

« ROMANZO NON VUOL DIRE BUGIA » : FICTION AS  
A COUNTERFEIT AND COUNTERFEITING AS AN  
ETHICAL CHALLENGE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN  
NARRATIVES OF PAOLO CIULLA'S FORGERIES



LOÏSE LELEVÉ

Université Rennes 2

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SUMMARY. In his recent book, *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine*, the French historian Ivan Jablonka turns the history scholar's art of writing into "the very condition of the truth" of his account. Thus endorsing history as a veridictive discipline *because* of its literary nature, he repudiates fiction which is assimilated to "counterfeiting." On the one hand, fiction is described as a fraudulent recreation likely to prove itself heuristic on its own terms but certainly not to produce truth *per se*. On the other hand, historians' scientific method of writing, exhibiting the scholars' process of inquiry to account for their rendering of the past, is able to elaborate a discourse of truth. Strikingly though, contemporary fictional narratives of fraud challenge the conception of veridictivity as an ethical guarantee of the truth of a given account and suggest that fiction, precisely because of its lack of pretense to scientific objectivity, may offer an efficient ethics of truth. By destabilizing their reader through a blurring of facts and fiction simultaneously signalled as such and yet arduous to disentangle, contemporary historical novels assign their readers the very role of a detective, giving him both agentivity and responsibility. Such a conception of literature can perhaps best be analyzed in two contemporary Italian accounts of the life of Sicilian counterfeiter Paolo Ciulla, which two accounts – *Il falsario di Caltagirone* and *Ciulla, il grande malfattore* – turn counterfeiting into a touchstone for a fictional ethics of historical truth. Forged banknotes are in both novels the prism through which Italian economic mutations and their cultural and social consequences are questioned. A political activist and a marginalized homosexual, Ciulla the forger becomes the crucial, albeit ambiguous, epitome of a past characterised by economic and political crises that go back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but are still shaping Italy. Such narratives, apparently factual but provided with unreliable narrators, hesitate constantly between a concern for documentary truth and the transmission of a forgotten political history, and the fictional recreation of obscure aspects of the counterfeiter's life for hermeneutical or even comical purposes. Their reader is faced with a complex merging of referential and fictional reading pacts that leaves him with the ethical and epistemological responsibility of sorting out, as best he can, the meanders of Italy's marginal history.

KEYWORDS: veridictivity, forgery, counterfeiting, literary ethics, history writing, Paolo Ciulla.

In his recent book, *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine* [*History as a Contemporary Literature*], an epistemological manifesto promoting a re-evaluation of history as a democratized *literary* discipline, the French historian Ivan Jablonka turns the

history scholar's art of writing into "the very condition of the truth"<sup>1</sup> of his account. Thus endorsing history as a veridictive discipline *because* of its literary nature, he repudiates fiction, assimilated to "counterfeiting"<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, historical fiction is described as a fraudulent reconstitution of the past likely to prove itself heuristic on its own terms but certainly not to produce truth *per se*. On the other hand, historians are able to produce truth by resorting to a non-fictional writing style, the scientific value of which relies upon openly displaying the scholars' process of inquiry to account for their rendering of the past. Equating veridictivity with truth might however prove problematic, as one could argue that veridictivity is a rhetorical device aimed at giving only an impression of truth and objectivity. As a primarily stylistic device, it therefore cannot objectively vouch for the ethical and truthful nature of any given content *per se*. And strikingly, contemporary fictional narratives of fraud themselves might turn out to be one of the most efficient means to call this theory into question, as they challenge the idea of veridictivity being the ethical guarantee of the truth of a given account. As their authors mimic an academic writing style by staging their narrator's inquiries, and as they reproduce so-called archives that they might have altered or altogether fabricated entirely unbeknownst to the reader, they produce texts that may *seem* veridictive and therefore truthful, but the authenticity of which is however problematic at best. Consequently, the partition established by Jablonka may find itself reversed: it might well be fiction, precisely because of its lack of pretense to scientific objectivity, which offers an efficient ethics of truth. Because they unsettle their readers by inextricably blurring facts and fiction and simultaneously signalling it, contemporary historical novels incite them to revise the reading pacts they are ready to conclude. Those novels suggest that the readers should treat every text as a suspicious enigma, a field of investigation requiring the reader to take on the role of the detective and try, not to distinguish truth from falsity, but to devise a new, ethical way of grasping past facts through the prism of these simultaneously misleading and heuristic fictions. Such a strategy on the narrator's part, of course, aims at returning to the readers both their agency and their responsibility.

This conception of literature can perhaps best be analyzed in two contemporary Italian accounts of the life of Sicilian counterfeiter Paolo Ciulla that turn counterfeiting into a touchstone for a fictional ethics of historical truth – *Il falsario di*

<sup>1</sup> Jablonka I. *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales*. Paris: Seuil, 2014, 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

*Caltagirone*<sup>3</sup> and *Ciulla, il grande malfattore*.<sup>4</sup> Forged banknotes are in both novels the prism through which Italian economic mutations and their cultural and social consequences are questioned. A political activist and a marginalized homosexual, Ciulla the forger becomes the crucial, albeit ambiguous, epitome of a past characterised by economic and political crises that go back to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but are still shaping Italy. These narratives appear constantly to hesitate between a concern for documentary truth and the transmission of a forgotten political history, and the fictional recreation of obscure aspects of the counterfeiter's life for hermeneutical or even comical purposes. Their reader is faced with a complex merging of referential and fictional reading pacts that leaves him with the ethical and epistemological responsibility of sorting out the meanders of the marginal history of Italy as best he can. This paper shall therefore endeavour to analyse how those two biographies of a forger devise a specific method of writing history, as well as the ethical principles and the understandings of the role of fiction that may be drawn from them: for, at the end of the day, such narratives remain paradoxical and imply that the reader actively participate in recreating the past suggested by both accounts.

#### PAST HISTORY AND CURRENT TIMES: HOW TO INTERTWINE FACTUAL NARRATIVES AND FICTION

The title of Maria Attanasio's novel does not include its protagonist's name, but mentions his birthplace, Caltagirone, which happens to be Attanasio's as well. Indeed, the very representation, within the narrative, of the evolution of the town geography through time works as a window through which Ciulla's and Italy's past can be apprehended. Actually, Attanasio's narrative overlays three embedded prisms to render Sicily's past: first, Ciulla is the protagonist who embodies a lost, concealed, and even marginal history of Sicily. Second, what we could call "micro-history," that is, the choice to sketch the history of the island and of the country by focusing on individual lives, in an approach reminiscent of Carlo Ginzburg's works for instance,<sup>5</sup> allows the author to distance herself from a number of widespread

<sup>3</sup> Attanasio M. *Il falsario di Caltagirone. Notizie e ragguagli sul curioso caso di Paolo Ciulla*. Palermo: Sellerio, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Fo D., Sciotto P. *Ciulla, il grande malfattore*. Parma: Guanda, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Ginzburg C. *Il formaggio e i vermi: il cosmo di un mugnaio de l'500*. Torino: G. Einaudi, 1976. Unfortunately, we lack space to expand on how Attanasio's treatment of clues and archives could be analyzed through Ginzburg's concept of the indicatory paradigm, as exposed in *Miti, emblemi, spie: morfologia e storia*. Torino: Einaudi, 1986.

political or historical theories (such as the so-called political immobilism of Sicily, or the supposed radical novelty of contemporary crises). Finally, investigating a particular place allows for a specific, individual, and detail-based approach to the historical content conveyed by the novel. Faced with the oddities and obscure events of town life, brought back to memory by the narrator's inquiry, national or general histories and the theories they produce are shown, at best, as too encompassing to deliver an individual truth about the dead and their struggles – including, and especially, their political ones – and at worst, as discourses of knowledge that more or less wittingly serve institutional structures of power (see below). Moreover, the fictional depiction of space betrays one of the main theories that underpin Attanasio's craft as a novelist: the past cannot be understood outside of its links to the present of both the readers and the narrator; and the investigation of distant facts really proves its worth when the former can demonstrate its heuristic power for the latter. A spatial reality that both the contemporary reader and the historical protagonist can or have experienced, the city plays the role of an interface between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The first lines of the novel are thus devoted to a reflection on the evolution of the layout of Catania, another major city within the book, and the second in which unfolds an essential part of Ciulla's Italian life after Caltagirone. The narrative begins with an evocation of the signs of the 1669 eruption that emptied the streets of Catania before the creation, "a few decades later," on the remnants of lava flows, of a "mule track" that progressively becomes a "wide boulevard"<sup>6</sup> when the city starts to brim over its walls. That boulevard was named after Mario Rapisardi, a writer and social philosopher, by De Felice, the great standard bearer of Catania's 19<sup>th</sup> century leftist social conflicts. It is the first time that this political figure, who is to play a crucial role in Ciulla's youthful political commitment, is mentioned. Geography and onomastics are therefore significant: the city wears the traces of past fights; it reminds its dweller of forgotten names and causes that used to be the object of intense struggles. That use of toponymy as a way of accessing a marginal history – and for Attanasio, a social history that serves her political agenda – recurs throughout the novel. Thus begins the third part, symmetrically to the preamble, with a presentation of the eponymous town, more specifically with the description of another "boulevard," which today marks the limit of the old town of Caltagirone, and where the young can go and have a beer: "That boulevard is called Mario Milazzo. Such a name – today, a pure anonymous sound – designated in 1889 the chief candidate of the workers' party, quite famous in town for having founded, at

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15: "qualche decennio dopo", "una mulatierra", "un am pioviale". All translations are by the author of this paper.

the age of eighteen, a political and society newspaper, close to the conservatives, that he ran with a corrosive aggressiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Behind the bitter comment on even the most well-known figures of a past era sliding into oblivion and the sense of a gap between an agitated past and a forgetful present, the importance of giving new meaning to lost names and to the city space is correlated with a feeling of continuity between a place that defines the identity of its inhabitants past and present and a history of which only indecipherable traces remain. For past actions, even forgotten, have consequences in the daily routine of contemporary dwellers: Ciulla, for instance, as a city councillor, had secured the decision, in aid of preserving an existing public garden, that new construction projects be moved to what was to become the main street of the modern city:<sup>8</sup> his decisions continue to influence the shape of today’s urban plan. Again, present configurations cannot be read, nor meaningfully lived, without the awareness that the past molds even the most unexpected aspects of our lives.<sup>9</sup> The mutations of the city space largely exceed the protagonist’s life and inscribe it into the Sicilian landscape of Catania or Caltagirone. From the dirt track to the main street, the variations of scope and importance of the various pieces of that landscape invite us to reconsider events usually seen as “minor” in history: even the – apparently – most insignificant streets can function as a testimony of a past that enlightens the current state of our present situation.

Furthermore, micro-history is what enables Maria Attanasio to introduce a certain amount of fiction within her narrative. The subtitle of the novel, “Notizie e ragguagli sul curioso caso di Paolo Ciulla” (“News and Information about the Strange Case of Paolo Ciulla”) seems to define its theoretical, epistemic, and ethical purposes. *Notizia*, among other things, is an “(acquired) knowledge [...] related to temporally close or remote facts, to the extent to which their trace was preserved, or their memory transmitted or received”.<sup>10</sup> *Ragguaglio*, by contrast, is to be

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. “Mario Milazzo si chiama questo viale. Quel nome – oggi puro suono senza identità – nel 1889 identificava il capolista del partito operaio, molto conosciuto in città per avere a diciott’anni fondato un giornale di politica e costume, vicino ai conservatori, chedirigeva con con corrosiva aggressività.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> As implied in a statement by the author, quoted in Adamo G. La deliberata infedeltà della scrittura. Riflessioni sulla narrativa storica di Maria Attanasio. *Strumenti critici*, 09/2009, nr. 3, 483–484. “Per me la storia di un luogo è continuità di vita che arriva a me, non separazione tra presente e passato. Aggirarmi per le strade della mia città; guardare i volti dei suoi abitanti dove si rappresenta una storia di transiti, scambi, culture; avvertire il vissuto che su quelle strade e su quei volti è scritto. Tutto ciò è fondamento della mia scrittura.” “For me the story of a given place is a continuity of living that reaches me, not a separation between past and present. Wandering in the streets of my city; looking at the faces of its inhabitants where is represented a whole story of transits, exchanges, cultures; perceiving the living past that is written on those streets and on those faces. All of this is the foundation of my writing.”

<sup>10</sup> “Conoscenza (come sapere acquisito), relativa a fatti vicini o lontani nel tempo, in quanto se ne conservi traccia, o ne sia trasmessa o recepita la memoria”. Prieiga internete <<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/notizia>> [žiūrēta 2018 17 09].

understood as “information, expository account; one usually expects it to be *specific*.”<sup>11</sup> Her narrative therefore combines two types of texts, which however aim at the same explicit goal: making the reader the custodian of an unsung knowledge. The first type deals with recorded history, for which traces and archives are still available, regardless of the narrative that accounts for them, puts them in order, and gives them their meaning. Such traces are the material for an objective knowledge of the past, which is to be passed down. The modest dimension of such an insight is openly acknowledged: the narrative focuses on a singular case. It actually is the very uniqueness of that case that justifies the addition, on top of the “notizie,” of a second kind of text, the informative account. The division of fiction and nonfiction between those two sorts of texts is easily discernible: it falls to the first to account for the facts available to the narrator at the end of her investigation, the authenticity of which is established by the paratext. Only in the chapters not preceded by the mention “*Notizia*” and therefore susceptible to be classified by readers in the “ragguagli” category,<sup>12</sup> can one find fictional invention. Indeed, it is fiction that enables the narrator to reach the level of precision forbidden by the scarce remnants of Ciulla’s life. Strikingly, filling historical gaps by fictional inventions is presented as a method whose cognitive value is at least equal, if not similar, to that of the verified facts gathered within the *notizie*. According to Maria Attanasio, fictional invention therefore possesses a heuristic value *per se*, independent from, complementary with, and certainly not lesser than, that of archival investigation.

Such a distinction is reinforced by Picasso’s quote, which serves as an epigraph for the whole text: “Today we know that art is not truth. Art is the lie that enables us to know the truth, at least the conceivable one.”<sup>13</sup> The epigraph opposes *truth* and *knowledge of the truth*: the historical narrative is less relevant as an objective and exhaustive account of a forgotten truth, than as a cognitive tool allowing an access to such a truth. It is therefore significant that Maria Attanasio chooses to translate the term “mensonge” (“lie”) from the French quotation<sup>14</sup> by “menzogna” instead of “bugia.” While the latter refers to a deceptive affirmation,<sup>15</sup> the former means an “affirmation against what one knows or believes to be true, or against what

<sup>11</sup> « Informazione, relazione informativa; s’intende di solito che sia precisa ». Prieiga internete <<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ragguaglio>> [žiūrēta 2018 17 09]. My italics.

<sup>12</sup> It is at least Giuliana Adamo’s theory; see *La deliberata infedeltà della scrittura. Riflessioni sulla narrativa storica* di Attanasio M. *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>13</sup> “Oggi sappiamo che l’arte non è verità. L’arte è la menzogna che ci permette di conoscere la verità, almeno la verità concepibile.”, Attanasio M., *Il falsario di Caltagirone*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> In Picasso P. *Propos sur l’art*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See: <<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bugia1/>> [žiūrēta 2018 17 09].

one thinks.”<sup>16</sup> The fictional narrative is not a counterfeit; it is the elaboration of a *para-doxical*, critical account of a received truth aimed at showcasing a marginal interpretation that challenges a given belief or item of knowledge.

Fo and Sciotto explicitly quote Attanasio as a source of inspiration, but noticeably diverge from her poetics on the crucial point of the role of history's agents. In the Sicilian writer's novel, the continuity between past and present, which was the foundation of the epistemic and political relevance of the historical narrative, was established by focusing on the singularity of beings and places, their irreducible difference, a difference that also implies, as Attanasio's description of Ciullas as a “prototype of all diversities – political, artistic, sexual<sup>17</sup>” – suggests, an attitude of resistance to the domination systems they strive to subvert. Those same domination systems are also the ultimate target of Fo and Sciotto's narrative, but they prefer underlining the relevance of past facts for the understanding of present ones through the unveiling of history as a cyclical, repetitive mechanism. The way Fo and Sciotto on the one hand, and Attanasio on the other, handle the continuity between past and present are thus opposed. Ciulla's biography, in Fo and Sciotto's narrative, is valuable not because it summons a marginal life, but because the forger appears as an archetype, the perfect image of his time, as stated in the stage version of the text: “Tonight's tale is about one story, or rather two: the story of Paolo Ciulla's life, ... and that of the period in which he lived and achieved his extraordinary feats... from the years following the Italian unification to the beginning of Fascism.”<sup>18</sup>

The forger's biographies thus display two opposite conceptions of how to write history. For Fo and Sciotto, the historical narrative should aim at revealing the iterative aspect of history, at denouncing the continuity of social injustice under the apparent uniqueness of experienced events. It is indeed because no event is unique, and because any past fact is always but the repetition of another one, that the historical narrative makes sense: it allows one to see the repetition of the same behind the illusion of change, and thus to realize that promises of social progress

<sup>16</sup> “Affermazione contraria a ciò che si sa o si credero, o anche contraria a ciò che si pensa; alterazione (oppure negazione, o anche occultamento) consapevole e intenzionale della verità”. Prieiga internete <<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/menzogna>> [žiūrēta 2018 17 09].

<sup>17</sup> Attanasio M. *Ibid.*, 167. “un individuo prototipo di tutte le diversità – politica, artistica, sessuale.”

<sup>18</sup> Fo D., Sciotto P. *Ciulla, il grande malfattore. Copione dello spettacolo del 1 marzo 2015 a Bologna*. Prieiga internete <<http://www.archivio.francarame.it/scheda.aspx?IDScheda=61324&IDOpera=230>>, 2015, March 1<sup>st</sup>, [žiūrēta 2018 17 09]. “Quello di stasera è il racconto di una storia, anzi di due storie: quella della vita di Paolo Ciulla [...] e quella del periodo in cui visse e realizzò le sue imprese straordinarie... dagli anni dopo l'Unità d'Italia all'inizio del fascismo.” The stage version of March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, date of the second representation, is even more explicit, as it precedes the narration of the forger's life with a lengthy preamble about Bava Beccaris's bloody repression.



may actually hide political immobilism. This cyclical understanding of history<sup>19</sup> is exposed at the very start of the narration, both in the foreword of the published book and at the beginning of the script of the stage play adapted from it for the Duse Theatre of Bologna. The authors quote a satirical song written by Fo in 1964 to better underline its current relevance:

PIERO: Of course you might have thought, “What an amazing, beautiful song... entertaining... a *very* actual photograph of our terrible politics...” But ... it is not true that we wrote this song nowadays for this show... Dario wrote “*Tutta brava gente*” for *Settimo ruba un po' meno* in 1964... [...] It sounds like a leap into the past, but in truth it is a leap into that eternal present that is turning into a constant future.<sup>20</sup>

Political immobilism causes time itself to freeze, so that any distinction between past, present and future and therefore, ultimately, any attempt at writing a *historical* narrative, becomes futile. Their historical fiction aims not at underlining the falsely disorientating remoteness of the past, but at tellingly articulating similar events together: the current economic crisis can only be truly explained, as the text suggests, by comparing it to that of the 1870s, namely to a crisis that not only announces and prefigures today's, but obeys the same mechanisms. Unveiling those mechanisms amounts to giving the historian or the historical narrative writer an active role and to making his work a social tool immediately usable for tackling present crises.

Attanasio, an outspoken communist, develops a radically different point of view: she battles against the vision of a Sicily stuck in centuries of social immobility – passed down, according to her, by writers such as Lampedusa or Sciascia,<sup>21</sup> not so much in order to do justice to the history of the island but to bring back the whole of its past and forgotten political innovations, which outline another possible political model. Hence the lengthy episode of the so-called “municipalization

<sup>19</sup> See Fo D., Sciotto P. *Ciulla, il grande malfattore, ibid.*, 113–114. “I mestatori e gli abili arrivisti delle combriccole imperanti nelle luride e disoneste repubblicette politiche, artistiche, ecc.’ cui accenna l’avvocato Savarese sono, ahinoi, la costante della nostra storia ciclica.” “‘The gangs’ schemers and adept arrivistes reigning in the foul and dishonest farcical political, artistic... republics’ to which alludes the barrister Savarese are, alas, the very constant of our cyclical history.”

<sup>20</sup> Fo D., Sciotto P. « Ciulla, il grande malfattore. Copione dello spettacolo del 1 marzo 2015 a Bologna », art. cit., 1–3; Fo D., Sciotto P., *Ciulla, il grande malfattore. Copione dello spettacolo del 3 marzo 2015 a Bologna*. Prieiga internete <<http://www.archivio.francarame.it/scheda.aspx?IDScheda=61323&IDOpera=230>>, 2015, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, [žiūrēta 2018 17 09]. “Di certo avrete pensato “Ma che bravi, che bella canzone... divertente... è una fotografia attualissima della nostra malapolitica...”. Ma [...] non è vero che questa canzone l’abbiamo scritta in questi giorni per questo spettacolo... “Tutta brava gente” Dario l’ha scritta per *Settimo ruba un po' meno* nel 1964... [...] Sembra un tuffo nel passato, ma in verità è un tuffo in questo eterno presente, che sta diventando il futuro costante.”

<sup>21</sup> On that topic, see Adamo G. Letteratura ed impegno: l’eredità sciasciana nella narrativa storica di Maria Attanasio. *La Libellula*, 12/2009, nr. 1, 87–94.



of bread” that sees De Felice, the mayor of Catania, requisitioning private bakeries in times of dearth and ordering them to produce cheap and healthy bread for workers and farmers on behalf of the city. Though not directly related to Ciulla’s life, it acquires a crucial relevance in the novel as it shows an undeniably clever and successful social initiative, which however was forgotten and left out of mainstream history. The very demonstration that it is possible to formulate counter-models to a capitalist system branded as unfair in the novel becomes the very reason why the history of Sicily *has* to be told. That is why Attanasio’s writing could not be staging a cyclical history: first because, on the individual scale of the heuristic marginal counter-model, macro-historical cycles have no meaning. And second, as a cyclical conception of history appears to reduce agents to archetypes and events to shallow copies of past facts, it results in obscuring the battles of those who were able to imagine alternative social configurations, and therefore ultimately contributes to spreading an incomplete and misleading historical narrative, which risks proving itself ineffective to help the reader make sense of the present. Whether cyclical or shaped by marginal individuals, however, history in Attanasio’s and Fo and Sciotto’s books seems to require a fictional narrative to regain a simultaneously heuristic and ethical dimension: either by broadening the scope (each and every event is always already but a copy of another event) or by narrowing it (history can only be truly apprehended on an individual scale), fiction appears in their work as the best means to both challenge mainstream narratives and underline how necessary it is to know of past social endeavours for present ones to be successful.

One can therefore discern common stances from one book to another, in spite of their divergences: the construction of the narrative of the past functions as a political key for reading a confusing present, and for educating forgetful or blinded readers to the reality of the balance of power that structures their society since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the authors are determined to make the writing of history a politically committed activity, that is the elaboration of fictions questioning discourses of knowledge that are shown to be, consciously or not, at the service of discourses of power. To such discourses passing down a vision of history presented as veridictive, but in truth distorted because of its incompleteness and biases, Attanasio, Fo and Sciotto oppose the “lie” of fiction as a heuristic mirror in which the past enlightens the present and the marginal offers a model to challenge entrenched power relationships.

## PARADOXICAL OR AMBIGUOUS READING PACTS

But such choices are not without paradoxes or ambiguities, and those two narratives craft reading pacts that could resemble traps. At the very least they are equivocal: neither entirely fictional, since all the authors take care to precisely document their sources, nor entirely referential, since they make way for “heuristic” lies – without the exact significations of terms such as “lie” or “invention” ever being specified. One will not find any clear signal whether something is fictional or not: on the contrary, as pointed out above, the authors challenge the heuristic nature of an excessively rigorous division between facts and fiction, and prefer praising fictional invention as a cognitive tool *per se*. In short, the reader enters into a contract the terms of which are never precisely specified and into a game the rules of which are at best implicit, at worst shifting.

This for instance is the case in Attanasio’s first “*notizia*,”<sup>22</sup> which tells of Ciulla’s procurement of a scholarship to study in Rome. One of its sponsors is named Arcoleo: a footnote mentions the plaque honoring his memory in the same building where the author spent her childhood and her pride at living in the same house as the illustrious judge did. Even as the narrator’s voice seems to focus on proven, verifiable facts of Ciulla’s life, it draws a hidden portrait of the writer. Their two biographies<sup>23</sup> seem to overlap through a subtle game of echo that complicates the fictional-referential reading pact the text seemed to set. Furthermore, the paragraph devoted to Arcoleo ends with the ironical mention – absent, of course, of the plaque – of his responsibility in Bava Beccaris’s bloody repression. An apparently purely informative passage, it turns out to subtly link together the names that are still legible in the city landscape thanks to being conserved on commemorative plaques, the historical events related to them (often, when problematic, hidden and deprived of a truthful account<sup>24</sup>), and the writer’s personal story. Implicitly, the narrator warns their reader that, even in the purportedly factual “*notizie*,” they will

<sup>22</sup> Attanasio M. *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> On the question of the historical narrative as an indirect autobiography in Attanasio’s works, see for instance Todesco S. *L’isola delle madri assenti: tracce di presenza femminile nella narrativa storica siciliana contemporanea (1990–2007)*, Ph.D. Thesis, University College Cork, Cork, 2012, 66, 207. Prieiga internete <[https://cora.ucc.ie/bitstream/handle/10468/994/TodescoS\\_PhD2012.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y](https://cora.ucc.ie/bitstream/handle/10468/994/TodescoS_PhD2012.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y)> [žiūrēta 2018 17 09].

<sup>24</sup> For, as Fo and Sciotto underline as well, remembering the name and knowing the story are not one and the same. See Fo D., Sciotto P. *Ciulla, il grande malfattore, ibid.*, 49. “Crispi, che tutti ricordiamo anche senza conoscerlo, perché in ogni città è a lui dedicata una strada o una piazza, invia in Sicilia – attenzione! – quaranta-mila soldati con un ordine preciso: alla prima protesta, fuoco a volontà.” “Crispi, who everybody remembers even without knowing him, because in every city he has a street or a square dedicated to him, sends to Sicily – wait for it! – forty thousands soldiers with one specific order: at the first sign of protest, fire at will.” The name endures, but who remembers the politician’s violence?

not find any absolute objectivity or rational contextualisation of past facts devoid of any personal intake, but rather the careful construction of a narrative of Sicilian history that is always already situated.

The paradox at the core of the two narratives lies, however, in the very status of Ciulla's fake. "The first attempt at falsification was a kind of challenge against himself – patience, perfection, concentration – but it was also a revelation; ... he could wage war on the State in his own way, breaking the monopoly of the lira with his art and his talent: freely multiplied, it could become food, clothing, free medication,"<sup>25</sup> especially for the poor of Catania to whom he distributes them. The fabrication of the fake banknote constitutes both a political and an artistic challenge. Attanasio underlines the contradictions in the forger's speech when arrested, as he addresses the prosecutor "proclaiming, together with the aspect of civil disobedience of his activity, his talent as an artist. Who could not, however, sign his masterpiece"<sup>26</sup>! Civil disobedience requires anonymity, while artistic recognition demands a signature. The impossibility of the signature turns the fake note into a paradoxical object. The experts and the jury at Ciulla's trial accept it as an artistic masterpiece on the basis of its perfect resemblance to an authentic lira. In other words, it can be considered a masterpiece only if indiscernible from the other banknotes in circulation, therefore – and there lies the first paradox – if undistinguishable from an interchangeable, mass-produced object – an object, that is, that absolutely does not fit the common conception of a work of art as a unique piece, the authenticity of which is betrayed by its aura<sup>27</sup>. Conversely, a signature would reinstate the artwork's uniqueness and aura but destroy the illusion created by the fake, which would then lose its monetary value: a signed fake ceases to be one, and a signed note ceases to be money to become art. In short – and this is the second paradox – by pretending to be both an artist and a renegade benefactor, Ciulla aims to mystify and counterfeit at the same time, which is impossible. A mystification programs its own uncovering: it is set up to confound a given target, often authorities in their field, in order to prove their supposed incompetence by ridiculing them, and conversely to establish the forger's talent at their expense. A falsification, on the contrary, is meant to remain concealed and undetected. Being a generous, Robin Hood-like

<sup>25</sup> Attanasio M. *Ibid.*, 89. "Il primo tentativo di falsificazione fu una sorta di scommessa con se stesso – pazienza, perfezione, concentrazione – ma fu anche una rivelazione; [...] la guerra allo Stato poteva farla a modo suo, spezzando con la sua arte e il suo talento il monopolio della lira: liberamente moltiplicata poteva diventare cibo, vestito, gratuito medicamento."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Such a conception, of course, has been developed in W. Benjamin's works. See Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973.

counterfeiter, Ciulla advocates for the thesis of the falsification; proving his talent by the production of a copy so perfect that it misleads even the employees of the Bank of Italy and bears witness to the forger's artistic skills, points to a mystification. The falsification provides undetected fake money for the poor, but no artistic recognition for its author; the mystification deprives them of this means of subsistence the moment the counterfeiter triumphs. Ciulla could of course have turned its mystification into a social rebellion: he could indeed have liberally provided the poor of Catania with fake notes and then subversively threatened the foundations of the State by revealing that he had introduced hundreds of thousands of fake liras into the Sicilian economy. But, given the economic crisis and political backlash such a declaration could not fail to produce, the impoverished and the marginal he intended to help would have been the first victims of his successful mystification. The fact remains that mystification and falsification are two opposite practices that Ciulla's discourse, but also his legend and the narratives that relate it, appear to conflate.

That unquestioned paradox is the origin of an ironic twist in the narrative. The forger's life, as told during the trial staged by Attanasio, seems to acquire a teleological meaning, that of a perpetual fight for the triumph of truth,<sup>28</sup> be it social or artistic. Ciulla when defending himself plays on paradoxes and irony: called to testify as an expert in his own process, he states that the trial will finally allow him to be acknowledged as a great artist, and that the only way to gain recognition is to break the law. This leads to the court's surprising conclusion that Ciulla is admittedly a forger, but not a liar.<sup>29</sup> Ciulla may have cheated the State, but the principles of his speech are not called into question. Hence the trial culminates in a paradox, as the forger's conviction is the artist's triumph: "A necessary condemnation to give Paolo Ciulla back his identity as an artist, an identity which – as he united in his counterfeit beauty and justice, simulation and truth – was, with this sentence, acknowledged, in a Pirandellian way, by the court."<sup>30</sup> If the forgery paradoxically allows the triumph of beauty and justice, and the equation of truth and simulation, one can concede the artistic nature of the forger's work, as his practice covers dialectical issues traditionally pertaining to art – how to produce truth through simulation, or the way aesthetics and ethics interplay in the creative process. Just like his contemporary Pirandello, Ciulla appears as a novelist or a playwright, and stages, especially during his own trial, fictions both misleading and demystifying.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 177. "Una condanna necessaria per far ritrovare al falsario Paolo Ciulla la sua identità d'artista che – coniugando nella contraffazione bellezza e giustizia, simulazione e verità – veniva, con quella sentenza, dal tribunale pirandellianamente conclamata."

Thus Ciulla creates his own artistic persona, through a deft speech in which the reality of the offense fades behind his mythical reconstruction of himself as a cursed painter. In the name of defending the truth, Ciulla therefore offers a compelling fiction, effective to the point it is picked up again by the very writers who tackle his story to question its symbolic and political significance.

#### FICTIONAL ETHICS OF TRUTH

As we can see, the historical fictions built by Attanasio, Fo and Sciotto are not deprived of paradoxes that complicate their reading, to the point that one has to wonder what ethics of fiction can be surmised from such problematic narratives, which often leave the reader, tasked with their interpretation, in an aporetic situation.

One of the first clues might be the forger himself, who stands as a more or less avowed proxy for the authors. According to him, fiction is the best antidote to the predation and lies of the rich and powerful, a *pharmakon* more appropriate than any rational discourse of truth to uncover the pretenses by which they hold on to power.<sup>31</sup> It is at least the lesson Ciulla delivers to his students: “The truth is never on the surface – the professor concluded in a sibylline way. Trained eyes are required to see it. Because it sometimes takes the appearance of a lie.”<sup>32</sup> Evidences and immediate truths are misleading; when obliquely conveyed, however, facts are heuristic as their meaning requires deciphering, and therefore must be actively appropriated and interpreted: it is the spectator’s or the reader’s responsibility to unearth an always relative truth. If the truth sometimes takes on the appearance of a lie, therefore, “the novel is not synonymous with lie. More often than not, life is trickier than a novel,”<sup>33</sup> as Ciulla himself states during his trial, an actual quote Attanasio uses as an epigraph to the second part of her novel.

Such demystifying fictions demand an active participation of their readers: Ciulla’s life is presented as an enigma, because it easily appears as a process of constant self-reinvention. His many trips, and the necessity on several occasions to flee accusations of counterfeiting or corruption of a minor (this last one being presented by the authors as a homophobic scheme), force him to regularly start a new life. When he comes back from South America, Attanasio shows him as a stranger

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* “La verità non è mai superficie – conclude il professore sibillino. – Ci vogliono occhi allenati per vederla. Perché a volte ha l’apparenza della menzogna.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. “Romanzo non vuol dire bugia. Spesso la vita è più imbrogliona di un romanzo.”

in a birthplace he does not recognise.<sup>34</sup> The forger appears as a Pirandellian man in perpetual search of himself, inasmuch as he constantly seeks to become his own author and to ask his audience – all the more so during the process – to ratify the changing image of himself he displays before it. Fickle and shifting, Paolo Ciulla is a man-fiction, a character as much as a person, and the narrative that tackles him cannot freeze the reconstruction of his biography in an account that claims to deliver an univocal truth about him.

A Pirandellian character, Ciulla is also, and simultaneously, a stage actor, to the point that dramatization, as well as the fictionalization of the forger's life, is a process common to both books. In the trial scene, written by Fo and Sciotto as a drama<sup>35</sup> (with the participants' names, lines, and stage directions), the dramatization highlights Ciulla's speech, the forger taking the floor to re-write the exegesis of his own story, and stages of Ciulla as a comic hero. The forger presents his speech as a discourse of truth necessary to the court that only has an incomplete version of the facts<sup>36</sup>; however if his talk is lengthily transcribed by Fo and Sciotto it is less because it might be veridictive than because it constitutes a subversive speech. As Ciulla is more concerned with being recognized as an artist than with proving his innocence, his discourse is ostensibly an aesthetics speech about art, the social recognition that should come with it, the forms in which it can manifest itself, etc. But on a secondary level, it functions in the narrative as a political discourse aimed at revealing the mechanisms of power and domination in a society that the text never ceases to depict as a mirror of ours. As such, the trial scene converges with Fo's political plays, to the extent that the dramatization of the political speech, within an eminently comical scene, enables the narrative to denounce socially oppressive dynamics.

The whole show comes from Ciulla's attitude, as the forger seems to stage his own lawsuit: "Ciulla advances until he takes the prosecutor's minutes, in a kind of spectacular continuity that seems to beneficiate only him. The dock brings out his pride, but also allows the crowded hotchpotch of direct experiences accumulated in that committed, crushed, idealist, mean, smart, honest man to obtain the floor and a stage."<sup>37</sup> Dramatization turns Ciulla into a comedy character as well as a

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>35</sup> As stated by the presiding judge himself. See Fo D. et P. Sciotto, *Ciulla, il grande malfattore*, *ibid.*, 135. "Ma chesiamo a teatro?!" "Are we at the theatre?!"

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* "Ciulla va avanti così fino a procurarsi l'interrogatorio del P.M. in una sorta di continuità spettacolare, di cui sembra beneficiare lui solo. Il banco degli imputati esalta la sua vanità, ma permette anche alla congerie di esperienze dirette che si affollano nell'uomo impegnato, schiacciato, idealista, meschino, furbo, onesto di avere pulpito e parola."

spokesperson for the invisible, and gives his intervention a political dimension that makes him the vehicle of a satirical charge against exclusion. The forger's ironic comebacks<sup>38</sup>, meant to provoke laughter, simultaneously aim at ensuring the audience's complicity by highlighting how arbitrary and absurd the judicial system can be, and at delivering a demystifying speech to oppose a subversive truth to that of the institution. Comedy, irony, exaggerations and ambiguities, negotiations with the truth and flair are shown as the best tools to undermine the judicial machinery's claim to the establishment of a factual and final truth, sanctioned by a sentence and potentially of precedent value.

Fo and Sciotto's conception of a complex and incomplete micro-history, which converged on many aspects with Attanasio's book, thus differs resolutely from it on that precise point. The writer's role no longer seems to lie in reconstructing, thanks to fiction, a plausible and sympathetic version of the lacking facts, nor in inserting his narrative within the holes of the archives, but in substituting a satirical tale to missing information, and in in this specific instance, in treating the evasive historical forger as the character of a political play. Fiction, in their view, is not meant to fill historical voids: rather than attempting to remedy to the loss by a literary reparation, they offer to accept the existence of the archival blank and make it the starting point of a corrosive comedy, that borrows its actors from history in order to better turn them into the political protagonists of a committed parable. If history is but an eternal litany of the same, the past does not have a specific sacredness: it is a narrative frame available to any narrator to comment ironically on social inequalities. This is not Attanasio's viewpoint. She is intent on bringing back a lost popular Sicilian history, on giving back their voice, presence and dignity to forgotten agents. Such a conception cannot accept a cyclical vision of history. Her role as a writer is obviously made very different from that of her masculine counterparts, even if their battles overlap. But, in both cases, the staging of a forger "prototypal of all diversities" becomes the emblem of an anti-historical writing style. Not, that is, a utopian or counter-factual one, but one that, from the very blanks in the archives, draws the resources of a fictional, pirandellian reconstruction of forgotten resistances meant as a political weapon for the present.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119. See also *Ibid.*, 120. "Prego, Signor Presidente, di non volerli interrompere! (*Ilarità*)". "Pray, Your Honor, do not interrupt me! (*Laughters*)".



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Loise Lelevé

ROMANAS TAI NE MELAS: BELETRISTIKA KAIP KLASTOTĖ IR KLASTOJIMAS KAIP ETINIS IŠŠŪKIS ŠIUOLAIKINIULOSE ITALŲ PASAKOJIMULOSE APIE PAOLO CIULLOS KLASTOTES

SANTRAUKA. Prancūzų istorikas Ivanas Jablonka neseniai parašytoje knygoje „L’histoire est une littérature contemporaine“ [„Istorija yra šiuolaikinė literatūra“] istoriko rašymo meną paverčia savo pasakojimo „tiesos sąlyga“. Šitaip patvirtindamas istoriografiją kaip tikrovę atitinkančią discipliną *būtent dėl* jos literatūrinio pobūdžio, jis atmeta beletristiką kaip supanašintą su „klastojimu“. Viena vertus, beletristika apibūdinama kaip apgaulingas perkūrimas, galintis vesti prie trumpalaikio sprendimo, tačiau tikrai ne prie tiesos *kaip tokios*. Kita vertus, istorikų mokslinis rašymo metodas, parodantis mokslininkų tyrimo procesą tam, kad būtų pagrįstas jų būdas vaizduoti praeitį, pajėgia išplėtoti tiesos diskursą. Nuostabu, kad šiuolaikiniai beletristiniai apgavystės naratyvai kelia iššūkį tiesos sakymui kaip etinei tiesos garantijai ir sugestijuoja, kad grožinė literatūra, kaip tik dėl to, kad ji nepretenduoja į mokslinį objektyvumą, gali pasiūlyti veiksmingą tiesos etiką. Destabilizuodami skaitytoją per faktų ir pramanų, tuo pat metu ir taip apibūdintų, ir sunkiai išskiriamų, susiliejimą, šiuolaikiniai istoriniai romanai priskiria skaitytojui detektyvo vaidmenį, sugrąžindami jam ir veikėjiškumą, ir atsakomybę. Tokią literatūros koncepciją gal geriausia išanalizuoti dviejuose šiuolaikiniuose pasakojimuose apie sicilietį klastotoją Paolo Ciulla, kurie klastojimą padaro beletristinės etikos kriterijumi istorinei tiesai atpažinti. Šie pasakojimai – tai romanai „Il falsario di Caltagirone“ [„Kaltadžironės klastotojas“] ir „Ciulla, il grande malfattore“ [„Ciulla, didysis piktadarys“]. Juose abiejuose padirbti banknotai yra prizmė, per kurią kvestionuojamos Italijos ekonominės mutacijos ir jų kultūrinės bei socialinės pasekmės. Politinis aktyvistas ir į paraštę nustumiamas homoseksualas, klastotojas Ciulla tampa esminiu, nors ir dviprasmišku, įkūnijimu praeities, paženklintos ekonominių ir politinių krizių, kurių ištakos XIX a., bet jos Italiją vis dar veikia. Tokie naratyvai iš pažiūros faktiški, bet

išskleidžiami nepatikimų pasakotojų, nuolatos svyruoja tarp rūpesčio perteikti dokumentuotą tiesą bei primirštą politinę istoriją ir klastotojo gyvenimo neaiškių aspektų prasimanyto atkūrimo hermeneutiniais ar netgi komiškais tikslais. Skaitytoją pasitinka referencinių ir beletristinių skaitymo režimų sudėtingas sujungimas, paliekantis etinę ir epistemologinę atsakomybę pačiam išsiaiškinti Italijos ribinės istorijos vinguriavimus.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: tiesosaka, klastotė, padirbimas, rašymo etika, istorijos rašymas, Paolo Ciulla.