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# Upsetting National Events and Conspiracy Narratives in Contemporary Italian Literature

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TITOLO ITALIANO: Avvenimenti nazionali sconvolgenti e narrative del complotto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea.

ABSTRACT: In the history of a nation, upsetting events sometimes threaten its identity. Often, conspiracy theories work as counter-narratives contrasting the reassuring official accounts of such shocking happenings. Fictional literature is one of the main channels for the diffusion of conspiracy theories. Starting from such premises, the essay focuses on a corpus of Italian novels written in the last sixty years. They refer to four of the most upsetting moments of Italian national history (Risorgimento, the fall of Fascism, the “lead years”, and the passage from the first to the second Republic). The analysis concentrates on novels by Umberto Eco, Andrea Camilleri, Leonardo Sciascia, Rino Cammilleri, Carlo Alianello, and Luciano Bianciardi. It singles out different types of conspiracy narratives in contemporary Italian literature, each one characterized by peculiar recurrent motifs and characters. The essay, therefore, sets the premises for a semiotic study of conspiracy as literary genre.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy; Italian Literature; National Identity; Semiotics; Narrative.

## I. Conspiracy narratives

In the history of a nation there are upsetting events that threaten the sense of national identity itself. Generally, institutions and citizens

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tend to organize these facts in reassuring narratives<sup>1</sup> working as a form of self-protection. It is nevertheless possible to hypothesize that such difficult moments generate not only reassuring accounts but also, as a sort of byproduct, a big number of the peculiar narratives called “conspiracy theories”<sup>2</sup>. Literature is one of the main channels of their diffusion. In this paper, I will therefore address some representations of conspiracy in contemporary Italian literature.

Although stories of conspiracies and of mysterious secret societies exist since the antiquity<sup>3</sup>, scholars tend to consider conspiracy theories as a typically modern phenomenon, or they underline that today they are assuming a new importance<sup>4</sup>, mainly by offering a kind of “quasi-religious” alternative to the declining grand narratives:

[...] the idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening, way. [...] by offering a highly adaptable vision of causality, conspiracy theory acts as a “master narrative,” a grand scheme capable of explaining numerous complex events [...]. Most conspiracy theories are virtually impossible to confirm — yet this built-in impediment to certainty is precisely why they have flourished in an age supposedly marked by the disappearance of grand explanatory schemes and master narratives. Because they are so difficult to confirm, they require a form of quasi-religious conviction, a sense that the conspiracy in question is an entity with almost supernatural powers. In fact, the term “conspiracy” rarely signifies a small, secret plot any more. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large organization, technology, or system — a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy. “Conspiracy,” in other words, has come to signify a broad array of social controls. (Melley 2000, p. 8)

[...] the “conspiracy theory of society” [...], which is more primitive than most forms of theism, is akin to Homer’s theory of society. Homer conceived the power of the gods in such a way that whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on

1. See Anderson (1983) and his theory of the “reassurance of fratricide” and Renan (1991).

2. Taguieff (2005), for example, underlines the connection between the moments of deep historical change, such as the French Revolution, and the flourishing of a plurality of conspiracy theories. On the conspiracy theory as a narrative see Martinelli herein; Fenster (1999), chap. 5.

3. Pagán (2012); Roisman (2006); Eco (1993).

4. See Knight (2000), pp. 1–22; Fenster (1999); Ceserani (2003).

Olympus. The conspiracy theory of society is just a version of this theism, of a belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything. It comes from abandoning God and then asking: 'Who is in place?' His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups — sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer. (Popper 2006, p. 13)

Given such premises, the present study focuses on a corpus of novels published in Italy in the last 60 years. It will neither consider the science–fiction conspiracy<sup>5</sup>, which seems a less explored branch, possibly derived from American cultural influence, nor will it consider ancient plots. It will instead focus on a sample of novels presenting an account of some of the most upsetting events in Italian national history: 1) the Risorgimento (the national unification period, 1820s–1870s); 2) the end of Fascism; 3) the “Anni di piombo” (“lead years”, terrorism in the 1970s); 4) the passage from the first to the second Republic (1990s).

Novels treating such key historical events using conspiracy narratives are analyzed in order to point out some recurring motifs and characters, and to introduce a reflection on the possibility of a study of conspiracy as a genre in Italian literature.

## 2. Umberto Eco: *Il cimitero di Praga* and *Numero Zero*

*The Prague Cemetery* (2011) and *Numero Zero* (2015) involve all the above–quoted key moments. Eco (2011) concerns, even if not exclusively, the *Risorgimento*, while Eco (2015) is set in the 1990s and treats the fall of Fascism and the “lead years.”

Eco's thought on conspiracy theories is well known: the only dangerous conspiracies are those that emerge publicly. A conspiracy whose effects are unknown is a failed conspiracy, or it is a fake, maybe invented by a dictator to mislead public opinion. As it has often been observed, Eco wrote some of his novels deliberately playing with symbols, motifs and stereotypes of “authentic” conspiracy literature. In

5. E.g. the novel for kids *Luciani* (2010).

Eco's intention, writing novels that represent the distorted mentality leading to conspiracy theories should be a way to exorcise them<sup>6</sup>.

In Eco (2011) we can find a declaration of conspiracy poetics. The protagonist is an old spy recalling his life. Grown up by a grandfather persuaded of the existence of a Jewish conspiracy for the conquest of the world, passionate reader of feuilletons full of tricks, the young Simonini is impressed by Dumas's novel *Giuseppe Balsamo*. This reading makes him aware of the underlying structure, or "Universal Form" (p. 77), of all conspiracies:

Let us imagine conspirators who come from every part of the world and represent the tentacles of their sect spread throughout every country. Let us assemble them in a forest clearing, a cave, a castle, a cemetery or a crypt, provided it is reasonably dark. Let us get one of them to pronounce a discourse that clearly sets out the plan, and the intention to conquer the world. . . I have known many people who feared the conspiracy of some hidden enemy — for my grandfather it was the Jews, for the Jesuits it was the Masons, for my Garibaldian father it was the Jesuits, for the kings of half Europe it was the Carbonari, for my Mazzinian companions it was the king backed by the clergy [. . .] and so forth. Who knows how many other people in this world still think they are being threatened by some conspiracy? Here's a form to be filled out at will, by each person with his own conspiracy. (Eco 2011, pp. 77–78)

This intuition leads Simonini to produce the fake known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He is a sordid, paranoid and cruel character, partially based on the stereotype of the *grande vecchio*, the big old man, the master plotting in the shadows<sup>7</sup>. However, contrarily to the recurring figure of the old master, well represented e.g. in Cammilleri (2007, see below), Simonini is not able to fully control the consequences of his actions. He is not aware of the huge impact that his *Protocols* will have in the 20th century.

Both Eco's novels are characterized by dark and dull settings, and in Eco (2015) a character called Romano Braggadocio embodies, in an almost caricature style, the paranoid who sees conspiracies everywhere. The narrator Colonna, a failed writer, ex-editor and translator, describes Braggadocio highlighting "filthy" (p. 35) aspects of his physio-

6. On Eco's position and on the big debate it produced see Riotta and Eco (2005); Magris and Eco (2010); Tosatti (2010); Mattioli (2011); Taguieff and Paoli (2011).

7. Riotta and Eco (2005); Taguieff (2005); Kelman (2012).

gnomy<sup>8</sup>. Braggadocio has adopted a radical philosophy of suspicion, due to the certitude of living surrounded by a constant deceit (e.g. «The newspapers lie, the historians lie, the TV today lies [...] I don't trust anything anymore. We live in the lie and, if you know that they lie, you must live in the suspicion. I suspect, I always suspect»<sup>9</sup>). As a consequence, the goal of his life is to find out the truth and to bring it to light (pp. 42, 47).

Not only is Braggadocio paranoiac, but he also seems to be affected by the illness Eco spoke about in different occasions by quoting Borges's character of Funes el Memorioso. Funes was a man that remembered everything, and he was "a perfect idiot", because he was not able to select and hierarchically organize the information he received<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, Braggadocio is persuaded that everything is connected (pp. 48, 152), and that the smallest detail can have a crucial meaning. This is a characteristic trait of the conspiracy mentality<sup>11</sup>.

Starting from the presupposition that the "common vulgate" (p. 104) is too simple to be true, Braggadocio builds his own account of the Italian postwar history. His interpretation is based on two main factors. The first one is an abnormal logic, typical of that «interpretive disorder that revolves around questions of control and manipulation» (Melley 2000, p. 16) called paranoia. The second factor is necrophilia. Braggadocio is irresistibly attracted not only by sinister places, but also by all sort of human remains. In Braggadocio's vision, all the history of Italy after World War II depends on the motif of Mussolini's death. Mussolini does not represent the hidden mind guiding history; he is rather the object of the history, especially as a dead body. As Simonini's obsession with the Jews comes from his grandfather,

8. For example: «Gli occhi di Braggadocio brillavano, sembravano illuminare la teoria dei teschi che ci attorniano, le sue mani tremavano, le labbra si coprivano di saliva biancastra, mi aveva afferrato per le spalle [...]» (Eco 2015, p. 180).

9. My translation, no English version available yet. «I giornali mentono, gli storici mentono, la televisione oggi mente. [...] Non mi fido più di niente [...] Viviamo nella menzogna e, se sai che ti mentono, devi vivere nel sospetto. Io sospetto, sospetto sempre» (Eco 2015, pp. 41-42).

10. See e.g. Eco (2011b). We can see this tendency of Braggadocio in the episode concerning the cars' advertisements, which he cannot help learning by hearth. The numerous and detailed data concerning the cars haunt him and ultimately make him think that the whole car industry is a conspiracy against him (p. 47).

11. See on this regard Knight (2000), chap. 4.

Braggadocio's mania seems to come from his family history, from his father's involvement with fascism.

According to Braggadocio, after the fall of fascism, Mussolini, with the Vatican's help, secretly flies to Argentina, where he lives for 25 years. A lookalike is killed in his place and his body is publicly exposed. Mussolini's return is the nucleus of a golpe against the government acted in 1970 and involving numerous secret societies. The golpe fails because of the old Mussolini's death during the long travel back to Italy. From that moment on, deprived of their central symbol, the secret societies change their strategy and begin a series of terroristic actions: «[...] the shadow of Mussolini, deemed dead, dominates all the Italian events from 1945 [...], and his actual death provokes the most terrible historical period of this country, involving stay-behind, CIA, NATO, Gladio, the P2, the mafia, the services, the high military headquarters, ministers [...] presidents [...], and of course most part of the extreme left terroristic organisations [...]»<sup>12</sup> After having traced this story, Braggadocio enthusiastically states that he is the only one who has been able to understand the truth (p. 181). Maybe his name, evoking a boaster, alludes precisely to this presumption.

Braggadocio thinks that some secret societies are still active. Indeed, after revealing his theories to Colonna, he is mysteriously murdered. Colonna, infected by Braggadocio's disease, starts seeing conspiracies everywhere and feeling persecuted. He recovers thanks to his friend Maia and to a BBC program showing partial truths concerning the dangerous secret that he knows. The partial and trivialized revelation of the secret both neutralizes and better conceals it. Colonna reduces therefore his paranoia to a «calm distrust of the world»<sup>13</sup> and he decides to come back to his insignificant but safe old life of translator.

In the end, Colonna and Maia pessimistically reflect on the reason why conspiracy theories find scarce resonance in Italy. Italians have lived too many historical upsetting events, such as invasions, massacres, raids. Being used to stories of “daggers and poisons”, they are

12. «[...] l'ombra di Mussolini, dato per morto, domina tutti gli eventi italiani dal 1945 [...], e la sua morte reale scatena il periodo piú terribile della storia di questo paese, coinvolgendo stay-behind, CIA, NATO, Gladio, la P2, la mafia, i servizi, gli alti comandi militari, ministri [...] e presidenti [...], e naturalmente buona parte delle organizzazioni terroristiche di estrema sinistra [...]» (Eco 2015, p. 186).

13. «Calma sfiducia nel mondo che mi circonda» (Eco 2015, p. 218).

immune to all shocking revelations and always ready to suspect that they are false. They just worry about how to evade taxes and do not care about what the rulers do, because they give their corruption for granted (p. 215). The growing indifference is a symptom of moral decay. According to Colonna, in a near future all the worst actions will be performed publicly and ashamedly (p. 217), “en plain air” and without “baroque chiaroscuro, counter-reform stuff”.

Due to both his novels deliberately playing with conspiracy motifs and his theoretical declarations, Eco is the Italian author more directly related to conspiracy theories. But the conspiracy theme can be found in many other contemporary works, which present a set of recurring traits, as the following short review will show.

### 3. Cammilleri: the *grande vecchio*

*Immortale odium* (2007) is a thriller set in the years following the Risorgimento and containing all the classic ingredients of conspiracy, such as secret societies, mysterious symbols and dull scenarios. Two Catholic priests inquire into the murder of a group of masons involved in the profanation of Pope Pius IX's corpse. The killers are the members of a secret society aiming at causing a new world war in order to reaffirm the power of the Church, whose terrestrial kingdom has been conquered by the newborn Italian State.

A clear opposition is traced between the Church, which represents the good, true religion, and the Revolution, which tries to destroy the Church to install the full sovereignty of man over himself. The new liberal ruling class is represented as an esoteric sect publicly proclaiming the virtue of reason but secretly practicing all sorts of spiritualist rituals and witchcraft. This elite is organized as an “Anti-Church,” as the “Church of the Progress and of the Reason” (pp. 196–197).

Several chapters of the novel are devoted to a mysterious character, an old man with a decrepit and demoniac appearance, who explains the history of the Risorgimento to a silent interlocutor. Just near the end the reader learns that the old man is called Nubius, and that, since he is close to death, he has summoned a priest, not to obtain the absolution, but to tell him that the Church is going to be overthrown.



According to Nubius, the whole Risorgimento is determined by a hidden revolutionary mind, which is the author of a plurality of conspiracies and is able to orientate history thanks to a foresight capacity that no one else owns. Nubius reports murders and crimes with pleasure and no regrets. After revealing how the Bourbons, the Savoy, Garibaldi and all the agents of the Risorgimento have been manipulated, he says that the national State is just a step in the long history of revolution. Concealed behind false ideologies spread by propaganda, revolution uses utopias to induce naïf idealists to act in favor of its hidden aims. But it has no defined goal, being instead an end in itself. The end or revolution is revolution itself, i.e. the instauration of a religion of man instead of the religion of God (pp. 130–131).

Masonry is just one of the provisional tools used by revolution, destined to be soon overcome. Nubius also speaks of the esoteric propensities of many revolutionaries, including Garibaldi (who accepted the direction of a spiritualist society and wrote a letter to praise the Antichrist, pp. 171–172). He considers the “occultist stuff” as a contingent and risible accident, while he is the everlasting enemy of the thrones and of the Church: «None has ever known who was hidden behind that name. But he was the gray eminence behind every conspiracy, the puppet master above every plot. [...] For many he was just a myth [...], a way to confuse the [old Italian kingdoms’] polices inducing them to think that [...] they could just cut the branches but never arrive at the tree. But he actually existed»<sup>14</sup>.

In the last chapter Nubius is represented as the embodiment of an idea. A growing contrast is traced between his more and more weak and miserable body, and his spirit, immortal and endowed with a tremendous energy:

His voice was now shriller [...], now deep and cavernous. Of course it came from him, but in certain moments it seemed like it was not his own [...], as if someone else was using him as a mask [...]. In such moments, even his head, his hands, his shoulders seemed to be moved by invisible

14. «Nessuno ha mai saputo chi si celasse dietro a quel nome. Ma era l’eminenza grigia dietro a ogni complotto, il burattinaio sopra ogni congiura. [...] Per molti era solo un mito [...], un modo per confondere le polizie inducendole a pensare che con i loro arresti tagliavano solo rami senza mai poter risalire all’albero. Invece, esisteva eccome» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 259–260).

strings. He spoke, and there you saw a poor, asthmatic [...] old man, the shrunken spectre of the adult man he used to be. He spoke, and there he assumed the appearance of a demonic, powerful, evil sculpture.<sup>15</sup>

Due to his immortal spirit, Nubius can forecast the future. He has planned and started a process that cannot be stopped or changed. In a moment of transfiguration, in a sort of epiphany, Nubius reveals his identity. He is the personification of Revolution and Anarchy:

I am not the momentary upsetting of the public order, [...] nor the conspiracy plotting in the dark, nor the substitution of a dynasty with another [...]. I am not Luther [...], nor Robespierre, nor Babeuf, nor Mazzini, nor Kossuth. These people are my sons but they are not me. These things are my works but they are not me. These men and these things are transitory facts, but I am a permanent state. I am the refusal of every social and religious order not established by man and of which he is not both the king and the god. I am [...] the philosophy of rebellion, the politics of rebellion, the religion of rebellion. I am Prometheus unchained; in a word, I am Anarchy, because I am God overthrown and substituted by man. This is why I am called Revolution [...]. And my registry or battle names are not important, because I am eternal and I existed before and will exist after this body's death. [...] But by now the path is traced and it will be impossible not to follow it. By now every effort can just slow down the avalanche, not stop it. It will go straight toward its ultimate end, which is all and nothing. A cosmic laughter.<sup>16</sup>

15. «[...] la sua voce si faceva a volte più stridula e gracchiante, altre profonda e cavernosa. Proveniva da lui, certo, ma in determinati momenti si aveva l'impressione che non fosse sua [...], come se un altro lo usasse da maschera [...]. Anche la sua testa, le sue mani, le sue spalle sembravano in quegli istanti come tirati da fili invisibili. Parlava, ed ecco un povero vecchio asmatico [...], spettro rinsecchito dell'uomo adulto che doveva essere stato una volta. Parlava, ed eccolo assumere l'aspetto di una scultura demoniaca, possente, malefica» (Cammilleri 2007, p. 382).

16. «Io non sono il momentaneo sconvolgimento dell'ordine pubblico [...], né la congiura che cospira nell'ombra, né la sostituzione di una dinastia con un'altra [...] Non sono Lutero [...], né Robespierre, né Babéuf, né Mazzini, né Kossuth. Costoro sono miei figli ma non sono me. Queste cose sono opere mie ma non sono me. Questi uomini e queste cose sono fatti transitori ma io sono uno stato permanente. Io sono il rifiuto di ogni ordine religioso e sociale non stabilito dall'uomo e del quale egli non è re e dio tutt'insieme. Io sono [...] la filosofia della ribellione, la politica della ribellione, la religione della ribellione. Io sono Prometeo scatenato; in una parola, io sono l'anarchia, perché io sono Dio spodestato e sostituito dall'uomo. Ecco il motivo per cui mi chiamo Rivoluzione [...]. E il mio nome anagrafico o quello di battaglia non hanno importanza. Neanche chi adesso ti parla ha importanza, perché io sono eterno e c'ero prima e ci sarò dopo che questo corpo sarà morto. [...] Ma ormai la via è tracciata e non si potrà non seguirla.

Nubius is moved by his hatred, which confers much more power and invulnerability than love and allows one to act alone (p. 386). The regime forecast by Nubius is “cryptocracy” (p. 389), the most radical and absolute despotism: «A unified humanity, without barriers and frontiers, without religious trammels» (pp. 386–387), led by secret rulers:

Some clowns will be placed on the stage to act as presidents, ministers, heads of the government, and they will be more than happy to lend their faces and their wooden heads in change of a fistful of privileges and some crusts thrown to their vanity. But none will ever know who really rules. [. . . N]ot because the true power will be hidden, but because, on the contrary, it will be under everyone’s eyes. And, as all the evident things, it will not be seen. [. . .] This leadership will never be overthrown because one would not know whom to shoot.<sup>17</sup>

The conclusion of the book leaves the reader with a doubt, leading him or her to wonder if Nubius’s prophecy is totally absurd or not. Like Eco (2011), Cammilleri (2007) is based on the motif of the big old men manipulating history in the shadows. However, while Simonini is represented just as an old man suffering from various psychological disturbs, Nubius appears as a sort of supernatural power, as a miserable body possessed by an evil immortal spirit.

#### 4. Hydra organizations

In Italian literature, the motif of the complex plot organized by a hidden head is present not only in the novels explicitly related to the conspiracy theories, such as Eco (2011) and Cammilleri (2007), but also in the novels concerning mafia. Such texts are characterized by

Ormai ogni sforzo potrà solo rallentare la valanga, non fermarla. Essa andrà verso il suo fine ultimo, che è tutto ed è niente. Una risata cosmica» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 385–386).

17. «Alcuni pagliacci li si metterà in primo piano a fare i presidenti, i ministri, i capi di governo, e saranno più che contenti di prestare le loro facce e mettere a disposizione le loro teste di legno in cambio di un pugno di privilegi e qualche crosta gettata in pasto alla loro vanità. Ma chi comandi davvero non si saprà mai. [. . . N]on perché il vero potere sarà occulto ma perché, al contrario, sarà sotto gli occhi di tutti. E, come tutte le cose evidenti, non si vedrà. [. . .] Questo comando non sarà mai [. . .] abbattuto perché non si saprebbe a chi sparare» (Cammilleri 2007, pp. 389–390).

a different kind of anxiety, which is not based on sinister, macabre and esoteric elements, but rather on realism. Indeed, they represent facts that are disturbingly similar to those reported by newspapers and history books.

An example is provided by *I pugnalatori* (Sciascia 1976). The members of the so-called “sect of the stabbers” kill contemporarily thirteen people in different places in Palermo. They are low-class men hired by a secret head, the powerful prince of Sant’Elia, who is so haunted by the desire of having even more power that he organizes terroristic actions aimed at undermining the government. While the poorest stabbers are executed, the prince remains untouchable, and he keeps his status and privileges. Although it is set during the Risorgimento, the text is full of references to the “lead years.”

In numerous mafia novels (e.g. Sciascia 1961; Camilleri 1999) we can find conspiracies whose head is discovered, but it proves to be undefeatable. Even if the truth is found out, the frightening conclusion is that there is a sinister agent that cannot be stopped and keeps free to act his plots and crimes. There is no protection against him. This sense of vulnerability, of impossibility to protect oneself against evil, the presence of evil in everyday life, together with the realism and the similarity with actual situations and events, provide such novels with their peculiarly uncanny, disquieting side.

## 5. The desecration of conspiracy

Nevertheless, in many other cases the motif of conspiracy does not present such dramatic traits. Especially in the literature concerning the Risorgimento, the conspiracy tendency appears as a sort of national vice, typical of sly characters who are depicted with contempt, but often in caricature tones. We can think e.g. of Calogero Sedàra in *Il Gattopardo*, who made proselytes for the future Italian regime: «[...] up and down the whole district he went like a bat; by trap, horse, mule, foot, in rain or sun; and whenever he passed secret groups were formed, to prepare the way for those that were to come. He’s a scourge of God, Excellency, a scourge of God» (Tomasi di Lampedusa 2007, p. 116).

Another example is provided by the characters of Coronato and Forgogna in Alianello (1963), two notables ruling a southern town during the Risorgimento. Coronato and Forogna are described in caricature tones both in their appearance (the one tall and thin, the other short and fat) and their behavior (e.g. they hurry up changing the statues and portraits of the kings in their home at every change of regime). They are corrupted, involved with the mafia, and they plot with every party that seems to be prevailing at the moment, sometimes even with two parties at the same time. They are always moved by their individual material interests. Even if they raise contempt, these village conspirators are very different from the omnipotent and maleficent big old man. On the contrary, their very same pettiness can sometimes inspire a hilarious irony.

We can therefore say that, in Italian literature, the conspiracy is often de-sacrated, in the sense that it is deprived of its «misterium tremendum et fascinans» (Otto 1917). This happens by means of the ironical representation and the caricature reduction of the plots and of their agents, or by exasperating the paranoia and the distort logic that inform the conspiracy theories<sup>18</sup>. A third desecration strategy is the ironic highlighting of the conspiracies' collateral effects and by-products. This last strategy reduces conspiracies to a human and very fallible dimension. Andrea Camilleri provides us with a masterpiece of the account of the conspiracies' collateral effects in his *Il birraio [brewer] di Preston*.

## 6. Camilleri, the brewer and Karl Popper

According to Popper (2006, p. 13), «[...] a conspiracy never [...] turns out in the way that is intended» In social life, we hardly «[...] produce precisely the effect that we wish to produce, and we usually get things that we do not want into the bargain. Of course, we act with certain aims in mind; but apart from these aims (which we may or may not really achieve) there are always certain unwanted consequences of our actions; and usually these unwanted consequences cannot be eliminated» Popper's position could thus be defined as a theory of

18. As Eco himself explains about his novels, see Eco and Magris (2010) and above.

the byproducts of conspiracy. Camilleri's *Il birraio di Preston* seems a perfect literary representation of such a theory.

Set in Sicily shortly after the *Risorgimento*, the novel is based on three conspiracies (C) with tragicomic collateral effects. The episodes are narrated in an apparently casual order, but we can identify the three conspiracies as the pivots of the action. The "foreigner" Florentine prefect of Montelusa, Bortuzzi, states that the theater of the nearby Vigata must be inaugurated with the opera *Il birraio di Preston*. The inhabitants of Vigata are hostile to this order because of an old rivalry with Montelusa. Bortuzzi asks therefore the mafioso Ferraguto to employ every stratagem to ensure the success of the representation (C1). The members of the society "Circolo cittadino di Vigata" decide in their turn to conspire against the representation (C2):

"And we're supposed to inaugurate our new Vigata theatre with an opera by this mediocrity just because our distinguished prefect is besotted with him?" [...]

At this point Canon Bonmartino got up from his chair, ran over to the windows, and drew the curtains to make the room dark, while Headmaster Cozzo lit a lamp. The men then gathered in a semicircle around the light. And Dr. Gammacurta, in a baritone voice, intoned: "Suoni la tromba e intrepido".

The first to join him, as if written into the score, was the commendatore. One by one, all the others followed. Standing round, hands linked as in a chain, looking one another in the eye, they instinctively lowered the volume of their song.

They were conspirators. They had become so at that very moment, in the name of Vincenzo Bellini.

The Brewer of Preston, the opera by Luigi Ricci imposed on them by the prefect of Montelusa, would never play.<sup>19</sup> (Camilleri 2014, pp. 17–18)

The agitator Traquandi is sent to Vigata by the Mazzinian party,

19. «E noi dovremmo inaugurare il nostro teatro di Vigata con un'opera di questa mezza calzetta solo perché il signor prefetto amminchiò? [...] A questo punto il canonico Bonmartino si susì dalla seggia, corse alle finestre, tirò le tende a fare scuro, mentre il preside Cozzo addrumava un lume. Attorno a quella luce si ritrovarono tutti a semicerchio. E il medico Gammacurta attaccò con voce da baritono: "Suoni la tromba e intrepido...". Primo gli si unì, come da partitura, il commendatore. Poi, uno a uno, tutti gli altri. In piedi, taliandosi occhi negli occhi e stringendosi a catena le mani, abbassarono d'istinto il volume del canto. Erano congiurati, lo erano diventati in quel preciso momento nel nome di Bellini. *Il birraio di Preston*, opera lirica di Luigi Ricci, imposta dal prefetto di Montelusa, non sarebbe passata» Camilleri (2010), pp. 24–26.

with the complicity of members of the parliament. His task is to exacerbate the tension created by C<sub>1</sub> and C<sub>2</sub> in order to provoke a national scandal aiming at undermining the government (C<sub>3</sub>). C<sub>3</sub> is a byproduct of C<sub>1</sub> and 2. The night of the representation, the spectators boycott the show by mocking the opera. The prefect prohibits them from leaving the theater before the end of the show, but people are suddenly panic-stricken and they attack the prefect's guards. Some hours later, when everything is over, Traquandi sets fire to the theater.

Each conspiracy fails but causes a big number of unplanned and unwanted effects. Bortuzzi and Ferraguto apparently meet their goal, because the representation takes place. However, the soirée ends up in a disaster that ruins Bortuzzi's career and provokes Ferraguto's death (discredited and weakened, he is killed by a more powerful mafioso). The Vigatesi cannot impede the representation, and they just obtain the destruction of their new theater. Many people are hurt and three people die. The police heads secretly kill Traquandi, because they fear to be accused of not having stopped the terrorist in time, and thus they unwittingly thwart the national scandal planned by the Mazzinians.

The three conspiracies also generate a series of collateral consequences connecting in bizarre causal chains events and characters that have apparently nothing to do with each other. For example, a young widow living in the house next to the theater dies because of the smoke provoked by the fire during the first night of love she was having after many years of loneliness; the engineer Hoffer is happy to have the opportunity to try the machine he has invented to extinguish the fire and, since he leaves home, his son Gerd can spend an unusual night; the stevedore Turiddru, who lives in a squalid room with his numerous family, saves his mother from fire, but he loses the house he dreamt to move in with his wife and sons. The honest doctor Gammacurta disobeys the order to stay in the theater until the end of the show. He exists by the backdoor, but a guard thinks he is a burglar and shoots him: the honest man is paradoxically killed as a criminal. These are just a few instances showing that this novel is not far from Popper's principle: social action often takes unexpected directions, in spite of human efforts to control the events. This is also made evident by the fact that the key event, the battle in the theater, is not directly caused by the different conspirators, but rather by a chain of fortuitous events:

- a) A guard falls asleep and, by pressing his musket, he involuntarily shoots.
- b) When she hears this noise, the soprano, very nervous because of the spectators' mockeries, awfully cracks.
- c) The musicians, scared by these strong noises, suddenly throw away their instruments and run away. The fall of the instruments, amplified by the theater's acoustics, seems the rumble of an earthquake.
- d) The spectators are panic-stricken by the supposed earthquake but, when they try to run away from the theater, they find the exits blocked by the guards. A big brawl starts.

The narration of such clumsy conspiracies and of their inevitably distorted direction is ironical and funny, but with a touch of pity for their innocent victims and for the fragility of human life, ultimately governed by a haphazard fate. Camilleri's narrator shares with Colonna and with Bianciardi's narrator the "vice of quotation" ("il vizio della citazione", Eco 2015, p. 19). This aesthetic propensity for intertextuality can be related to the taste for the allusion, for the abundance of semi-hidden clues, and to the axiom "everything is connected" that are typical traits of the conspiracy mentality.

## 7. Bianciardi and the paranoid style

Les visions conspirationnistes sont indissociables d'une rhétorique de la dénonciation dont le premier caractère observable est un «style paranoïde», comme si l'obsession du complot allait de pair avec un délire d'interprétation, susceptible d'être lui-même le symptôme d'une structure psychique paranoïaque. Le paranoïaque élimine l'incertitude, systématise la méfiance et généralise le soupçon [...]. (Taguieff (2005), p. 102)

Bianciardi's novel *Aprire il fuoco* (2005, 1st ed. 1969) is a good example of the "paranoid style" characterizing the conspiracy theories as a general semiotic style but also, more specifically, as a literary genre. The protagonist and narrator lives in exile after having participated in revolutionary actions and having been taken to trial five times by a corrupted judiciary system. Even if he mentions the names of some of his personal antagonists, his main enemy is a whole system, made



of powers without a face, of banks and tribunals that oppress the individual depriving him of his rights and of his goods. As Eco's *Colonna*, the narrator is a failed editor and a translator. He lives in a hybrid time melting the Risorgimento with the 1960s: for example, Milan is still under the domination of Austria as in the 1850s, but the protagonist watches TV and he translates Henry Miller's novels. He has obsessive persecution feelings. For instance, he only leaves home disguised as a hunter, a seller or a teacher, because he fears to be recognized by the ubiquitous "oppressor's spies" (p. 28).

From time to time, the narrator has to leave the quiet village of his exile to hand in the translated books in Milan. Such occasions exacerbate his paranoia. The city is an "enemy land" where «many people suffer and sweat under the oppressor»<sup>20</sup>. Milan is metaphorically defined as an orchard, where the protagonist waits for his martyrdom as Jesus in the Gethsemane: during the train journey to Milan one can recognize «the signal of the orchard, when you have to get ready [...] and proceed toward the door [...] But always try not to be seen and, if anything, meditate upon this orchard signaled many times by the writings on the wall, or on the top of the smoky city's shining neotowers. Ask yourself, brother, which orchard we are talking about, and [...] you will finally understand that it's the Gethsemane, where the son of man sweated blood»<sup>21</sup>. The protagonist sweats blood as well. He explains that the scientists call "hematidrosis" this phenomenon caused by violent emotions or fears, and that they connect it to hysteria, a disease that he fiercely denies to suffer from, because it is typically feminine.

The narrator presents the mentality of the radical suspect that we found in Eco's characters, especially in *Braggadocio*. Like Simonini, he is obsessed with the disguise and he is a double, or split, character: Bianciardi's narrator lives between past and present, Simonini has a double personality (Simonini and Dalla Piccola). Eco (2011, 2015) and

20. «Basta un colpo d'occhio per capire che siamo in territorio nemico, dove patisce e suda tanta gente sotto l'oppressore» (Bianciardi 2005, p. 959).

21. «[...] il segnale dell'orto, quando devi prepararti [...] e avviarti nel corridoio verso la porta. [...] Ma tu cerca sempre di non farti vedere e medita semmai su questo orto più volte segnalato dalle scritte sui muri, o in cima alle neotorri lustranti della città affumata. Chiediti, fratello, di quale orto si stia qui parlando, e [...] lo capirai, finalmente, che è l'orto del Getsemani, dove il figlio dell'uomo sudò sangue» (Bianciardi 2005, p. 959).

Bianciardi (2005) follow an aesthetics of paranoia, characterized by a hallucinated style, an absurd logic, unusual connections between events and bizarre associations of ideas. The stream of consciousness (Bianciardi) and the diary (Eco 2011) are literary forms that well suit such an “interpretive disease”.

This aesthetics of paranoia seems typical of male characters whose forefathers can be found in Western literature at least from the 18th century. In her book, which focuses on German literature, Johnson writes:

Men of melancholy or enthusiastic temperament, as represented in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and psychology, were prone to feel themselves at the mercy of other, uncanny men with “special powers” akin to those to which Freud refers in his essay on “The Uncanny:” we think of others as uncanny not only when we think of their intentions as evil, but when we believe that they have special powers. These powers, however, are nothing supernatural and in fact only exist in the mind of the melancholy man, who lives in a liminal uncanny lack-of-home. [...] the male protagonists of the novels [William Lovell by Tieck and *Der Geisterseher* by Schiller], all of whom exhibit “hysterical” symptoms, are convinced that they are victims of conspiracies. To be sure, they are handicapped by nature; they suffer from an excess of sentiment [...]. But their psychological and social doom is sealed by their perceived victimization at the hands of others — lovers, friends, brothers, fathers, and secret societies. (Johnson (1994), p. 147)

According to Johnson, this paranoia is characteristic of a “male hysteria” recurring around 1800. Indeed, despite his denial, Bianciardi’s protagonist seems to show all the symptoms of this disease. If we consider the corpus analyzed herein, we can observe that all, or most of, the characters connected to conspiracy, both theorists and agents, are men. Italian contemporary literature seems therefore to show a mainly masculine conspiracy paranoia, which is probably the legacy of an older literary tradition.

## **8. Towards a semiotic study of conspiracy as a literary genre**

As Eco demonstrates, it is possible to theorize a “Universal Form” of conspiracy, i.e. a basic narrative structure functioning as the revelation

of obscure plots led by powerful enemies hidden in sinister settings. Such a structure underlies many textual forms circulating in our culture, as multimedia discourse (Internet, TV, newspapers), pamphlets and, of course, novels. There are many studies — mainly, but not only, American — focusing on the recurring traits of the novels based on conspiracy<sup>22</sup>. Such researches induce us to hypothesize that it is possible to tackle the narrative of conspiracy as a specific literary genre.

Nevertheless, the study of the small corpus of novels presented herein shows a various and nuanced landscape. In contemporary Italian literature, the narration of conspiracy crosses different literary genres, thus assuming different traits and tones, from the tragicomic tale (Camilleri, Alianello) to the socio–historical denounce (Sciascia), to the classic conspiracy theory with uncanny characters and settings (Eco and Camilleri).

In order to get to a more precise typology of the conspiracy genre in Italy, a systematic study of an extended corpus of novels is needed. Semiotics can offer useful analytic tools to such a research. The main traits of both literary and non–literary conspiracy theories have all been central subjects in semiotics:

- a) Agency. The problem of agency is central to the conspiracy theory, which typically focuses on issues of power and is full of mysterious agents opposed to a subject trying to understand their secret plots.<sup>23</sup>
- b) Binary oppositions. A conspiracy theory implies the revelation of a secret plot.<sup>24</sup> Secrecy is a fundamental element. The contrast between being and appearance is the first of a series of key oppositions that characterize conspiracy mentality: lie / truth, good / evil, light / darkness, individual / society.
- c) Passions. The passion ground of conspiracy is constituted, on the one hand, by the fears of an individual that theorizes the conspiracy and, on the other hand, by the desires and passions

22. See e.g. Levine (1989); Hantke (1994); Wisnicky (2008); Micali (2003).

23. Coady (2006); Melley (2000), pp. 16–26; Byfort (2011), chap. 4. For an overview of the semiotic theories on agency, see Leone (2009).

24. Coady (2006). The study of binary oppositions is one of the main traits of structuralism, and it can be afforded for instance with the “semiotic square” (see e.g. Greimas 1966).

(often hatred and/or avidity of richness or power) attributed to the conspiracy agents. The dominating passion in conspiracy narratives is anxiety, amplified by sinister and uncanny settings and characters.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, such stereotyped passions are sometimes reversed by an irony that is made possible by the reference to a well codified genre<sup>26</sup>.

- d) Manipulation and interpretation. Manipulation is highlighted in every conspiracy theory. The mentality of radical suspect derives from the persuasion of being manipulated and it is linked to paranoia, which, as we have seen, can be defined as an interpretive disease, as an abnormal semiosis.<sup>27</sup>
- e) Counter-narrative. A conspiracy theory is defined in opposition to an official narrative. It implies the opposition of a “self” to a hostile and menacing social order<sup>28</sup>. Conspiracy theories can therefore be studied as a system of clashing ideologies.

Each of these components can be the object of a semiotic analysis aimed at a literary typology of conspiracy. On the thematic level, when compared for example to American culture, Italian literature seems less concerned with the sub-genre of the big Ufo-alien conspiracy. It is instead more attracted to an imagery rich of secret sects, which have been actually abundant in Italian history and have raised a persisting curiosity on their aims and actions. There are Catholic and revolutionary conspiracies, supernatural personifications of Evil and painfully realistic accounts. However, a typically Italian irony is often ready to downplay the big conspiracy, reducing it to the messy plot of sly but clumsy “arruffoncelli” (“wheeler-dealers,” Alianello 2011, p. 51).

In view of more extended analyses, we can therefore state that, in Italy, conspiracy narratives have peaks corresponding to key traumatic historical events that shake the nation. Such narratives have two main functions. On the one hand, they work as counter-narratives that,

25. Wisnicki (2008), chap. 1. On the semiotics of passions see Greimas and Fontanille (1991); Del Marco and Pezzini (2008).

26. Coady (2006).

27. On interpretation see e.g. Eco (1990, 1992, 2007).

28. Coady (2006). For an overview of the semiotic study of ideology and for a more detailed analysis of the novels treated herein, see Ponzio (2015).

albeit frightening, provide an alternative explanation to the scarcely persuasive official or institutional version. However, on the other hand, the ironic reduction of conspiracy exorcizes paranoia and irrational fear. What we have called the “desecration” of conspiracy seems to prevent Italians from a serious adhesion to narratives and beliefs that in other cultures take sometimes the form of an alternative religiosity.

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