

The Tools of the Detective: Leonardo Sciascia's Approach to Literature in the mid to late 1970s

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In their introduction to a collection of essays on detective fiction, Klaus and Knight argue that “crime fiction is a form that, by being so close to the populist grass roots, is in direct contact with social and political attitudes and so capable of revealing to a sufficiently acute analysis, the point where society and culture interrelate” (Klaus and Knight 8). Detective fiction, in other words, is able to reflect the key issues of its time, the belief systems and concerns. This is certainly true in the case of Leonardo Sciascia, a writer credited by Farrell to be the first Italian writer to use the genre systematically (Farrell 61). Indeed, although there had certainly been what Luca Crovi called “protogialli” (‘proto-detective stories’) in Italy from the 1880s onwards, fully fledged detective stories only began to take root in Italy from around the 1930s onwards and the genre did not enjoy the deep-rooted tradition of France and Britain (Crovi 23-36). Sciascia himself began writing detective fiction in the 1960s, using the genre as a means of exploring social concerns particularly in Sicily. In this article I will explore how later on, in the 1970s, he used the detective mode to analyse factual events, examining how his changing use of the mode dialogues with the shifting concerns of the ‘leaden years’ of the 1970s, with a society living under the shadow of violence, fear and difficult moral choices.

Early Detective Fiction

Before turning to Sciascia's factual detective forays of the 1970s, it is worth briefly charting his use of detective fiction up to that point. He used the detective style to illustrate the webs of power and corruption that dominated Sicilian life, pointing to the impossibility of securing justice in a world dominated by the Mafia. Two texts of the 1960s, *The Day of the Owl* (*Il giorno della civetta*) and *To Each his Own* (*A ciascuno il suo*), recount Mafia murders and the subsequent *omertà* (or code of silence) that prevented the murderers from being brought to justice. The texts are particularly interesting as they invert the traditional set-up of a detective novel: usually the individual investigator and society are united in a bid to find the murder who has upset the social order. In Sciascia's texts however, it is the investigator rather than the murderer who is isolated, as the murderer and society are united to preserve the social order in which Mafia killings may take place with impunity. In *The Day of the Owl*, the northern detective Captain Bellodi cannot secure a conviction in Sicily and returns to his native Parma for reasons of health, whilst Laurana, the amateur sleuth in *To Each his Own*, is murdered. The investigator then, rather than being society's hero, as he seeks to restore order, is an outsider who ultimately fails in his attempts to bring the murderer to justice.

This theme continues in Sciascia's detective novels of the 1970s, *Equal Danger* (*Il contesto*) and *One Way or Another* (*Todo modo*). The novels are no longer set in Sicily, but in an un-named space which may be read as emblematic of Italy or indeed of the whole world. The Mafia is no longer seen as the chief evil as its ethics of corruption and collusion with the authorities has transcended Sicilian space and has become the *modus operandi* of all politics. *Equal Danger* was read as a damning critique of the Communist Party, whilst *One Way or Another* was seen to condemn the Christian Democrat Party.¹

¹ Sciascia accepts these readings in *La palma va a nord* p. 19.

Justice and morality had no place for either leadership, and the investigator in both texts is an outsider from a society that has no interest in discovering and punishing the murderer.

The Case of Majorana

Up to the mid 1970s, Sciascia used the detective novel as a way of commenting on political and social issues, focussing on the inherent corruption in society, initially in Sicily and then further afield. In the mid 1970s Sciascia uses the detective mode to approach two factual investigations, *The Disappearance of Majorana* (*La scomparsa di Majorana*) (written in 1975) and *The Moro Affair* (*L'affaire Moro*) (written in 1978). *The Disappearance of Majorana* is an investigation into how the Italian physicist Ettore Majorana suddenly vanished in 1938. The scientist left two suicide notes (one addressed to his family, one to a colleague) yet later sent a telegram saying he had changed his mind and would return to Naples (from where he had disappeared). He was never officially seen again, although a nurse who knew him claimed to have spotted him coming down some steps in Naples. The police were convinced it was suicide. Sciascia investigates two issues surrounding Majorana's disappearance: firstly, his ultimate fate and whether or not he committed suicide or simply chose to vanish and secondly his motivation for disappearing. The majority of the novel focuses on this second question and looks far into Majorana's past to construct a case for the theory that the scientist was beset by moral unease at the direction that physics was taking, towards the construction of an atomic bomb.

What detective approach does Sciascia adopt in this text? Early on in the work he tells the reader that such a case required the talents of Edgar Allen Poe's Dupin (Sciascia, *Majorana* 129, 217).² The choice of Dupin is interesting, as in his "Breve storia

² The page references refer to the English and Italian texts cited respectively.

del romanzo poliziesco” (“Brief History of the Detective Novel”) Sciascia sees Dupin as embodying French Enlightenment thinking, of reaching his conclusions through simple logic, without being endowed with the genius or divine enlightenment of a Sherlock Holmes. Dupin uses his “lucid and visionary intelligence”, which is “capable of mathematically ordering facts and unknown elements of absolutely anything which appears as a mystery” (Sciascia, “Brief History” 1186). This is an approach which it is possible for Sciascia, as detective to adopt, with a realistic chance of solving the mystery.

Sciascia firstly adopts this approach to deal with the issue of Majorana’s final fate. Sciascia initially lists the facts as he knows them, “mathematically ordering” them in his best Dupin-esque fashion, before turning to the two suicide letters that Majorana wrote. Sciascia tells us that, “on the evening of the 25 March, Ettore Majorana departed on the 10.30 pm Naples-Palermo mailboat. He had posted a letter to Carrelli, Head of the Institute of Physics and had left one in his hotel room addressed to his family” (Sciascia, *Majorana* 160, 253). In his letter to Carrelli, Majorana wrote that he would remember his colleagues at the Institute of Physics “at least until 11 o’clock this evening and perhaps beyond” (160, 254). Sciascia analyses this statement and reads it as a clue that Majorana did not mean to commit suicide, as he could not possibly think of throwing himself overboard a mere thirty minutes into the ferry journey, when all the passengers would still be on deck and so he would be spotted and rescued. If the reference is not to his planned suicide, then it must, Sciascia argues, be a clue to his future plans. There is, Sciascia tells us, “some hidden message in this number eleven. Perhaps a mathematician, a physicist, an expert in the movement of the tide could decode it” (161, 254). Herein lie the two key words of Sciascia’s enquiry: message and decode. Sciascia holds a belief that by addressing the case in a logical manner, then it can be understood, or at least that more

can be understood than was known before. Eventually, Sciascia is unable to say with any certainty where Majorana 'disappeared' himself to. Did he retreat to a monastery as some monks hint? Did he go abroad? Only one thing is certain: Sciascia holds firm to the belief that Majorana went somewhere safe and did not commit suicide. The other letter, addressed to Majorana's family, exhorted them to shun mourning and, if they felt they must wear mourning, then to limit it to three days. Why three days, Sciascia asks? Is this another clue? Should the three and the eleven from the other letter be paired? Is fourteen then a significant number? Sciascia cannot discover the code of these numbers but is convinced that they do have a significance, and this, paired with his discovery of other factors, such as that Majorana took his passport and cash with him when he disappeared, leads him to conclude that his disappearance was too elaborate, too calculated, to point to suicide. The rational, logical and Dupin-esque enquiry had answered the question of whether or not Majorana committed suicide.

Sciascia's main focus in the text concerns Majorana's motivation for disappearing. To discover this, Sciascia reads and analyses not only Majorana's letters but also his actions, conversations and behaviour of the preceding years, treating his past as a set of clues through which to view his disappearance. The emphasis on Sciascia's readings indicates that Majorana had foreseen developments in physics which would lead to the possibility of building an atomic bomb, and that he did not want to be a part of that. Sciascia does not doubt that Majorana was capable of carrying out such developments, despite the doubts raised by others.³ Sciascia insists that Majorana simply chose not to develop these ideas, based on clues found in his behaviour some years before his disappearance. Sciascia looks in particular at how Majorana would develop complex new formulae on the

³ Sciascia responds to these doubts in *La palma va a nord* p. 143.

tram in the morning, scribble them on a cigarette packet, and then, after having dazzled colleagues with the new idea, casually throw away the cigarette packet (and formulae), despite their anxious pleas to publish the new theories. Sciascia reads such actions as “part of the instinct of preservation. Doubly so, it would seem today. Self-preservation and the preservation of the species” (139, 228). Following on from this, Sciascia reads Majorana’s unusually friendly relationship with the German physicist Heisenberg as evidence that Majorana had ambiguous feelings towards scientific progress. Heisenberg gained recognition for his theory on protons and neutrons in the nucleus, which Majorana had (independently) developed six months previously. Yet rather than resent Heisenberg, Majorana conceived for the German physicist “a feeling of sincere admiration [...] Heisenberg represents for him an unknown friend to him – someone who without knowing, without knowing him, had in a way saved him from disaster, has saved him from a disaster, enabled him to avoid a sacrifice” (139, 229) [“concepisce nei riguardi del fisico tedesco un sentimento di ammirazione [...] Heisenberg gli è come un amico sconosciuto: uno che senza saperlo, senza conoscerlo, l’ha salvato da un pericolo, gli ha come evitato un sacrificio”]. Heisenberg then, by publishing the theory that brought the use of atomic energy that much nearer, had taken away Majorana’s dilemma about advancing science, but in a possibly harmful way. Many of the actions and statements by Majorana that Sciascia reads are quite solid clues towards his analysis of Majorana’s motives, such as Majorana’s declarations to his sister that “physics or physicists were on the wrong track” (his sister did not remember the exact words) (156, 248) [“*la fisica è su una strada sbagliata*, o (non ricorda esattamente), *i fisici sono su una strada sbagliata*” (italics in text)]. Other ‘clues’ are less convincing: Sciascia devotes an entire chapter (there are eleven in total) to the story of a family dispute involving a cousin and some uncles of

Majorana. A baby was burned in a cot, a servant girl confessed, and then later on, after the idea had been suggested to her, began to implicate others as having ordered her to carry out the murder, eventually blaming the baby's (and thus also Majorana's) uncles. Sciascia devotes a good deal of space to the legal wrangling of the incident and the preceding family dispute that seemed to make the servant girl's claims tenable, concluding that Majorana would have been greatly affected by the incident and that the image of the burned child would have made him more conscious of the potential dangers of atomic energy. Sciascia reads the family tragedy as a clue pointing towards Majorana making certain decisions about his future.

Sciascia then sees many actions in Majorana's life as pointing towards a moral dilemma whereby he no longer wished to help physics to progress to the manipulation of atomic energy. He reads actions and statements as clues that 'prove' this theory. So at this point, Sciascia sees logic, Dupin's methodology, as the best way to understand the world. He uses the detective mode to uncover a moral dilemma that was particularly pertinent to the debates of the 1970s, when violence was being used to justify moral positions of both the left and the right, when the same means of violence were used to gain ground. Sciascia spends some time recreating the dilemma of scientists in the 1930s and denies that there was any difference between the 'slave' scientists seeking to develop atomic energy for Hitler and the 'free' scientists attempting to create the same destructive force at Los Alamos for Truman (147, 238-9). Sciascia insists that in the 1930s there was no difference then between the forces that used atomic energy, and perhaps in that we can read an analogy for the 1970s, where what should have been stark differences between the positions of the left and the right became blurred by the use of paramilitaries by both sides.

In *The Disappearance of Majorana*, Sciascia displays his faith in the processes of literature as a way to understand the

world. He reads reality – the events in Majorana’s life and his actions – in the same way that he reads the written word (in this case Majorana’s suicide notes). Sciascia believes that there is a hidden truth that can be discovered, through ‘deciphering messages’ and through textual means. This is striking given the post-structuralist and semiotic thought of the time, which sought to problematize ideas of a hidden truth and of ways to discover it. Sciascia maintains his belief that such truths do exist and that rational thought and the tools of literary investigation will help us to discover them.

The Moro Affair

To ‘solve’ the case of Majorana’s disappearance, Sciascia draws on a host of ‘clues’ from the Physicist’s life. To solve the Moro case, Sciascia is far more limited and can use only the letters that Moro wrote when he was in the ‘People’s Prison’. The known facts of the case were limited and brief: all that was definitely known was that the President of the Christian Democrat party was kidnapped by the Red Brigades at via Fani on March 16th 1978 on his way to inaugurate the new Government of National Solidarity, when his car was stopped by a collision and his security guards killed. He was kept in the ‘People’s Prison’ for fifty-five days, stood trial in a Kangaroo Court for crimes of the SIM (Multinational Imperialist States) and then executed after the Communist and Christian Democrat Government refused to negotiate. His body was left mid-way between the Communist and Christian Democrat headquarters in Rome. That was all that was known. Many questions remained, such as ‘Were the Red Brigades working alone?’, ‘Where was Moro held prisoner?’ and ‘What role did the Christian Democrat stance play in his fate?’

The question of whether the Red Brigades acted alone is addressed in the final section of Sciascia’s book, in the Parliamentary Minority Report that Sciascia submitted on behalf

of the Radical Party, for whom he was a deputy. Here, he acts as a detective, picking up clues from the testimony of the widow of Moro's chief security guard, from police actions and from concrete evidence. The widow of the security guard Leonardi claimed that her husband had repeatedly asked for an armoured vehicle after receiving threats. He had been refused. Police attempts to find Moro had been very visible, had seemed very impressive, yet had achieved nothing and had missed some very obvious leads, leading Sciascia to condemn police investigations as "more for show than for the purpose of investigating" (Sciascia, *Moro* 105, 583). And a photocopier, previously belonging to the Secret Services re-emerged in a Red Brigades' hideout. All of these unhappy coincidences led Sciascia to conclude that the Red Brigades were not working alone when they kidnapped Aldo Moro.

Sciascia arrives at this conclusion through traditional detective work, much as he did in the Majorana case. However the bulk of *The Moro Affair* (the Parliamentary Report was only added in later years) focuses on Moro's time in the 'People's Prison' and has only the evidence of his letters. Sciascia sees these as "messages [...] to be deciphered" (35, 490), that reflect the lucid thoughts of Moro. He uses them to reconstruct how Moro felt, even where Moro believed that he was being held, despite the fact that though the letters were derided by Moro's ex-associates as the product of probable torture and undeniable stress and therefore "cannot be ascribed to him ethically" (45, 502). Crucially, Sciascia uses the same terminology as when he discussed Majorana's letters, again calling them "messages to decipher". Yet to decipher Moro's letters is far more difficult, not only because of censorship by his captors but also as the politician was well-versed in the art of 'non-saying' in his speeches. The only clues to the Moro case lie in these ambiguous and enigmatic letters, where nothing is certain. A very high level of interpretation is required on the part of the

investigator, as a few examples will illustrate. Sciascia read Moro's phrase "might not a preventative intervention from the Vatican (or from elsewhere? Where?) be opportune" as an indication that Moro believed that he was being held in the grounds of the Vatican (36, 489). Similarly, Sciascia reads the phrase "had I not a family so dependant on me things might be a slightly bit different" as an allusion to the Christian Democrat party and his role within it (47, 504). These are all highly subjective interpretations, which owe little to the Dupin-esque mathematical logic of the Majorana case.

Dupin is in fact evoked in *The Moro Affair*, where Sciascia adopts Dupin's methodology of having to identify with the criminal when investigating a crime (35, 489). However Sciascia notes that this process is problematized in the Moro case by the need to identify both with the Red Brigades and with Moro himself. Dupin's mathematical enquiry is, in 1978, no longer sufficient and Sciascia shifts from Dupin's methodology to incorporating Borges' world of mirrors, labyrinths and shifting worlds. He stresses this point by quoting heavily from Borges' *Fictions* in *The Moro Affair*:

I have already said that this is a detective story...after seven years I can't recall the details of my plot but here is the broad outline to which the gaps in my memory have reduced (or refined) it. There's an inexplicable murder in the first few pages, a slow investigation in the middle ones, a solution in the last. Then, once the mystery has been solved, there is a lengthy revision which contains the sentence: 'Everybody believes that the two chess players had met by chance. From this sentence it becomes clear that the solution is the wrong one. The perplexed reader re-reads the misleading chapters and finds *another* solution, the right one (98, 565).

Sciascia, as detective, has no concrete clues to work with, only ambiguous hints and veiled language. On several occasions Sciascia likens the Moro kidnapping to a work of fiction, saying that "Moro and his vicissitudes seem to be have emerged from a certain literary genre" (25, 479), mainly because "only in fantasy, in dreams is such perfection achieved. Not in real life" (26, 480). The tools of the detective have a limited place in discovering the truth about the Moro affair, because it does not belong to the world of logic but to the world of interpretation and fiction. This perhaps reflects the increasing confusion of the latter end of the 1970s, when all divisions had become blurred, when the Communists and Christian Democrats, two supposed opposites, had formed one government and had indeed adopted the same stance towards Moro. Similarly, the terror tactics of the left and right paramilitary groups had become indistinguishable, and previously clear-cut divisions were blurred. Forces of law and order, meant to be protecting citizens, were implicated in generating the very terrorism that they were meant to impede, as indeed were various politicians. Life under terrorism seemed not to belong to real-life, but to theatricality. The worlds of reality and of fiction had merged, as reality began to become more fantastic than reality.

Sciascia is still looking for clues, attempting to establish a truth that he believes exists, even if it is hidden. The clues that he has for the Moro case are confined to the realm of literary analysis, an examination of Moro's letters, rather than the examination of events and letters that characterized the Majorana case. Sciascia holds onto his faith in literature as a means of reading reality, even if this literary process owes more by 1978 to Borges than to Dupin's ratiocinatic logic. This is crucial, as the post-structuralist vision of literature had undermined belief in finding truth and 'deciphering messages'. In *The Disappearance of Majorana*, Sciascia adopts the tools of Dupin as a way of exploring moral issues of his time. By 1978,

with *The Moro Affair*, Sciascia has turned more to the methodology of Borges, where reality and literature intertwine and reality takes on the vestiges of literature. In both cases, the detective mode is used to explore questions relating to society and to the nature of literary processes, of how we may understand the world around us. By using the tools of the detection, the detective is, as Covi puts it, able to “thoroughly investigate the customs and ills of our country”, to become “a mask used to lay bare the tragedy of our contemporary world” (Covi: 11).⁴

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⁴ Translations of Covi’s work are my own. Covi writes that “il giallo è divenuto uno stilema che è stato spesso adottato da grandi narratori [...] per indagare a fondo nei costumi ma soprattutto nei malcostumi del nostro paese. Il giallo è divenuto nel tempo una maschera che è stata utilizzata per mettere a nudo la tragicità della nostra età contemporanea”.

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