

JO-ANN CANNON
THE NOVEL AS INVESTIGATION:
LEONARDO SCIASCIA, DACIA MARAINI AND ANTONIO TABUCCHI
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 134 pp.

In *The Novel as Investigation*, Jo-Ann Cannon analyzes select works by Italian writers Sciascia, Maraini, and Tabucchi that focus predominantly on crime, punishment, justice and testimony. The texts she explores are detective or investigative novels which depart in various ways from accepted conventions of these genres. In doing so, these departures leave extensive room for the texts' self-reflexivity and ultimately lead the reader to ponder the ethical responsibilities of literature within society. Cannon's book consists of six chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion.

The first two chapters focus on two later works of Leonardo Sciascia: *Porte aperte* (1987) and *Il cavaliere e la morte* (1988). *Porte aperte* is an historical novel, based on an event that occurred in Palermo in 1937. The main protagonist, *il piccolo giudice* (the small judge), refuses to comply with the Fascist authority and he proves to be a firm opponent of capital punishment. Cannon demonstrates how the protagonist's readings (i.e., Montaigne, Tolstoy, and Giuffredi) deeply shape his ethics and moral code, and how, therefore, the pen proves to be a powerful means to educate and ameliorate humankind. Reading is thus depicted as a civic activity, one which ought to involve the entire community in its path towards a better world. According to Cannon, there is a link between the Fascist Italy of the 1930s, the Inquisition of the Fifteenth century, and the act of writing itself; it is this link which could be further explored and might inspire future research by other scholars.

Il cavaliere e la morte is Sciascia's penultimate novel, written in the form of a *giallo* shortly before his death. The crime narrated in this work is not linked specifically to an Italian sociopolitical context, but instead focuses on more universal issues. One of the main characters, the deputy, is a voracious reader and can be considered a mirror image of Sciascia himself. In fact, both the deputy and the author linger over concerns typical of a dying man. In her analysis, Cannon offers an explanation of the significance of reading and re-reading as an effective process of shaping one's personality.

The third and fourth chapters of Cannon's book delve into two novels by Dacia Maraini: *Isolina: la donna tagliata a pezzi* (1985) and *Voci* (1994). *Isolina* is a heartfelt inquiry into the numerous miscarriages of justice in the case of Isolina Canuti's murder, a tragic and real event that occurred in Verona at the beginning of the year 1900. In this *racconto inchiesta* (investigative novel), two stories are meticulously reconstructed: Isolina's tragedy, and the author's scrupulous research to assemble all available

documents on the case. In her investigation, Maraini is driven by a painstaking desire to fill all the ambiguous gaps left in the official chronicles and also to give voice to Isolina herself, and on a larger scale, to all female victims of patriarchal society. In this instance, writing is to be interpreted as a means to untangle the past and to shed light on both past and present events.

The next chapter focuses on *Voci*, another novel containing both the story of the crime (Angela Bari's murder) and the story of the investigation, carried out by a journalist, Michela Canova, and a police inspector, Adele Sòfia. In this section, the author convincingly shows how Maraini adopts and often overturns norms of the detective story. For example, neither of the investigators falls into the category of the androgynous female detective. In exploring this novelty, Cannon provides an insightful interpretation of the relationship between gender and genre in this type of fiction. The end of the novel does not console the reader and instead alludes to the fact that the solution of one single crime cannot restore order and peace in an entire society.

The fifth and sixth chapters are dedicated to Tabucchi's *Sostiene Pereira: una testimonianza* (1994) and *La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro* (1997). *Sostiene Pereira* is an historical novel set in 1938 Lisbon during the Salazar dictatorship. This work investigates the need for constant vigilance in the struggle against oppression and abuse. The novel depicts Pereira's slow awakening to fascist Portugal and the recognition of his crucial role as a journalist. Through Monteiro Rossi's unpublished obituaries, Pereira begins to understand the intellectuals' role in society, and starts questioning the validity of judging literature according to ethical rather than aesthetic criteria. After Rossi's assassination, the journalist writes a detailed account of the atrocious murder in order to pay tribute to his friend and simultaneously expose the cruelty and abuse of the Fascist regime. In concluding, Cannon underlines the role of writing as a means to bear witness, and she points out the subversive power of literature, especially in authoritarian societies.

La testa perduta di Damasceno Monteiro is a novel about torture and police brutalities that are perpetrated in civilized countries. The main characters are Firmino, a young journalist with a scholarly vocation, and Sequeiro, a crusading lawyer committed to denouncing crimes against humanity. Cannon tracks the progress of the investigation and succeeds in showing how the examined murder symbolizes indeed a larger social ill which has no national boundaries. The author again calls attention to the act of writing and proposes that both political activism and writing be complementary tools in the fight against injustice, torture and abuse.

The Novel as Investigation begins with a concise introduction wherein the author provides a detailed overview of her chapters and clearly states the goal

of her study: the close relationship that exists between literature, society and ethics. Cannon approaches her research through a close reading of the texts, focused primarily on ethical thematic. In the book's conclusion, she summarizes her findings and offers suggestions for further investigation.

Cannon has written a rich and stimulating study on three major figures in the Italian literary panorama. Her work is well-documented, coherent, and inspiring, and allows the writers' works to speak for themselves. Thanks to its style and readable format, this work may be amply enjoyed both by scholars and students of Italian literature and culture. *The Novel as Investigation* reconfirms Cannon's talent in writing straightforward and sound scholarly research.

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