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## Fiction's Ethics

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## Abstract

This text is part translation, part reformulation of a few chapters of my book *L'invenzione del vero. Romanzi ibridi e discorso etico nell'Italia contemporanea* (Gaffi 2014). It was first presented in English as a lecture at the University of Kent in 2013. It investigates the new period of Italian literature often called 'Nuovo Realismo' from an ethical point of view.

## Contributor Note

Raffaello Palumbo Mosca is PhD in Romance Languages and Literatures (University of Chicago), and PhD in Italian literature (University of Turin). He works on modern and contemporary literature and the connections between literature and ethics. He has published articles and essays in a range of American and European journals (*Lettere Italiane*, *Modern Language Notes*, *Rinascimento*, *Raison Publique*, *Studi Novecenteschi*, etc.) on Manganelli, Gadda, Proust, Franchini, and Saviano, among others. His monograph *L'invenzione del vero. Romanzi ibridi e discorso etico nell'Italia contemporanea* (Gaffi 2014) won the Tarquinia-Cardarelli prize in 2014. With Lorenzo Chiesa he is the co-director of the Genoa School of Humanities ([www.gsh-education.com](http://www.gsh-education.com)).

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## Introduction

My starting point is the so-called return to reality of Italian narrative in recent years. I am going to give just a few examples of works that exemplify this still ongoing phenomenon, but the list could be much longer. *Cronache italiane* as well as *Occhio per occhio* by Sandro Veronesi both came out in 1992; *Fattacci* by Vincenzo Cerami was released in 1997, and *L'abusivo* by Antonio Franchini in 2001. I should also mention *Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano, released in 2006, which is the most famous – although not necessarily the most important – book of the group. These are indisputably very different works, nonetheless they share some crucial features: from the thematic point of view, these are all books focusing on present times and society ('realism of the *dictum*'); from a stylistic point of view, all these works challenge the form of the novel, blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Moreover, all these novels revive a figure that seemed irremediably lost, that of the *engagé* writer.

However, speaking of engaged literature today involves considerable difficulties, chief among them issues of terminology. The term *impegno*, 'engagement', is in fact strictly intertwined, especially in Italy, with a specific period – from the end of World War Two to the mid Sixties – and with a discourse deeply rooted in Marxism; a discourse whose influence is today at the very least weakened. It is therefore necessary to state at the outset that speaking of engaged literature today entails taking stock of a gap between the

present and a historical period that is long gone. It comes as no surprise therefore that the eight novel-writers examined by the journal *Allegoria* in 2008 reject any comparison between their work and that of the Neorealist writers, even polemically critiquing the idea of a possible influence of literature on reality. Giuseppe Genna, for example, ironically comments on the *démodée* figure of the writer-demagogue, while Nicola Lagioia quotes almost literally Clov in *Fin de Partie*, stating: 'still bearing an effect on reality? Ah, this is a good one!' (see Genna 2008: 14; Lagioia 2008: 17).

However, the current rejection of 'outdated' expressions of political engagement does not mean completely cutting off the connection between literature and politics, but rather refusing the ideological connotations associated with it. When questioned on the topic, Bruno Arpaia immediately stated that 'the connections between the writer and the political avant-gardes are today impossible, simply because these avant-gardes do not exist anymore and are not even imaginable in this day and age' (Arpaia 2008: 73). He nonetheless suggests the idea of a *coinvolto* writer (we can roughly translate it with 'involved'), whose duty is to 'disclose the lies hidden in words, especially those words spoken by power' (Arpaia 2008: 73).

Arpaia's words are very clear, but they take us into a minefield: opposing lies means establishing truth, and truth is anything but an easy concept. What

possible truth are we speaking of? For a first, partial answer, we shall look at the novel of Javier Cercas – a work introduced in Italy by Arpaia himself – *Anatomía de un instante*. The topic of the novel is the military *coup d'état* of February 23, 1981 in Spain, and in particular the figure of Prime Minister Suarez, who refused to abandon the presidential chair even when threatened by Colonel Tejero and his thugs. This is a well-known fact, at least in Spain. Why, then, one might ask, should it be made the subject of a novel? And, maybe even more importantly, *how* – in which form – should it be narrated? The answers we seek come from the theoretical *Prologue* to the novel: it is necessary to recount the event once again in opposition to the oversimplified version that the mass-media have continuously broadcast.

The event, Cercas writes, has already become a 'rodomontade slipped out of the poisoned brain of a mediocre imitator of Luis Berlanga' (Cercas 2010: 12). The first and unavoidable duty of the novelist is therefore to restore, by means of his narration, the complexity and seriousness of the event. The answer to the question of *why* to tell the story relates to the matter *how* it is told. Cercas's discussion starts off by taking into account that in today's society of communication (see Perniola 2004) the roles of informative nonfiction and novel writing have been turned almost upside down: mass media communication has indeed appropriated two main qualities of the novel, the emotional and the fictional. If, as Cercas states, each and any historical event is turned by mass

media communication into a 'collective romance', the socially aware writer cannot, and should not, add another fiction to the already fictionalized story of the mass media but, more unassumingly, 'discover what is the real story and scrupulously report it' (Cercas 2010: 21-22).

Cercas's example is representative of the broader phenomenon with which we began: the flourishing, in Italy, of narratives dealing with specific social issues by means of hybrid forms consciously mixing fiction and non-fiction. These should be read first of all as a reaction to the fictionalization of reality promoted by mass-media.

Is this a step back, a belittlement of the genre? Quoting the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the Italian critic Andrea Cortellessa polemically affirmed that 'humankind cannot bear very much reality'. I think, however, that today's problem is exactly the opposite, and that the question we should be asking is rather: how much more exoticism and inaccuracy can we still bear? Advocating for a novel that discusses real social and historical problems means neither reducing it to a simple chronicle of events, nor endorsing the idea of the novel as *ancilla historiae*.

### Hybrid novels and history

At this point I would like to distinguish between *documentary novels* and what I propose to call *hybrid novels*. Whereas

the first simply aim to chronicle facts in order to check their truth and eventually rectify vulgate interpretations of them, hybrid novels start by chronicling historical facts but transcend mere facts in order to convey a deeper, archetypal meaning of human history. Such novels dare to have it both ways: on the one hand they respond to reality, and therefore can be read as history books, on the other hand, they do not renounce responding to the novelistic genre: as Javier Cercas has written, they ‘are not *completely* novels’ but still want to be read *also* as such (Cercas 2010: 23-24, my italics).

Establishing a direct relationship between the novel and the historiographic discourse, Cercas puts us in a minefield yet again. Theories that have sought to demonstrate the shared properties of historiographic and novelistic discourse have had great success in the latter half of the twentieth century, thanks in part to Hayden White’s elaborations on the topic in *Tropics of Discourse* and the subsequent *The Content of Form*. Demolishing the myth of historical objectivity, White went so far as to affirm that ‘seen simply as verbal artifacts, historiographic narrations and novels are indistinguishable one from the other’ (White 1978: 112).

Hyper-constructivists and postmodern attempts to eliminate the distinction between fictional and historical tales of this kind have been strongly contested. Carlo Ginzburg, for instance, has focused attention on the very different relation to the source material obtained when

sources are understood as ‘proof’. Unlike what the novelist has to deal with, they represent an insuperable limit to the subjectivity of the narrator historian, thereby also guaranteeing the scientific reputation of his discourse, as well as his credibility, (see Ginzburg 2000). The same distinction is also central in Dorrit Cohn’s pointed narratological analysis, when she underlines that the novelist’s relation to his sources is ‘free, remains tacit, or when mentioned is assumed to be spurious’:

In this respect the process that transforms archival sources into narrative history is qualitatively different from (and indeed hardly comparable to) the process that transforms a novelist’s source [...]. The novelist’s relation to his sources is free, remains tacit, or, when mentioned, is assumed to be spurious; its true origination may (and often does) remain forever unknown – sometimes to the writer himself. (Cohn 1999: 114-15)

The point is incisive. Even without considering the extreme case of *Gomorra*, with not one footnote or bibliographical index, it is clear that the elaboration of the sources (their ‘free use’, if not their ‘unknown origin’) is one of the primary characteristics also of hybrid novels. In these narrations the sources (almost) never constitute proof from a ‘scientific’ point of view.

There are two other key indicators, in Cohn’s view, that clearly distinguish the fictional from the non-fictional tale: 1. the

possibility of discovering a discrepancy between the 'norms explicitly stated by the narrator and [those] that belong to the author and remain implicit'; and 2. the presence of an omniscient narrator, or one able to explicate the thoughts of each character (see Cohn 1999: 129 and *passim*).

Let us pause for a moment on the first point: the difference between the actual author and the narrator. This view is certainly justified, but in my mind it has two weak points:

1. The ambiguity of the norms or values attributed to the author which, precisely because they are *implicit*, have to be deductively recovered and in any case remain difficult to verify.
2. In line with the most rigid structuralist and narratological analyses, Cohn's analysis posits a hyper-reader informed not only about the (unclear) values of the author, but inclined to verify them by constantly comparing them with those of the narrator.

Cohn's objection works perfectly at the theoretical level, especially if one ignores the fact that the addressee of a narration is always a reader: someone who instead of dissecting the text merges with it. I do not mean to argue that the novelist's discourse is subsumable into that of the historian. It is not a question, therefore, of refuting Cohn's analysis (which I happen to find, for the most part, convincing), but rather of shifting the point of view and identifying the means adopted today to guarantee the authority of a narrative, not for a highly specialized

reader, but for that vaster public that any text purporting to be 'engaged' or civic must necessarily presuppose.

The most widely adopted method to certify the truth of the facts recounted in the novel involves using the autobiographical model in order to construct a narrative with the characteristics of a witness story. The distance between the real author (an actual person) and narrator (a character) is systematically reduced to a minimum (even if, as in the case of Siti's work, that distance does not always disappear entirely). One of the principal (and most evident) signs characteristic of fictional narrative is thus removed and the 'identity between author, narrator, and protagonist constitutes the certification of the content's veracity' (Iovinelli 2004: 255).

The autobiographical method is particularly popular with authors who tend to present themselves as intellectuals more than novelists. Here the explicit statements of a narrator and the implicit convictions of an author coincide (almost) perfectly. (We shall see this later, when discussing *Gomorra*). Generally, it is rare to find the description of thoughts that are not traceable to the narrator, since he limits himself to what he has personally experienced. As Meneghello put it in a note to *I piccoli maestri*, the author writes 'with the authority of he who speaks of what he knows, and only of what he knows' (Meneghello 2006: 615). Moreover: the example of *I piccoli maestri* – 'written with an explicitly civic and cultural

purpose', namely 'to express a way of seeing the Resistance in a rather different way from the popularized view, in a register that is anti-rhetorical and anti-heroic' – shows that the novel is often the *rival*, rather than the vicar of history (Meneghello 614: 615). As Coetzee has reminded us, by shaping historical facts according to its own 'paradigms and myths' the novel 'demythologizes history', showing it to be only one of a number of discourses on reality and not the thing itself (Coetzee 1998: 4).

This rivalry is all the more necessary whenever and wherever historical discourse finds itself controlled by power, and is therefore highly ideological. Rethinking the historical record by starting from objective (verifiable) facts, the novel arrives at conclusions that are not 'checkable by history as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress' (Coetzee 1998: 4). It might provide a different explanation of a specific event, but at the same time, and at a more profound level, it manages to shed light on the connection between the facts and something universal.

In the end, any discourse on the question of fiction and history ends up reformulating. And, as Aristotle contends in the ninth book of the *Poetics*, 'poetry rests on a more theoretical basis' and is more important than history because 'poetry speaks of universals and history of particulars' (9, 51b). Today, however, the constant tension between reality and fiction that one finds in hybrid novels has little to do with verisimilitude. Many of

the texts in question claim to present things not as 'they could take place' (9, 51b) but as they have actually taken place. Nonetheless, when the documents are manifestly insufficient to the illustration of some deeper truth, the novelist turns to imagination while conferring upon it the status of truth by deploying a variety of reality effects.

### Imagining real facts

My discourse seems to suffer here a paradoxical *impasse*: the novelist is imagined to imagine a fact that has truly happened. The oxymoron, or *aporia*, however, no longer exists if we consider that in this context imagination is not opposed to reality, but to brute fact (and the emphasis is on the adjective). To imagine means here to shape facts so that a meaning can emerge from them. The real distinction is not between facts and fiction, but between facts and truth, since facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. Danilo Kis saw this perhaps better than anyone else: the novelist can go as far as imagining a historical document, but he cannot invent/imagine history; he can falsify his proofs but only to 'identify again, through his imagination, a historical reality'. The appendix of documents therefore becomes what he calls 'the frame and the recipient' of the novel, but the imagined part of it is never arbitrary. Rather, it represents a *plus* of beauty and critical thinking.

I would also like to stress that memory

and imagination are – in the novel as well as even in our daily experience – strictly intertwined. Focusing on the limited point of view of the autobiographical narrator, and underlying the unreliability of his discourse, some of the best hybrid stories reveal both a fundamental feature of the novel, as well as the mechanisms involved in the construction of experience through memory.

In *Gli ultimi italiani di Kobarid* by Antonio Franchini, the autobiographical narrator recounts the life of Gobbo and Rossi, the last Italians to remain in Caporetto after the annexation of Italian territories in the former Yugoslavia. The narrator's attention focuses on what seems like a marginal detail that is actually of great lyrical power. On those rare occasions that Gobbo spent the night in the city, he would fall asleep drunk on the parapet of the bridge of Napoleon, thus risking falling into the river upon awakening. Gobbo would say, 'tomorrow I'll fall one way or the other' only to 'always fall on the side of the street'. At the end, however, the reader finds out that there is little truth to the story and that the author actually might have 'made it all up' (Franchini 2008: 82-83). 'Many things', the narrator says, 'I had dreamt, many things indeed I had misinterpreted up there' (Franchini 2008: 83). This demonstration of the unreliability of the narrator and the mechanisms of memory in the construction of experience, casts an ambiguous light on all the facts in the story, only to finally rebound as an affirmation of the truth of the 'dreamt story':

Però a quel punto anch'io non capivo [...] se continuava a negare voleva dire che ero stato io a figurarmi tutto. Come poteva essere accaduto, come potevo essermi inventato di sana pianta un episodio tanto preciso? Avrei voluto dirgli, pensa che l'abbia sognato? Molte cose, in effetti, avevo sognato, o travisato, in quel luogo. E la storia sognata non finisce con l'essere vera quanto quella reale? Ma questo non si sa, di fatto, ed è una vecchia questione, signor Cimpric'. (Franchini 2008: 83-4)

It only remains to note that the equivalence affirmed here is one of *quantity* and not of quality: the imagined story is as true as the real one. What matters, from a novelistic point of view, is the symbolic power of the image, and the story is more true the more it is able to shed light on the human meaning of experience rather than mirroring facts through an impossible objectivity.

This is even clearer in Franchini's first novel *L'abusivo*. The novel recounts the story of the murder of Giancarlo Siani, the journalist of *Il Mattino*. Here Franchini diligently copies all the official documents and police reports of the murder, but the core of his novel – its truth – relies on the symbolic power of an image, and the existential power of the simple reflection promoted by that image:

Il pensiero elementare, quello che slitta in zone remote della percezione, è immaginare di stare





parcheggiando sotto casa quando sentiamo esploderci la testa. Quanto dura? Quanto dolore c'è? Quanta consapevolezza? Qualche volta ci penso, quando parcheggio sotto casa: ora spengo il motore e mi scoppia la testa. Uno dovrebbe immaginarsi solo questo, quando pensa a una storia così o ad altre simili, storie fatte per essere esumate ogni tanto e poi archiviate perché la memoria non le può contenere tutte. Nell'intrecciarsi della loro trama, gli omicidi che talvolta si ricordano per sollevare le più svariate questioni finiscono col nascondere la considerazione più semplice, che un corpo si è rotto per mano di qualcuno e che somministrare la morte è un'indecenza. (Franchini 2001: 70)

This passage by Franchini succeeds in linking, like only (excellent) literature can, three different elements, or points of view: the private (that is to say, the experience of the author/narrator), the universal (the fear of death that anyone feels), and the civic, since it forces the reader to rethink the real murder of Giancarlo Siani not as an aesthetic element of the novel but from a moral point of view. In *L'Abusivo* there is a very strict continuity between the autobiographical narration of the narrator's familial story and the 'journalistic' story of Siani's death. The contiguity is such that when the narrator reflects upon the death of the journalist he uses the same fatalistic words ('Che ne vole a muri, ce vo' tanto e nun ce vo' niente') that serve as the leitmotif of both the mother and

the grandmother. Stripped of the mimesis of the dialect and pronounced in a different context, these words come to acquire at once concreteness and tragedy: they recall death as the destiny of every man, but incarnate this destiny in the concrete existence of the journalist Siani:

Che ci vuole a morire. Ci vuole tanto e ci vuole niente. Sotto casa l'avevano aspettato a lungo, fumando sigarette dalle cui cicche si poté risalire alla marca, Merit, i filtri con la riga d'oro, e pisciando quando ne avevano voglia, davanti a testimony. (Franchini 2001: 65)

In *L'Abusivo* Siani's homicide stops being mere news that fails to touch upon the lives of those who remain since the autobiographical fiction makes the story part of 'a human journey ("real" and "historical")' (Casadei 2007: 130). Therefore, the purpose of Franchini's tale is not to discover some alternative truth to the one that has emerged during the trial. Instead, precisely because it develops, as Coetzee wished the novel would, the 'paradigms and myths' proper to novelistic discourse, it manages to safeguard the truthful representation of the facts as well as show their archetypal nature (Coetzee 1998: 4).

This declension of the universal through the concrete and the historical is a constant feature in Franchini's writing. He always begins with everyday acts and objects and through them he is capable of seeing human destiny. It is with this recognition that the writing begins. This



process is evident, for example, in the already cited *Gli ultimi due italiani di Kobarid*:

Pipe, cartoline, specchietti e pettini, queste «futili cose» rese ormai preziose dal tempo e dall'essere appartenute a uomini scomparsi, stavano a decine anche nelle teche di Mirko, assieme a tirapugni, pugnali, spaccacuori e mazze chiodate e agli altri atroci attrezzi che testimoniavano come l'alternanza della luce e dell'ombra, in ogni aspetto della nostra vita, non fosse soltanto l'ipotesi di una logica astratta ma un costante dato naturale. (Franchini 2008: 79)

The rivalry between history and novel of which Coetzee has spoken is, therefore, a crucial element for hybrid novels: not only because they freely interpret real facts, but most of all because the interpreting imagination of the novel becomes the bridge linking a factual reality to a human and existential truth. In this sense, recourse to autobiographical models can only be formal: the 'I' that recounts the story always coincides with the author only partially. The most striking example of this is without doubt Walter Siti's *Troppi paradisi*: the identity/difference between author and narrator is announced in the opening line, 'Mi chiamo Walter Siti (the narrator coincides with the author), come tutti' (I am not the author, I am the *typical* man, specifically the western man). That is why it is more appropriate to speak of *autofiction* rather than autobiography where, as Siti states, the 'I'

functions as 'an exclusively literary artifact [...] as a pretext: the 'I' in that case is nothing more than a particularly sensitive instrument serving to undermine stereotypes of reality by starting from what one knows best' (Siti 2000: 8). It matters little whether or not the events recounted actually coincide with those experienced, since the author's 'I' must always try to attain to the generality of the 'we'. It must become a sociological 'I'. The true or feigned 'I', but more often than not the true *and* feigned 'I', becomes 'a sort of robot, or clone, sent forth on a mission of reconnaissance where the territory is contaminated' (Siti 2006: 45). The world becomes 'a gnoseological effect' constructed by the 'I' as 'equivalent to the Cartesian cogito' (Siti and Simonetti 2003: 161 and *passim*).

### ***Gomorra's case***

In the case of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*, the construction of the 'I' exceeds the limits of the written page and is put into practice in many, if not all, spheres of communication available today. Taking up Foucault's use of the concept of *parresia* (see Foucault 1996), Carla Benedetti has analyzed the last works of Pasolini and, subsequently, Saviano's *Gomorra*. Pasolini is certainly a sort of authorizing father figure for Saviano. The possibility of writing and testimony depends on a sort of 'investiture from a distance' that the author receives during his pilgrimage to the tomb of the poet. We shall notice,

however, that Saviano directly quotes the 'I know' by Pasolini only to radically change the end of it. Where Pasolini says 'I know but I have no proofs', 'I know, because I am an intellectual', Saviano states: 'I know *and* I have proofs'. Saviano knows that being an intellectual is almost irrelevant today, and therefore he needs to give proofs to the readers. The need that Saviano feels to prove his discourse through means other than his novelistic imagination reveals a fundamental (probably irreversible) change of the figure of the intellectual. In fact, the figure of the intellectual was born with the *J'accuse* by Emile Zola on January 13 1889, and had been since then exactly the figure of 'whom who knows but has no proof'.

In Benedetti's reading, Pasolini's 'I know', just like Saviano's own, are the words of a *parresiastes* – the one who exposes himself in the first person and exercises his liberty to speak the truth regardless of the risks that this entails. Remarking this is no doubt pertinent, but requires, in my view, further elaboration.

*Discourse and Truth in Ancient Greece*, clearly shows how the figure of the *parresiastes* changes function and status depending on the time: the enunciation of truth does not have the same effect, nor the same function, in different historical, social, and political contexts. In a democracy, for instance, the *parresiastic* function can be easily confused with the political battle or factionalism. In fact, Foucault points out that Isocrates maintained that *parresia* and democracy are incompatible (see

Foucault 1996: 37-45).

One should also notice that truth is not a stable given that is acquired and then simply spoken. It involves, rather, the complex relations of force between different knowledge-power correlates in society – 'a whole set of procedures regulated by production, codifying, dividing up, the circulation and functioning of enunciations' (Foucault 1994: 113). It is necessary to avoid a mythologizing perspective (which, it seems to me, Benedetti's reading does not completely do). In contemporary society the real problem of the *parresiastes* is to be heard (or listened to).

Among contemporary authors Saviano is the one that most closely resembles the 'classic' models of the intellectual as the antithesis of the 'anonymous functionary or careful bureaucrat' (Said 1996: 13). He understood that what the intellectual does is a *performance*: the actorial techniques he uses to deliver his words are – or can be – even more important than their truth. Saviano has all along presented himself not as a novelist, but as an intellectual for whom the novel is only one and not the only possible form of expression. The narrator of *Gomorra* is therefore not a novelistic double of its author (none of the Sitarian ambiguity), but the extension of his voice in so far as he is speaking as a public persona. More so than a novel, *Gomorra* is actually a peroration in written form: part of a more comprehensive discourse through which the intellectual Roberto Saviano attempts, in a Foucauldian way, to

change the laws of the production of truth from within a given community.

In the text itself, the construction of identity is achieved primarily through the verisimilar representation of the body and its reactions to stimuli; the body reacquires veracity and specificity because it is the signifier of the presence in the world of the author-narrator and his engagement in what is recounted. Consequently, the body is not estranged as an object of knowledge, instead it is assumed to be a knowing subject.

The use of the body as an instrument of knowledge, with all its imperfections and lacks, excludes *a priori* the possibility of perfect knowledge of the logic-Cartesian sort. On the other hand, however, it functions as a guarantee of narrative sincerity because words seem to erupt naturally from sensation, unfiltered through intellectual or class prejudice. If Franchini in *Quando vi ucciderete, maestro?* speaks of a 'very direct and exposed' link between 'a man's sheath of flesh and his thoughts', in *Gomorra* the tendency to represent emotions and, more generally, abstract situations in corporeal terms is linked to the principle that information or interpretation can be inexact or misused, whereas the body *does not lie*.

as if there were something in the body that alerts you when you are faced with the true. With all the senses. Without mediation. A truth that has not been told, reported, photographed, but which all the same is given to you (Saviano 2006:

151)

In so far as it appeals to a shared humanity and to a creaturely fragility, the representation of the body is also what allows a glimpse of the person behind the literary character. It is that which grounds the possibility for contact between the represented experience and the experience of the reader. '[I] speak of skin, and shame', explains Edoardo Albinati in his novel *Maggio selvaggio*; 'I cannot conceive of another meaning to brotherhood but an openness to bodily fragility' (quoted in Donati *et al.* 1999: 42).

### **Problems of style (and ethics)**

The body's experience comes across in these texts through a set of reality effects deployed to create the illusion of words that exclude any hyper-literary play and mystification, and for which the 'speaking as a man to other men' that Gadda saw in Manzoni could still be an ideal and non-constraining model (ethical more so than aesthetic) (see Gadda 1991: 680).

This refusal of artificiality in language goes hand in hand, with a belief in the communicability of experience and the possibility that it can become part of a communal patrimony. 'Never trust exclusively in the aesthetic gesture' is the dictate that Saviano finds in Vittorio de Seta's documentaries (Saviano 2009: 45). If it already seems an established fact that the Italian narratives of today have left behind the weight of tradition, especially where tradition applies to

language, then the challenge for today's engaged narrator is to find a *simple style*, to guarantee above all else the efficacy of his communication. As E. W. Said has reminded us, an intellectual's message is, after all, always '*for a public*' (Said 1996: 11, my italics). Or, put in Primo Levi's simple words: 'we must not write as if we were alone' (Levi 1985: 53). This is also a key point in Raffaele La Capria's lucid pamphlet *La mosca nella bottiglia*, where he argues that the abandonment of common sense that guides the boat of reason has led, in the course of the twentieth-century, to an estrangement of art from life and its (necessary) public so that 'today it seems that art, rather than addressing a public, requires only the participation of those who are knowledgeable about the artwork. And thus art for art's sake has become art for artists' (La Capria 2003: 1393; 1398).

To return to clarity (like Levi), or to common sense (like La Capria), is anything but a banal undertaking. By foregrounding the responsibility of the spoken word, these appeals clear the ground of all 'ivory tower' romanticism, definitively refuting the image of an artist free of History. Levi's simplicity, in the same way as La Capria's common sense, cannot and should not be understood in terms of a lack of complexity (in fact, Levi had spoken of argumentative clarity). Both discourses share the conviction that 'somewhere there is a truth' and it is the task of the intellectual to utter it, even at the cost of estranging oneself from those groups that hold power. In fact, the intellectual as such 'prefers, to begin with, non-belonging and

estrangement, disidentification and distance' (La Capria 2003: 1419;1453). Is this a sterile morality? I do not believe so, and I would like to support my stance recalling Montaigne's *Apology of Raymond Sebond*: to the contrary of any Grand Theory, not only does a minimalist ethics produce no suffering, it actually contributes to the general well-being by acting as a corrective to dogmatism and intolerance.

And yet, even this mechanism is always at the point of breakdown. Common sense can seem ingenuous and become 'good sense' ('a self-defensive and bourgeois attitude'). Even the clarity of language is capable of deterioration into the banality of stereotypes found in journalistic communication, especially televised journalism. If there is 'a point in our narrative where civil engagement and tourism dangerously border one another' (Simonetti 2006: 131), these can still be distinguished by their different ways of representing suffering.

The writer must try to avoid falling victim to that perverse mechanism that, in Susan Sontag's analysis, governs the production of images: if the real horror is not shocking enough for the spectator, it must then be artificially heightened by stressing the most horrifying detail (and thus exhibiting a piece of information that is 'unnecessary, indecent'), or even by way of an outright reenactment or theatricalization that intensifies the horrific and the grotesque (see Sontag 2003: 63-64). Just as in war photography and its emphasis on detail, there is a certain novelistic representation of pain

that says at the same time both 'stop this' and 'what a spectacle!' (Sontag 2003: 77). The task of literature must then be to reflect upon a thing instead of showing it, promoting reflection rather than creating shock.

In literature, preterition can be worth a thousand descriptions because it avoids the romanticism (better yet, the sentimentalism) of the image's hyperrealism, creating instead a space for the reader's imagination and reflection. One thinks, for instance, of an episode narrated by Levi in *Se questo è un uomo*:

Accanto a me, serrata come fra corpo e corpo, era stata per tutto il viaggio una donna. Ci conoscevamo da molti anni, e la sventura ci aveva colti insieme, ma poco sapevamo l'uno dell'altra. Ci dicemmo, allora, nell'ora della decisione, cose che non si dicono tra i vivi. Ci salutammo, e fu breve; ciascuno salutò nell'altro la vita. (Levi 1989: 16)

Even the narration of the condemned final hours prior to deportation does not linger on their desperation, but rather stays focused on a few everyday and necessary activities: packing the suitcases, baking focaccia for the children, drying clothes on barbed wire. The image is all the more true and affecting the less it dwells on the pain of the other, not making a spectacle of it or transforming the reader into a voyeur of the horror. Ahead of the train's departure, pity is further enhanced through a

reticent glance: 'Many things were then said and done between us; but it is better that no memory remain of these' (Levi 1989: 14).

Just as for the representation of the other (and his pain), the representation of the self entails the risk of spectacularization. The person-author can become part of that de-realizing mechanism triggered by show business: the stronger his presence across different media, the more the author can become, for all ends and purposes, no longer a person but an icon created by the mass media, and the text nothing more than an object of cultural consumption. It is no coincidence that Roberto Saviano, while being the one Italian author who more than any other has taken advantage of the power of the mass media in order to integrate the discourse of the novel, has at the same time denounced the dangers of this practice. Although mass media have unparalleled power to 'rip through the blanket of indifference', the danger of becoming 'too much of a character', and the loss of legitimacy this entails, is always behind the corner. The dilemma is essentially the same one that Arbasino denounced in his own time in *Off-off*: 'is *making use* of existing cultural structures not equivalent to *being used by them*?' (Arbasino 1968: 268).

It seems to me that the danger of media overdetermination is, essentially, what Sontag has already denounced as the tendency to create a 'star-witness' who, by attracting the public's attention to his character, effectively obscures the real

victims (see Sontag 2003: 33 and *passim*). They become, in this way, mass victims – deprived of identity, *without a name*.

In *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* by José Saramago there is a passage that strikes immediately with its power (in a certain sense, by its crudeness): a passage filled with almost nothing but names. Christ, alone in a boat on a lake, begins a conversation with the Father. When the Son asks the Father how many will die in His name, the latter does not restrict his answer to ‘many’, beginning instead a long list:

E depois, Depois, meu filho, já to disse, será una história interminável de fero e de sangue, de fogo e de cinzas, un mar infinito de sofrimento e de lagrimas, Conta, quero saber tudo. Deus suspirou e, no tom monocórdico de quem preferiu adormecer a piedade e a misericórdia, começou a ladainha, por orden alfabética para evider melindres de precedências, Adalberto de Praga, morto come um espontão de sete pontas, Adriano, morto à martelada sobre uma bigorna, Afra de Asburgo, morta na fogueira, Agapito de Preneste, morto na fogueira, pendurando pelos pés [...] Beatriz de Roma, morta per estrangulamento, Benigno de Dijon, morto à lançada [...] Juan de Prado, apunhalado na cabeça... (Saramago 1991: 380-83).

What I want to note here is that it is in the moment in which their names are

pronounced that the victims regain their dignity, since it is only at that moment that they are recognized in their reality as individual and actual beings. It is useful at this point to recall Kripke’s distinction between common names, which are defined by a series of specific qualities, and proper names, which is to say ‘rigid designators’. Proper names always refer to some singularity, independent of its multiple qualities and of the potentially infinite ways of representing it. In the passage cited above, knowing the names means for the reader knowing the people not in their common quality of victims but in their singularity, in terms of what specifically distinguishes them from all the others. The difference is the same as that between the description of an anonymous mass, with which there can be no identification and recognition, and the referral to real and singular lives.

In the already cited *Gli ultimi due italiani di Kobarid*, the autobiographical narrator visits the city’s war museum. There he admires shell casings and helmets, mess kits and flasks, even detailed dioramas reproducing troop formations and lines of attack. By themselves these exhibits are nothing but ‘the curiosities of military enthusiasts, one of the most captious specializations in history’ (Franchini 2008: 63). The possibility of an empathic relationship with the fallen soldiers at Isonzo comes across thanks only to the curator, who has enlarged the faces of the soldiers in each group photograph and replaced them side by side in single photographs:

Nell'ingresso del museo, sul cortile acciottolato, stavano proiettili di obice, e su una parete un grande pannello che riproduceva i volti dei soldati. Quelle facce erano particolari ingranditi delle foto di gruppo esposte nelle sale, quasi per non dimenticare che le truppe avanzano e retrocedono sui plastici, nelle cartine che mostrano schieramenti e linee d'attacco, per soddisfare la curiosità dei cultori di strategia, una delle specializzazioni più capziose della storia, ma erano fatte di singoli ed erano singoli che morivano, e avevano facce e corpi e gli stessi identici sogni che avremmo avuto noi al loro posto, e

pensavano cose simili a quelle che, messi nelle stesse condizioni, penseremmo noi. (Franchini 2008: 63-4)

The possibility of a text's impact depends therefore on a fragile equilibrium: if, on one hand, it must reveal the human experience that is its foundation, the represented individuality cannot occupy the stage entirely. The contemporary writer must additionally manage to establish a dialogue with the reader that is at once rational and emotive, a dialogue that, to use Albinati's words, is given over to 'a cold passion that is the very opposite of sentimentalism. A coldness that is roused, open, ready to listen' (Albinati 1999: 63).

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