.