

Loriano Macchiavelli and the Italian Detective Novel of the '70s

Franco Manai
(University of Auckland)

The serialization of Fruttero & Lucentini's model

Loriano Macchiavelli's work was produced in the wake of Fruttero and Lucentini's success with *La donna della Domenica* (1972),¹ which had given a new impetus to the Italian detective novel genre, not only within the literary field, but also in the sphere of the imaginary and generally in social life. Like the successful literary duo, he also finds in the detective novel genre a way of establishing a relationship with a mass public. Yet his concern is not to find ways of making high culture accessible to a low-brow readership by writing for the people, on the people's side with nonchalance. Rather, his concern is to create a literature that responds to his expressive needs and that at the same time is in tune with a large number of readers.

The detective story genre is for Macchiavelli a tool which allows him to bring to his public a series of plays that, apparently based on a few recurrent elements, permit the representation of interests and problems which are different each time. From the very beginning Macchiavelli as a narrator pokes fun at detective novel narration; he parodies the genre.

Both the plots and the characters are ostentatiously presented as caricatures of traditional detective novel plots and

¹ On Fruttero and Lucentini see Gisella Padovani (1989); Gianni Canova (1985).

characters or, to be more precise, of that ideal form of detective novel that, following Todorov, one must always imagine as underpinning each individual actual novel.² We should first note that Lorian Macchiavelli is one of the few Italian authors who proved himself able to cope with the challenges and rhythm of serialization.

The fact that serialization is an unavoidable characteristic of the detective novel is not the result of abstract theories, but of a lesson learned, one that is easily understood by looking at what had happened in the great Western literatures. Of course literature has always involved some degree of serialization. After all the whole mechanism of the literary genres is based on repetition, but with infinite and highly stereotyped variations of characters, situations and actions. Indeed it is the repetition of these stereotypes that allows the public to have the expectations, which new works will satisfy.³

The case of the detective novel is a little more peculiar; it offers the public not only the same scheme and main characters, but also the same suspense; this suspense may be effected through different plots, however this does not change the basic elements of the relationship that the public establishes with their heroes and heroines. It is this serialization which permitted the development and proliferation of a cultural industry based on an assured sale. As it has been often recognized and as experience has proved *e contrario*, a series of detective novels, which does not respect the rules of punctuality and homogeneity in quality, has no chance of success.

² We are of course referring to Zvetan Todorov (1970). Anyway irony is imbedded in the genre: the recognized master of the detective novel, Conan Doyle, does not spare his fine irony on the figure of his protagonist Sherlock Holmes and even less so on that of his second actor, Dr. Watson.

³ See Gian Carlo Ferretti (1983); Vittorio Spinazzola (1985).

But the production of sufficient numbers of stories, which obey these rules, can only happen with rigorous serialization. This requires that the author takes the attitude and consciousness of a craftsperson. It presupposes that the authors actually recognize themselves as intellectual workers, as workers in the assembly-line of culture. It is not resignation but conscious choice. And it is precisely the need for such a choice that has long kept Italian intellectuals out of the detective genre and away from intellectual work that is really aimed at the wider public and not at a small elite.

The system of the characters

Macchiavelli first novel of 1974, *Le piste dell'attentato*, was followed by numerous novels and stories that have as their protagonist the police sergeant Sarti Antonio, always surrounded by characters whose names and characteristics have remained constant over the years or, if they have changed, these changes are not substantial. Macchiavelli also proposes anew the classic duo whose prototype is that of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. In this regard, we might point out the conscious reversal of these roles: the protagonist Sarti Antonio is a police sergeant (and we must also note that there is no such rank in the Italian police system; in other words, this is another sign of the author's attitude towards his character) and thus should not only be in charge of the inquiry but also solve the case. Instead, he is a sort of sidekick to his friend, the student Rosas, who is the real problem solver.

Rosas suggests which trails should be followed, the people to interrogate, the hypotheses to verify. He often has to explain the connections between apparently unrelated elements because Sarti Antonio is not able to do so himself. The two other main figures in these plots are the simple-minded police officer Felice Cantoni, whose most important task is to drive the police car, and the chief inspector, Raimondi Cesare, who is Sarti Antonio's superior and has a talent for taking the glory when

cases are solved by his subordinate. Of course, Raimondi's claiming of another's work emphasizes even more strongly the fact that Sarti Antonio is completely dependent on his intellectual friend for solving the crimes.

Another figure in the system of characters is that of Sarti Antonio's friend, the journalist Gianni 'Lucciola' Deoni. As one would expect, this character too has a personality that is completely different from that of the ideal, skilled reporter working for a big newspaper or the television news. He works for a local newspaper, and would be a good journalist but he is too shy and too self-conscious, thus his work is never adequately recognized and he is the first to see his work as worthless.

Playing with these and a few other fixed elements Macchiavelli writes a series of novels that creates a further protagonist, maybe the most important one: the city of Bologna. This city is not transfigured into an anonymous metropolis or into a badly camouflaged American city. On the contrary it is represented, albeit through hyperboles and grotesque deformations, in its historical and social truth, in the way it has changed over the years.

It has already been pointed out that in Macchiavelli's work the city of Bologna is given a voice, and that the changes it underwent between the early 1970s and the 1990s are well represented. Indeed the city saw radical changes including the huge expansion of two extremely voracious institutions: the university and the fair. Bologna transformed itself from a rich provincial city, the heart of various economic and organizational activities (as the capital of the regions Emilia and Romagna), into a university city and a center of national and international fairs and exhibitions.⁴ This process entailed considerable demographic transformation and thus provoked a profound crisis

⁴ See Marcello Bernardi (2001).

over what was considered the peculiar Bolognese *modus vivendi*, that is, easy and merry sociability, curiosity and openness. The massive influx of students from all over Italy, who were attracted by this very *modus vivendi*, caused the after-effects of '68 to take an ideological character that was particularly strong and often extreme.

An example of Macchiavelli's representation of Bologna: *Fiori alla memoria*

The dynamics of this ongoing progressive change in identity has been at the core of Macchiavelli's fiction over the years. The writer, even when he was facing what many described as a mere loss of identity, remained faithful to the reading of the city which he himself gave in his novels of the '70s. We will focus our attention on what might be considered the most representative of these novels, both in terms of its enduring success and the clarity with which the essential data for the question can be found, *Fiori alla memoria* (1975). First we must note that it is the second novel in the series and thus appears within an already established set of expectations. As is often the case with serial works, here too there are references to the previous work but comprehension of this later work does not rely on knowledge of the former.

Also the pretense of objective representation is completely avoided: there is an internal narrator, a ghost-like figure, who narrates in the first person and at the same time interacts with the characters – especially the protagonist – through dialogues and speeches. The narrator moreover enters directly into the story; for example, at a certain moment in the novel, Sarti Antonio orders four coffees at a bar, one for himself, one for the driver (the officer Felice Cantoni), one for Rosas, the student intellectual, and the fourth for the narrator. The latter equally states that he is participating in this or that car drive, resolves to remind the protagonist about something or other; in other words he participates in the story without really

being in it. His comments and his observations on the other hand in no way represent those of the author. He is indeed a far cry from both the omniscience of the classical nineteenth century narrator or the external or psychological presentation of the twentieth century narrator. Generally he declares his ignorance or confesses he does not understand. This strange narrator, who has been described as petulant (Carloni), should be seen as a double of the reader rather than of the author; certainly, he is not a character that would make a reader feel uneasy. Just like the protagonist, as we will soon see, this narrator-reader-spectator is not placed on a pedestal of heroism and ability, but on a level of absolute parity with many readers – perhaps even on an inferior level to that of most readers. This is one of the elements that allows the creation of that particular atmosphere of complicity and amused participation which makes the play possible. However the first to pay the price for this is certainly the protagonist, starting with the way he is named. The formula of family name followed by first name (Sarti Antonio) brings to mind the language of bureaucracy at its lowest level: the language of reports, of depositions, of the civil certificates already casts *per se* Sarti Antonio in a caricatural light.

The effect is increased by the epithet “sergeant” that almost always accompanies his family and first names. The same technique is used for Raimondi Cesare, chief inspector, and with the *variatio* first name and family name plus epithet for Felice Cantoni, officer. Quite often the three characters are mentioned repeatedly in the space of a few lines, each time with the full name and epithet: the effect is a hammering repetition that increases the ridicule and works as an amused hint of complicity with the reader.

If perplexity arises from denomination, the other characteristics of both the protagonist and his second leads only increase it. Sarti Antonio’s most frequent activity is to massage his stomach in a desperate attempt to placate his neurotic colitis,

which torments him and forces him to look for a bathroom at the most delicate of moments.

When he cannot find a bathroom he must make do with a secluded place, as happens in our novel when Sarti is on duty near a monument to the Resistance. He abandons his vigil for a few minutes to attend to this pressing need, during which time an unknown hand smears the monument he was supposed to be guarding. When they discover the misdeed, both the sergeant and Officer Felice Cantoni react in a heedless and unbecoming way. In the darkness of the night they end up finding not the culprit but the corpse of a murdered man. The connection (that later will be found to be casual) between the writing on the monument and the finding of the corpse offers the opportunity for a false start, one of those wrong moves of which Sarti appears to be an absolute master. Indeed the vandal is soon found and is automatically accused of the murder. However when another murder takes place, in the same pleasant and quiet mountain village of Pieve di Pino 50 kilometers from Bologna, it appears quite clear that the accusation of murder should not have been so automatic. This does not bring about the immediate release of the presumed murderer; on the contrary, the fate of the vandal appears to be the last thing on the minds of the police and the judiciary.

This forces the student Rosas to collaborate with Sarti. In the novels, Rosas always plays the role of the intellectual partner, the one who gives Sarti the clues to solve the case. He is also presented as a caricature, however he is given a status quite different from both the protagonist's and that of the other characters in the novel. It is not just the fact that his actions lead to the solving of the mystery, but above all it is because through him that behavioral and ideological values, which are presented as right and exemplary, are explicated. Thus Rosas, together with some other students, spends his nights supporting the group of leftists who have decided to defend the monument from further attacks. The initial intervention by the police came about

after a fire broke out in the cabin of the workers who were building the monument. Suspicion fell on an extremist right-wing group who were suspected of wanting to delay the building of the monument. This also offers the opportunity for a false start – false only to a point, though.

This particular political line of investigation does not expose a connection with the fire, an element that appears to have been forgotten at the end of the story and that might have been purely coincidental. However the origins of the three murders which punctuate the novel certainly have political overtones, and are indeed linked to the Resistance, specifically, to the historical episode to which the monument, around which the story takes its first steps, is dedicated.

The monument was being built to commemorate the ambush and massacre by German troops of a partisan brigade which was on its way to support the Allies in the liberation of Bologna. For most of the book though Sarti Antonio, helped by the journalist, Gianni ‘Lucciola’ Deoni, – another caricature – follows lines of investigation that are all but political. The most imagination he can conjure up seems to be that inspired by the old *cherchez la femme*.

During the investigation of some leads, which are certainly not too difficult to identify but still have to be suggested by Rosas, Sarti reconstructs a singular village idyll in which the three murdered people form the core. The first one, Giacinto, is a young man, all home and church, but who has clandestine meetings in a Bolognese brothel with the distinctive village Carabinieri chief petty officer, a well-respected family man. It is not this relationship that disturbs the chief petty officer’s sleep; rather, it is his wife’s affair with the second victim, the handsome Gaetano, also known as the village rooster.

This is why the chief petty officer does not hesitate to send her away to her native Sicilian town for a holiday of unspecified length. Indeed the investigation immediately reveals that the

second victim had shared a bed with all 18 of the available women in the village, beautiful and ugly, young and less young, unmarried and married. Sarti is looking for the passion that motivated these murders and thus before his puzzled eyes he sees a village where all the husbands knew of their wives' affairs and were indifferent if not consenting.

It is clear that here Macchiavelli is playing on two levels with the reader: on the one hand he flavours his literary delicacy with that dose of sex which appears indispensable to the roughest palates; on the other he charges the deeds of Mondini Gaetano, the rooster, with a hyperbole which is close to a Leporello catalogue: bedding all 18 of the available women is just too much, even more so when among the 18 there are some, like the pharmacist's wife, who are represented as completely unpalatable.

However the irony of an extremely drawn out tract on the 'latin' mentality, i.e. admiration for the man as a 'hunter' who is able to conquer as many women as possible, is further reinforced by the revelation that this village Don Giovanni was actually a poor, unhappy man, with problems of early ejaculation which poisoned his sexual relationships and worried him to the point of depression. The sex ingredient is further exploited with the representation of a totally satisfactory encounter between Sarti Antonio and the young and beautiful wife of the village doctor, following a *topos* of the series, according to which in each novel Sarti Antonio is given the adventure of making love to at least one woman of great beauty. This is perhaps the major compensation given to a character who is for the most part presented as a model 'loser', but who nonetheless, being the protagonist, should offer the readers something to identify with. Sex is also dealt with in that aspect of student life which surfaces in the book's pages. Without clamour, but also without shame, a couple of students who are guarding the monument make love. The student intellectual, Rosas, who is presented almost as a blind mole, always

immersed into his studies and his political commitment, has a clearly sexual relationship with a young student who appears as a voluptuous and flexible tute (giunco flessibile) to the greedy eyes of Sarti Antonio.

To complete the picture, mercenary love is not overlooked: it comes with the journalist Deoni who, *malgré lui*, is sent by Sarti to investigate the Bolognese brothel attended by the first victim. If the intention to provide 'low cuisine' we hinted at above is quite clear, it is also evident that there is in Macchiavelli the desire and the ability to offer a variegated and, albeit ironically deformed, realistic picture of an important aspect of Italian culture, precisely in a time like the mid-'70s, when this part of social life was undergoing tumultuous change.

The hint of a hidden relationship between the protagonist and a street prostitute has a function which is internal to the genre. The treatment of this character differs slightly in this novel, compared to others in the series: here Sarti limits himself to looking for her on the streets and thinking of her sometimes without actually meeting her. Another detective comes immediately to mind: the celebrated, parodic and serious protagonist *par excellence* of the novels by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, that Pepe Carvalho who has a long-term relationship with the prostitute Charo, but who nonetheless does not let the other opportunities that his professional life offers him go by. The first novel of the series involving Carvalho and his bizarre philosophy, *Yo maté a Kennedy*, had been published in 1972, and was followed by *Tatuaje* in 1974⁵: the Barcellona antifranquist writer became far too popular and influential with his sociological slant to be ignored by any detective novel writer from the '70s onwards.

⁵ On Montalbán in general see at least Joan Ramón Resina (1997), José F. Colmeiro (1996), Georges Tyras (2003).

In *Fiori alla memoria*, Sarti Antonio spends most of the novel following lines of investigation which are all centered on these troubled sexual relationships. First he suspects the consequences of the rooster Mandini's frenzied activity, then he becomes quite sure of the relevance of a homosexual lead which would incriminate none other than the chief petty officer of the Carabinieri. Yet at the end the novel offers a reversal, following the best tradition of the enigmatic detective novel, where the suspense is kept till the very end on a false lead. Indeed at the heart of the triple murder there is neither adultery nor an attempt to hide an ambiguous double life.

There had been instead the discovery by the three victims during their excursions together into the mountains of the hide-out of a famous partisan brigade, the Brigata Volpe – the same one whose members were slaughtered by the Germans in the ambush commemorated by the monument at Pieve del Pino. From the diary of Commander Volpe, which had remained hidden in the hide-out all those years, it can be deduced that the German ambush was successful thanks to the treachery of the parson of Pieve di Pino, who had been acting as a mediator between the brigade and the Allies.

But that same person was still administering to the village souls, and had an excellent relationship with each of the three murdered young men. The latter trusted him and told him every secret: and in doing so they signed their own death warrant. Thus at the centre of the plot in this singular detective novel by Macchiavelli there is neither sex, nor money, nor base power struggles. There is rather the defense of a world of values whose continuity with the present the author, through the voice of his mouthpiece Rosas, wanted to stress.

The Resistance does not appear in the pages of this book with the almost flag-waving emphasis of the founding moment of the Republic because in the '70s, in contrast to the present day, the values that the Resistance stood for were taken for granted. It appears rather as the blooming of civic, civil and moral, political

and ideological commitment. It appears also as an opportunity to rethink the social and cultural order of the country: the heritage of the Resistance should be honored and kept alive by those present-day souls for whom the construction of a better and more just society is a cherished goal.

Thus in the hands of Lorianò Macchiavelli the detective novel, a popular and mass genre *par excellence*, is realized as such but is also capable of offering a representation of the world which is thorough, complex and multifaceted, disenchanted and committed.

The passing of time, from the close of the '70s with the killing of Aldo Moro and the *anni di piombo*, the head-long fall into the crisis of the backlash (*riflusso*) and the triumph of rampant capitalism of the '80s and the emergence a postmodern, postindustrial and postpolitical society in the '90s, did not make it any easier for the writer to give a faithful representation of the world around him.

However, Macchiavelli did not become disheartened. The Bologna which emerges in his later work assumes a darker and darker tonality: it is a city where the lively element of the young people's civil protest movement (*la contestazione giovanile*) is missing. That generation, open to change and at the same time able to remember the past, has been substituted by a youth whose attention is only attracted by fancy labels and artificial paradises. It is a youth on which it becomes harder and harder to pin those hopes which certainly cannot find the right support in a social and institutional establishment that at each turn of history appears weaker and more corrupt. The 1995 novel *Coscienza sporca* is emblematic of this: here we find again a Sarti Antonio who drags his colitis and loose brains through a tangle of private and public criminality over which the shadow of Aids looms threateningly and symbolizes the internal rot of a society that finds it harder and harder to produce the antibodies needed to stop its dissolution (Manai).

Works Cited

- Bernardi, Marcello. "Postfazione" a "Fiori alla memoria." *Fiori alla memoria*. Ed. Marcello Bernardi. Torino: Einaudi, 2001. 125-35.
- Canova, Gianni. "Il romanzo supermarket di Fruttero e Lucentini." *Il successo letterario*. Ed. Vittorio Spinazzola. Milano: Unicopli, 1985. 293-305.
- Carloni, Massimo. *L'Italia in giallo. Geografia e storia del giallo italiano contemporaneo*. Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 1994.
- Colmeiro, José F. *Crónica del desencanto: la narrativa de Manuel Vázquez Montalbán*. Chicago: North South Center Press, 1996.
- Ferretti, Gian Carlo. *Il best seller all'italiana. Fortune e formule del romanzo di "qualità"*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1983.
- Fruttero, Carlo, and Franco Lucentini. *La donna della domenica*. Milano: Mondadori, 1972.
- Macchiavelli, Lorianò. *Le piste dell'attentato*. Milano: Garzanti, 1974.
- . *Fiori alla memoria*. Milano: Garzanti, 1975.
- . *Sui colli d'alba*. Milano: Garzanti, 1976.
- . *Sequenze di memoria*. Milano: Garzanti, 1976.
- . *Ombre sotto i portici*. Milano: Garzanti, 1976.
- . "Fra gente per bene." *Buon sangue italiano*. Ed. Raffaele Crovi. Milano: Rusconi, 1977. 35-55.
- . *Passato presente e chissà*. Milano: Garzanti, 1978.
- . *Sarti Antonio, Un questurino una Città*. Milano: Garzanti-Vallardi, 1979.
- . *Sarti Antonio, Un diavolo per capello*. Milano: Vallardi, 1980.
- . "Storia breve e molto semplice, da una storia lunga e più complessa." *La Lettura* XLVII (1980): 15-28.
- . *Sarti Antonio: Caccia tragica*. Milano: Mondadori, 1981.
- . *La strage dei centauri*. Milano: Garzanti-Vallardi, 1981.
- . *L'archivista*. Milano: Mondadori, 1981.

- . "Diamo una sbiancata al mito." *Orient Express* 6 (1982): 12-15.
- . *La balla delle scarpe di ferro*. Milano: Garzanti-Vallardi, 1983.
- . *Sarti Antonio e L'amico americano*. Milano: Garzanti-Vallardi, 1983.
- . "Invito al funerale." *L'Altra Letteratura* 0 (1985): 21-28.
- . *Stop per Sarti Antonio*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1987.
- . *La rosa e il suo doppio*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1987.
- . "Trieste 1985: Dagli anni '30 al giallo d'oggi." *Il giallo degli anni '30*. Ed. Giuseppe Petronio. Trieste: Lint, 1988. 215-22.
- . "Il poliziesco va a scuola." *Nuovo albero a elica* 4 (1989): 15-16.
- . [pen name Jules Quicher]. *Funerale dopo Ustica*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1989.
- . [pen name Jules Quicher]. *Strage*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1990.
- . *Un poliziotto una città*. 1. ed. Milano: Rizzoli, 1991.
- . *Un triangolo a quattro lati*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1992.
- . *Partita con il ladro*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1992.
- . *Sarti Antonio e il mistero cinese*. 1. ed. Torino: Sonda, 1994.
- . *Coscienza sporca*. 1. ed. Milano: Mondadori, 1995.
- and Francesco Guccini. *Macaroni. Romanzo di santi e di delinquenti*. Milano: Mondadori, 1997.
- . "Senza Attori in Scena." *Delitti di carta* 3 (1998): 51-53.
- . *Sgumbèi. Le porte della città nascosta*. Milano: Mondadori, 1998.
- and Francesco Guccini. *Un disco dei Platters*. Milano: Mondadori, 1998.
- and Francesco Guccini. *Questo sangue che impasta la terra*. Milano: Mondadori, 2001.
- Manai, Franco. "I gialli di Lorianò Macchiavelli: Gusto dell'affabulazione e denuncia sociale." *L'Italia nella lingua e nel pensiero*. Eds. Anthony Mollica and Riccardo

- Campa. Vol. I. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2001. 267-78.
- Montalbán, Manuel Vázquez. *Tatuaje*. Barcellona: Batllò, 1974.
- . *Yo maté a Kennedy*. Barcellona: Planeta, 1972.
- Padovani, Gisella. *L'officina del mistero. Nuove frontiere della narrativa poliziesca italiana*. Enna: Papiro editrice, 1989.
- Resina, Joan Ramón. *El cadáver en la cocina*. Paris: Anthropos, 1997.
- Spinazzola, Vittorio. Ed. *Il successo letterario*. Milano: Unicopli, 1985.
- Todorov, Zvetan. *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Seuil, 1970.
- Tyras, Georges. *Geometrías de la memoria, Conversaciones con Manuel Vázquez Montalbán*. Barcellona: Zoela, 2003.