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Italian Chimeras: Narrating Italy through the Writing of Sebastiano Vassalli

by Meriel Tulante, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2020, 320 pp., £50 (hardback), ISBN 9781789977035

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che lega Gadda al romanzo ottocentesco, stampo non più utilizzabile per tradurre una nuova, più complessa realtà; Manuela Bertone si avventura sulle tracce d'un intertesto che agisce sotterraneamente (ma con pervasività) nel *Pasticciaccio*, ovvero il *Fauno*, giallo di Nathaniel Hawthorne ambientato a Roma. Complementari gli studi di Giuliano Cenati e Cristina Savettieri: mentre il primo s'interroga sulla peculiarità delle sperimentazioni con la forma breve, la seconda rovescia la consuetudine del 'Gadda romanziero mancato' per ragionare produttivamente su cosa comporti, a livello di ricezione, il riuso di capitoli di romanzo riproposti in forma di (poco convincenti, a causa d'un *surplus* di romanzesco) racconti.

Pur diverse per approcci e metodi, le undici letture che si susseguono paiono unite dal comune, meritorio intento di 'cercare di capire l'artefatto, il concetto che si complica perché inseparabile dal resto dei processi, la manifattura del prodotto da cui non si era partiti'.

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Italian Chimeras: Narrating Italy through the Writing of Sebastiano Vassalli, by Meriel Tulante, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2020, 320 pp., £50 (hardback), ISBN 9781789977035

Although a successful writer, Sebastiano Vassalli (1941–2015) had not, until this monograph, yet been the object of a book-length study. Meriel Tulante asks herself why and links the lack of critical engagement with his work to the author's 'confrontational stance' towards the literary establishment and literary groups in Italy, and with his 'self-styled persona as an acerbic, contrary commentator' (p. 8). Tulante delivers in an exhaustive and dedicated manner on the task she sets herself, that is to 'fill the gap in the critical literature about a writer who possesses a strongly original voice in the Italian literature and his period' (p. 11).

The volume follows a thematic approach which starts from the symbol of the chimera, the most recurrent motif in Vassalli's expanded oeuvre which stands for 'the dangerous and deceptive illusions that are at work in society' (p. 1) and, since the Renaissance, for those 'hybrid and elusive creatures' which tend to be categorised as 'monsters' and therefore to be socially marginalised. Tulante's close readings are divided into 5 chapters, which are all thoroughly researched and in which the order of the selected works is made relevant to the central themes of national identity and political illusions that pervade Vassalli's work. Chapter 1 ('A Laughing Matter: The Neoavantgarde, the *commedia all'italiana*, and a Political Trilogy') focuses on Vassalli's earlier work, his troubled engagement with the neoavantgarde and the trilogy of political novels he published from 1976 to 1982; chapter 2 ('*Impegno* Revisited: The Public Intellectual and the Futurists') analyses the debate on the public intellectual in the light of anti-intellectual Dino Campana (narrated in *La notte della cometa*, 1984) and with the negative example of the Italian Futurists (*L'alcova elettrica*, 1986); chapter 3 ('History as Meaning: The Past in Narrative') deals with Vassalli's microhistorical approach in his 1990s historical novels *La chimera* (1990), *Il cigno* (1993), *Cuore di pietra* (1996); chapter 4 ('The Monster, the Nation, the Self: Marginality and Belonging') unpacks the repulsive as well as fascinating figure of the monster which inhabits the characters of the author's father in Vassalli's semi-autobiographical *L'oro del mondo* (1987) and the figure of Berlusconi in *L'italiano* (2007); chapter 5 ('Place and Nation: Regional Identities and an Ethics of Place') closes the volume with reflections on issues related to memory, environment and nationalism in Vassalli's fiction as well as non-fiction works. The conclusion presents itself as an additional chapter on the 'caso

Vassalli' in which Tulante explains the apparent contradiction between the writer's self-isolation and his frequent appearances in national media, including television. Vassalli chose to live in geographical solitude for most of his life in a 'cascina' or farmhouse in Biandrate near Novara (a photo of the house is provided on p. 256). He published both with peripheral (Interlinea Publishers, Novara) and central publishers (Einaudi), and he wrote regular columns for national newspapers (*La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*). This non-conformist approach to the literary field could account for his rare ability to 'anticipate future literary directions' (p. 291), to perform his deep engagement with Italy from an embedded position and to express his belief in the importance of narrative from a disinterested standpoint.

The volume's index is as detailed as is Tulante's treatment of Vassalli's works, and invites one to perform a small experiment. For instance, the entry 'Vassalli, Sebastiano', is composed of fields that can be looked up separately, of which the most extensive are as follows: the historical novel; humour; *impegno*; Italian national character/identity; the literary establishment; the literary neo-avantgarde; the marginalised; newspapers; public intellectual; and purpose in writing. The subsequent entry, 'Vassalli works', follows a subcategorisation per close-read work which mentions specific topics related to them, such as for instance '*commedia all'italiana*' (in *Abitare il vento*, *L'arrivo della lozione*, *Mareblù*). '*Commedia all'italiana*' also figures as a separate entry which does not totally coincide with the already mentioned subcategory of humour. It shares, however, a lot of its characteristics, since Vassalli's humour is often coupled with sarcasm (p. 218) and with its being a way of both 'confronting illusions and expressing critical, disruptive ideas' (p. 73). Tulante's observations on the *commedia all'italiana* in relation to the film genre are very well documented and offer a productive tool to interpret Vassalli's use of humour 'to create a feeling of discomfort and recognition among those he is satirising' (p. 22). Maybe one of its most challenging pairings is that between the 'monster' – another separate entry – and the *commedia all'italiana* trope in the father figure in *L'oro del mondo*. In Tulante's study, this 'crook, womaniser, and Fascist collaborator' embodies 'what Vassalli considers to be the worst characteristics of the Italian national character' (p. 195). These Italian vices can be summarised in the englobing monstrous quality of *trasformismo*, a feature of Italian politics but also a 'mutation' in progress, applicable to 'the behaviour of ordinary Italians' (p. 206).

This experiment of reading by nodes shows how Tulante convincingly traces the connections between Vassalli's 'Italian chimeras', but also singles out what distinguishes them in works with variable qualities and set in different historical and regional contexts. This means she also deals with the criticism Vassalli received for his harsh judgement in *Il cigno* of Sicilian writers' unwillingness to address the Mafia in their texts, for his one-sided attack on German nationalism in Alto Adige in his 'libro-inchiesta' *Sangue e suolo* (1985), and for his animosity against literary groups to which he ascribes the guilty exclusion of independent figures such as Dino Campana and himself. These controversies perfectly apply to Vassalli who defined himself 'bastian contrario' (p. 116), and who considered fundamental the responsibility of a writer towards his geographical, cultural, political, and social environment. It therefore seems fitting to finish this review with the quote from Vassalli's concluding note to the last novel he wrote before he died, *Io, Partenope* (2015), with which Tulante choose to close her book: 'Ho raccontato l'Italia' (p. 295).

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