

Riccardo Antonangeli

**The Fascist Character as Enigma in
Post-World War II Italian Literature, Cinema,
and Historiography**

Crossovers: New Perspectives on CompLit

Edited by: Emilia Di Rocco & Beata Waligorska-Olejniczak

1 Riccardo Antonangeli

*The Fascist Character as Enigma in Post-World War II
Italian Literature, Cinema, and Historiography*

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2013-0

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8013-4

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: Illustration (Detail) by Tony Johannot and Maurice Sand for the reissue of Spiridion in "Œuvres illustrées de George Sand, volume IX" (Hetzel: Paris, 1856). Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2013-0

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8013-4

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Printed in the EU

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Introduction

Nel raggio delle distanze finte

Fascist characters in Italian literature and films produced after the fall of the fascist regime seem to share, first of all, one recurrent epithet: they are 'mysterious.' By fascist character, I will refer, in the present work, not only to the classic figure of the *gerarca* but also, and mainly, to its more ambiguous variations: the female collaborator, often a prostitute, the spy, the *voltagabbana*, the informer, the traitor and the *repubblicino* (the adherent of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, allied with Nazi Germany, 1943–45). No matter what degree of guilt, what involvement with fascism and with the occupying German forces these characters have, the authors of the texts that contain them see a veil of absurdity covering their aspect and conduct. To the eyes of the protagonist and of the author, they always appear as interpretative and *visual* enigmas, deforming the everyday cognitive abilities and usual perspective of the gaze, which attempts to frame them as objects.

Two examples, taken from autobiographical narratives written in the immediate postwar years respectively by Gianna Manzini and Franco Fortini, will help clarify the nature of the mystery of the fascist character. In Manzini's text, when two former Italian army barracks in Rome are occupied by the Nazis and then turned into prisons, the narrator notices a sort of uncanny deformation of time and space in the usual, familiar, everyday aspect of the nearby Roman avenue she lives in. The two large buildings and their new purpose and meaning seem to trigger a sort of estrangement:

È incredibile come le cose più consuete, gli aspetti più affabili di un paesaggio invecchiato dall'abitudine, possano essere trasformati senza che avvenga alcun mutamento reale. Un luogo comune di cotidiane avventure si cangia ad un tratto in uno speciale deserto, ove le usuali misure di tempo e di spazio non sono più valide; diventa una scena che accenna un mistero, allestita per gli espatriati del vivere umano. Così, quasi per uno scarto nell'orbita della terra, ci sembrò ad un tratto di vivere altrove, costretti ad accettare una catena di eventi assurdi e logicissimi, i quali, pur contrastando

con gli elementi della vita quotidiana, continuavano ad essere intessuti di codesti elementi.¹

This defamiliarization, which turns everyday space and time into a scene alluding to a mystery and the normal causal chain of events into an at once *absurd* and logical sequence, perfectly exemplifies two textual deformations that the fascist character seems to enable with their presence: the disruption of the coherent, teleological progression of a narrative plot (as a logical cause-effect series) and the deformation of the profilmic space in cinema, of the symmetrical configuration within the limits of the frame.

Fortini's *Diario di un giovane borghese intellettuale* contains a report of a curious story told to him by a doctor. When he was the commissar of a partisan group, the doctor—Doctor M. in the story—had sentenced to death a 17-year-old fascist spy who had been captured some hours earlier. Just before everything was ready for the execution, a German battalion attacked the partisans, who were forced to escape into the forest. While surrounded, wounded and chased by the Germans, the doctor was saved by the person he would never have expected to be rescued by: the fascist spy. Change of setting. Some time afterward, the doctor is in Milan for a clandestine mission. One day, he is arrested. Someone recognized him in the street and reported him. Who? Precisely that young spy who saved him, who now tells the fascist police that he was the partisan commissar who ferociously tortured him while he was kept captive. This is how Fortini reports the end of the doctor's account, where he tells of the young fascist's accusations:

«Ha ripetuto queste accuse più di una volta, con una quantità di particolari inventati. Ho saputo che, preso dai tedeschi poco dopo l'episodio del nostro

1 Gianna Manzini, "Aspetti di un viale," in *Mercurio*, December 1945, 209. «It is unbelievable how the most usual things, the most affable aspects of a view that daily routine made look older, might be transformed without any actual mutation. A common place of everyday adventures suddenly turns into a special desert where the usual measures of time and space are not valid anymore; it becomes a scene that alludes to a mystery, set for those who expatriated from human existence. Thereby, almost as if a swerve from earth's orbit took place, we felt like living somewhere else, forced to accept a chain of absurd yet extremely logical events which, although in contrast with the aspects of daily life, continued to consist of these same elements.» [translation mine]

incontro nel bosco, aveva ripetuto a loro le medesime menzogne ed era stato così la causa diretta della morte orribile di una decina di amici miei seviziati e massacrati. In conseguenza della sua denuncia, fui condannato a morte; e scampai alla fucilazione in modo miracoloso, liberato dai miei stessi compagni. Durante la mia detenzione, in una cella prossima alla mia, c'era il giovane che mi aveva denunciato, trattenuto anch'egli dalla polizia fascista per sottrarlo a probabili vendette dei miei amici. Accadeva così che, ogni giorno, mi incontrassi con lui nel corridoio. Ci guardavamo. Naturalmente, non gli ho mai rivolto la parola».

M. aggiunge di aver saputo, a liberazione avvenuta, che quel giovane era stato fucilato dai partigiani per altre sue colpe, non avendo egli voluto, per un motivo a lui stesso inesplicabile, denunciarlo. *Dice che quel giovane è rimasto un mistero, il ricordo più enigmatico di tutto quel periodo.* [Italics mine]?

The young fascist spy is the most mysterious and enigmatic memory the doctor has kept of the Resistance. Moreover, in the above short 'framed' narrative, past and present are linked by means of a recognition scene in the streets of Milan. Recognition is, in itself, an enigma, the difficult synthesis of past and present, of the present reality with the image-*eikon* that our memory has kept of the past reality. In fact, as Paul Ricœur writes:

On se rapprochera plus encore de ce que j'aime appeler le petit miracle de la reconnaissance si on y discerne la solution de la plus vieille énigme de la problématique de la mémoire, à savoir celle de la représentation présente d'une chose absente. La reconnaissance consiste dans la résolution effective de cette énigme de la présence de l'absence à la faveur de la certitude qui l'accompagne : «C'est bien elle ! C'est bien lui ! [...] C'est l'énigme tout

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- 2 Franco Fortini, "Diario di un giovane borghese intellettuale," in *Il Politecnico*, 39 (December 1947), 34; reproduced in Marco Forti and Sergio Pautasso (ed.) *Il Politecnico. Antologia critica* (Milano: Lerici, 1960), 773-774. «He repeated those accusations more than once, with a series of completely made-up details. I heard that, having been caught by the Germans right after the episode of our encounter in the forest, he had told them the very same lies, therofere becoming the direct cause of the horrible death of some of my tortured and massacred friends. As a consequence of his report, I was sentenced to death; and escaped the execution in a miraculous way, thanks to my companions who freed me. During my detention, in a prison cell next to mine, there was the young kid that reported me: the fascist police decided to keep him in order to protect him from the possible vengeance of my friends. Hence, everyday we bumped into each other in the corridor. We glanced at each other. Obviously, I never talked to him.» M. adds that somebody told him that, after the Liberation, the kid was executed by the partisans because of other crimes he committed. In fact, M. did not want, for reasons still inexplicable to him, report him. He says that that kid is still a mystery, the most enigmatic memory of that entire period of his life. [Translation mine]

entière réaffirmée de la présence de l'absence : trancher *sur* le présent, reconnaître *pour* un souvenir.³

Fascism appears not as a repressed memory but rather as a cognitive and epistemological challenge. This book will try to unravel this enigma, show what lies behind it, and explain why an enemy is portrayed as a mystery.

Fascist characters are 'entertaining.' Entertaining, and not only *fascinating*, because the captivation they trigger has more to do with storytelling than eroticism, more with the *plaisir du texte* than with the guilty pleasures of perverted sexuality, as famously claimed by Susan Sontag in her 1974 essay "Fascinating Fascism." This means that their essential quality perhaps lies not so much in their representation, in the completed, finalized *image* with which they appear in a text – as sadomasochistic closeted homosexual torturers, for example – but in the *process* of their very aestheticization as fictional characters. How are stories with a fascist character told? How does an author describe the enemy? What type of storytelling practice is needed in order to give historical evil a narrative shape?

One of my central propositions in this study is that what readers and spectators find immediately striking in their first encounter with a fascist character is a sense of their pure literariness compared to the rest of the surrounding text. Fascist characters trigger a sort of block, a halt of reading, caused by the recognition of their somehow expanded, self-evident nature as fiction. There is at stake the perception of an inherent difference between them and the way other characters are portrayed, between their overdramatic figuration and the supposedly autobiographical, almost first-hand testimony, documentary nature of the rest of the story, as in the two examples above. The present book will be an attempt to problematize and clarify what I, for now, simply, tentatively called an emphasis on fictionality, these 'entertaining' and gap elements that fascist characters seem to enable in the texts hosting them.

The representation of fascism has been a widely explored research topic, and it is not my aim here to propose a further analysis of how fascism was portrayed in Italy in the years after 1945 and

3 Paul Ricœur, *Percours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Stock, 2004), 200, 202.

even less to infer from the recurrent features of this representation an indication of deeper social and political upheavals characterizing national life and identity. This is by now a well-trodden research path, one that has brought significant and now universally acquired results, including, for example, the essays in the volume edited by R.J.B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*. Among the conclusions that investigations of this kind have reached is that the fascist character is a demonstration of, first, the war as a traumatic experience that Italian collective memory has tried to cover, thereby betraying a sense of guilt and responsibility for having chosen to be on the 'wrong' side of history; second, the attempt to transfer that guilt and responsibility to the non-Italian ally, the Nazi outsider, making Italians appear as naïve, passive objects at the mercy of fate and the real criminals; third, the will to create a positive foundational myth for the newborn nation, idealizing the memory of the Resistance as a revolution unifying and redeeming the whole country, and demonizing the Nazi-fascists as the absolute evil that, once eradicated, would allow Italy to have a fresh and innocent start. Works such as *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano* by Filippo Focardi and *Uomini in nero. Il fascismo nel cinema italiano* by Maurizio Zinni describe the fascist character as a melodramatic caricature, as the stereotypical embodiment of absolute evil, regularly depicted with recurrent psychological and physical traits: bodily deformations (limp, one-eyed, with a sexually-transmitted disease, etc.) and psychic disturbances (deviant, perverted sexuality, sadistic tendencies, irrational violence, etc.). The result is a gallery of 'freaks' that serves to bolster a largely psychological interpretation of the legacy of fascism in postwar Italian history, resulting in a narrative of trauma, guilt, oblivion, and redemption (see F. Baldasso, *Against Redemption*, Fordham University Press, 2022). One narrative gets substituted by another: the first one told its addressees to forget that fascism was part of the national history; the second one brings fascism back into official history but does so mainly by making sense of fascism through a linear narrative of a society in 'bad faith,' one that could never really come to terms with its shameful past, since the price

would have been the uncanny recognition of fascism's ongoing, latent persistence long after the end of the war.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat ends her essay "Liberation: Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past, 1945-50" with the following remarks:

At a time of crisis in national identity and widespread shame about the Fascist regime, the films of De Santis offered Italians a vision of a nation that was cohesive and purposeful. Along with many other texts of the reconstruction period, they laid down a path for the collective memory of the dictatorship that exonerated ordinary Italians who had 'just been following orders' and projected responsibility for Fascism on to foreign powers. Although the crisis of national identity and variety of diplomatic, political, economic and social factors conspired to limit state-sponsored efforts at retribution, the wish of individual Italians to perceive themselves as victims, not perpetrators, also complicated the process of coming to terms with the Fascist past.⁴

This reading is, to various degrees, extended to all Italian literature and film on fascism, the Resistance and the 1943–45 civil war up until the 1960s, when, following, first, the indignation against the Tambroni government in 1960 and second, the student and worker protests of the late 1960s, a general rethinking and reassessment of that past is undertaken by the new generation born in the 1940s. The myth of the Resistance is questioned, and the memory of fascism is rescued from *taboo* status in order to highlight the *continuity* between the dictatorship and the postwar democracy under the common sign of bourgeois capitalism. As Dominic Gavin explains in commenting on *Strategia del ragno* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970):

Bertolucci's film can be viewed in connection to a crucial phase for antifascist identity in postwar Italy. The film's release—and that of *Il conformista*—coincides with a turning point in the memory and interpretation of antifascism. On the one hand, the 1970 film recalls the impatient criticism of the so-called *antifascismo di stato* that had been voiced by various groups on the left over the previous decade. Yet it also coincides with the beginning of the season of widespread antifascist militancy that marked the 1970s, when fascism

4 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Liberation: Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past, 1945-50," in R. J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, (eds.), *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation* (Macmillan, St. Martin's Press: Basingstoke, New York, 1999), 97.

and antifascism returned as pressing contemporary themes, as keys to interpret current political realities.⁵

After a decade-long period of repression of fascism from official memory and the parallel myths of *antifascismo di stato*, the younger generation revisited the lost, unknown past as a fantasy imbued with erotic meanings. Directors such as Liliana Cavani and Bernardo Bertolucci and historians like Guido Quazza and Claudio Pavone problematized historical memory by contesting the clear-cut polarization between bad fascism and good anti-fascism. Sadism becomes, at this point, the main individual connotation of the fascist character who drags the anti-fascist good character in an ambiguous circle of desire that perverts clear-cut and Manichean distinctions between victim and perpetrator, good and evil. As David Forgacs writes, questioning Susan Sontag's equation of fascism and sadism:

The fascination with fascism as perversion that marked the cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s seems to have had two main causes. One of them, perhaps a condition more than a cause, was the very rapid process of sexual liberalization in the 1960s. [...] the other cause was the more or less simultaneous lifting of restrictions on historical memory, and this was in large part an effect of the challenge mounted by the post-war generations to the collective repression and the channeling of historical memory into approved grooves that had characterized Italian society throughout the 1950s. This, too, led to a hot eruption of pseudo-history, or history crossed with fantasy, from which it would be wise now to keep a cool, critical distance.⁶

Repression and resurfacing, disappearance and reappearance. The representation of fascism and antifascism follows a pretty much teleological 'narrative' of maturation from unconsciousness to a more evolved, more or less conscious, recognition of the national past as a problematic event. Also, the fascist character becomes an object worthy of critical attention mainly thanks to film and/or historical analysis that greatly favored works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, given maybe the greater international resonance of Italian

5 Dominic Gavin, "Myths of the Resistance and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno* (1970)" in *California Italian Studies*, 4 (2), 2013): 24.

6 David Forgacs, "Days of Sodom: The Fascism-Perversion Equation in Films of the 1960s and 1970s" in R. J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, (eds), *Italian Fascism*, 233.

cinema over Italian literature. What is in focus is the social and political content they are signs of, the historical context that originated them and that they refer back to; while their form as specific literary and filmic characters is almost never taken seriously, the formal analysis is limited to their caricatural and melodramatic nature. However, what if the fascist character enables a kind of textual perversion of the formal structure of a work of art?

I do not think another study on the historical, social and political value and resonance of fascism and antifascism could have added much more to what has been already achieved by the scholarship I have briefly and schematically sketched above. I do think, though, that a serious, formal analysis of these characters is scarce both in literary and film criticism. My essay aims to fill this gap and, at the same time, to contribute to a reassessment of some of the conclusions that scholarship on the subject has reached, starting from the teleological periodization in two macro periods of shadow and light. For this reason, I decided to focus most of my critical investigation on plots of novels and films from a limited time frame, roughly 1945 up until 1960. However, I do also include two films from a later period, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno* and *Il conformista*, both released in 1970. In this way, my purpose was to question the above periodization, highlighting how, during the period of so-called oblivion, fascism and antifascism were far from being objects of a clear-cut Manichean distinction. In a word, what happened in the 1970s was already latent and working its way to the surface in the immediate postwar years. This can be observed only by means of going back to the texts, taking seriously and as worthy of close critical attention exactly those marginal parts and secondary characters that were rapidly dismissed as stereotypical representations and clichés. I am not trying to propose a formal analysis in contrast to the historical and political interpretations of the character, but, rather, a different approach and angle to the text, one that can perhaps revive the discussion around the cultural value of some works—and of some specific characters in them—that were previously dismissed as minor or as unworthy of the attention of 'academic research.' Specific storytelling patterns, narrative functions and motives might then be recognized as other

constant and recurrent characteristics of fascist characters throughout Italian literature and cinema, besides the already familiar ones of sadism, perverse sexuality, and unmotivated violence.

The cliché and stereotypical appearance of these types is, in my opinion, the symptom of a different linguistic configuration that the narrativization of the enemy, of the *other*, requires. The fascist character is the manifestation of an epistemological problem, the narrative shape resulting from the attempt, the will to come to terms with, and assign a meaning to, an ambiguous, and not absolute, evil. The fascist, in fact, has the ambiguous nature of the enemy in a time of civil war: at once outsider and insider. This is an object that forestalls total exclusion and objectivization because they share the same national identity as those who fight them. The recognition of sameness in difference complicates both storytelling and classification. Hence, it does not seem totally correct to define as more or less uninterrupted 'oblivion' the representation of fascism before the 1960s. *Anni facili* (Luigi Zampa, 1953), *Gli sbandati* (Francesco Maselli, 1955), *Il Generale Della Rovere* (Roberto Rossellini, 1959), or the novels *Fausto e Anna* (Carlo Cassola, 1952), *Il prete bello* (Goffredo Parise, 1954), *Il segreto di Luca* (Ignazio Silone, 1956), the collection of short stories *Cinque storie ferraresi* (Giorgio Bassani, 1956), are only the major examples of how the continuity of fascism after the war, and thus the collaboration of the majority of Italians, was a phenomenon that was already a matter of analysis and 'material' for stories. The literature on the subject has always and constantly been extremely prolific, so much so that the fascist 'type' might as well be defined as one of the main and most original creations of Italian literature and film of the second half of the 20th century, or at least as the character that had the most fortune and influence also in the wider European context. Fascist characters have always been present in mainstream and 'alternative' literature and cinema. Comedies, caricatures, low-brow melodramas as well as auteurist cinema and 'official' literature – besides the will to 'forget' and 'unburden' from the guilt of collaboration – are all precious documents of how an ambiguous object that triggers disturbing recognition as well as distance, shapes and deforms the language and narrative through which the subject tries to make sense of it. Would it be

possible, then, to identify certain rhetorical strategies and narrative genres enabled by the fascist character? With this in view, I would like to propose an enquiry that tries to open discussions rather than close them.

Maria Corti asks in her *Il viaggio testuale* why out of neorealism—given its roots in the Resistance’s popular, oral tradition of storytelling and first-hand chronicles—there did not emerge «a national-popular epic.»⁷ One reason, she argues, is the inherently contradictory nature of neorealism, characterized on the one hand by its faith in the exemplarity of personal experience and by faith «nelle cose che parlano da sé»⁸ and on the other by the reluctance of this objectivity, and oral tradition, to be displaced into *sjuzet*, i.e., into plot. While the first-hand popular, chronicle-like or journal-style and oral documentation on the Resistance is extremely rich, authors who try to use that material for narratives and stories inevitably transform their popular sources into myth because of their nature as intellectuals formed in ‘traditional’ culture and thus both inside and outside the object they want to narrate. There is, then, a contradictory imbalance between objectivity and myth due, among other things, to the ambiguous identity of the authors, who, while they did participate in the Resistance, cannot get rid of the fact that their status as outsiders to the culture of the masses makes them reframe the stories they re-narrate within the thematic and semantic fields of traditional literature:

Mentre la documentazione ricchissima intorno alla Resistenza offre un certo numero di testi memorialistici dovuti a non letterati, magari a proletari, dove il raccontare viene veramente dal basso, da chi ha vissuto certe esperienze dall’interno, e riesce a farle parlare con precisa coerenza, molto più ardua e spesso stilisticamente contraddittoria diviene l’operazione sul reale quando chi racconta scende dall’alto, cioè dalla sua cultura, come dire dalla cultura tradizionale; allora gli accade di essere insieme dentro e fuori della materia. Scrive giustamente Asor Rosa: «è da notare, innanzitutto, che il populismo della letteratura resistenziale appare mosso, più che da una frequentazione diretta degli strati popolari interessati al processo di rinnovamento, da un forte impulso moralistico e ideologico: l’intellettuale va verso

7 Maria Corti, *Il viaggio testuale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 36.

8 Ibidem. «faith in self-evident things that speak by themselves.» [translation mine]

il popolo, ma il più delle volte, prima ancora di raggiungerlo concretamente e seriamente lo trasforma in mito in immagine rovesciata di sé» Cioè può allora aversi con la pratica scrittoria una produzione rischiosa di senso anteriore al vero senso, di reale anteriore al vero reale: l'esito qualche volta è scontato o velleitario, sempre è lungi dal programma dell'oggettività, è fornito di funzione segnica diversa dalla prevista.[emphasis mine]⁹

The reality of the present, which needs new structural models, gets translated instead into the old models that cause the elimination of all ambiguity and a resulting clear-cut classification into opposite semantic fields, which pave the way not to objectivity but to symbolization and myth. Through the hero, the author communicates their moral judgments. Maria Corti produces in the form of a chart this antithetical Manichean model, which necessarily reorders the real material into literary form:¹⁰

resistenti	fascisti
uomini integri	semiuomini o belve
popolani	borghesi
campagna	città
quartiere cittadino povero	città
strada dei poveri	città

9 Idem., 37-38. «On the one hand, the very rich documentation on the Resistance provides a certain number of memoirs written by non-intellectual, sometimes even by proletarians, in which the story is told from below, by someone who has directly lived certain experiences from the inside, and thereby can let these experiences talk with precise coherence. On the other, when the narrator comes from above, from his/her culture, i.e., from traditional culture, the operation on the real is much more complicated and stylistically contradictory: s/he is both inside and outside the material. Asor Rosa correctly writes: «the populism of the literature of the Resistance seems to be activated more by a strong moral and ideological impulse, rather than from a direct participation side by side with the masses involved in the process of renewal: the intellectual goes towards the people, but, most of the times, even before joining it really and seriously, s/he turns it into myth, into the reversed image of itself.» That is to say, the storytelling practice might consist of a risky superimposition of a meaning preexisting the actual meaning, of a reality that anticipates the actual reality: the outcome is sometimes predictable, and it is always very far from the program of objectivity, being endowed with a semantic function different from the expected one.» [translation mine.]

10 Idem., 63.

The narratological and semantic approach—here exemplified by Maria Corti's fundamental essay—has been the starting point of my research. It is historically justified also by the fact that the so-called 'resurgence' of a demystifying discourse on the fascist and antifascist past during the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with the diffusion of the tenets of narratology and a simultaneous revival of Russian formalism. I intend to follow up on Maria Corti's formal analysis of that period's literature and attempt to investigate how the contradictory encounter between reality and myth, between a supposedly self-evident truth and literary form, between hero and author, takes shape in the films and novels analyzed. Often, the result, as we will see, does not allow the uncomplicated categorization shown above but instead reveals ambiguity and relativity, already in works produced in the late 1940s.

That a gap between facts and words, popular and traditional, was at the heart of neorealism and the reason for its unsuccessful attempt to create a national epic is already made clear in the famous preface written by Italo Calvino to the 1964 edition of his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947). First of all, the preface is in itself an exercise in proto-narratological style. The author continuously refers to the form itself of the preface as a genre, confessing his inability to write one altogether and the impossibility of deciding how and when to begin. The discourse results, then, as a postponement of the beginning and a preface that does not exactly refer to just one text but that, rather, opens the text to a potentially infinite chain of intertextuality. Instead of introducing the reader to the meaning of the text, the author hides and fragments the unity of meaning into multiple possible significations. By writing that book, Calvino destroyed the unique reality he wanted to capture. By writing this preface, he changes the nature of the book itself, turning it into an 'open work'. The transfiguration into literary form is paid at the high price of an irreversible loss of truth, described by Calvino as a very Bergsonian conflict between a memory as quality and flux and a memory as quantity and static, completed point. He defines neorealism as neo-expressionism, as the grotesque exaggeration of a fleeting reality:

E poi il modo di figurare la persona umana: tratti esasperati e grotteschi, smorfie contorte, oscuri drammi visceral-collettivi. L'appuntamento con l'espressionismo che la cultura letteraria e figurativa italiana aveva mancato nel Primo Dopoguerra, ebbe il suo grande momento nel Secondo. Forse il vero nome per quella stagione italiana, più che «neorealismo» dovrebbe essere «neo-espressionismo.»

Le deformazioni della lente espressionistica si proiettano in questo libro sui volti che erano stati di miei cari compagni. Mi studiavo di renderli contrafatti, iriconoscibili, «negativi», perché solo nella «negatività» trovavo un senso poetico.¹¹

The most evident example of this expressionism and negativity is the fascist character, especially in the variants of the female or male, collaborator, traitor and spy. Only negativity seems to retain a poetic sense, thus implying that only through a deformation could reality function as material for a poetically sound and coherent literary work. The fascist character becomes, then, the textual location of the utmost *poiesis* of emphasized fiction, as I mentioned earlier. The moralistic categorization of the fascist as absolute evil is also the clearest manifestation of that contradiction between popular oral tradition and traditional moral classification into the roles of myth that Maria Corti identified as one of the reasons for the neo-realist 'failure' to create a veritable epic. The fascist seems to embody the gap between facts and words, to constitute the disruption of an objective, popular tendency by a subjective, authorial one. Even the only epic tale that the literature on the Resistance ever produced – Fenoglio's *Una questione privata* according to Italo Calvino; *Il partigiano Johnny* for Maria Corti – is an "absurd and mysterious" book that seems to be praised by Calvino more for its post-structuralism *avant la lettre* than for its effective capturing of the past reality: «ed è un libro assurdo, misterioso, in cui ciò che si insegue, si insegue per inseguire altro, e quest'altro per inseguire altro ancora e

11 Italo Calvino, "Preface" to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Torino: Einaudi, 1964), 12. «there was the manner of depicting characters: they all had exaggerated, grotesque features, twisted grimaces, dark, deep-rooted psychological scars. If Italian literature and art had missed out on expressionism after the First World War, it made up for it at the end of the Second. Perhaps the correct label for that artistic epoch in Italy ought to be 'Neo-expressionism' rather than 'Neo-realism.'» [Calvino, "Preface" to *The Path to the Spider's Nests* translated by Martin McLaughlin (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 13.]

non si arriva al vero perché.»¹² *Una questione privata* is defined, then, as the epic of the chain of signifiers, of truth, always unattainable and forever sliding a step away, like Achilles's tortoise in Zeno's paradox. In between the uncovering of truth in both *Una questione privata* and *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, there is a fascist minor character: Alarico in the former text and Pelle in the latter. Alarico is the 'currency of exchange' that the protagonist, Milton, needs if he wants to free his friend and hear from him a decisive truth. Pelle finds the place where Pin hid the pistol, thus involuntarily causing the final murder of the protagonist's sister and her Nazi lover. In both instances, the fascist has a key structural function in the plot, standing in the way or accelerating the *dénouement* of the events until the end. In both cases, the fascist character is involved in a covering/uncovering of truth, and by having a very marked, evident narrative function as a sort of ambiguous helper/villain, in Propp's terms (he is a villain only inasmuch as the lack of his help would be detrimental for the hero) this character also makes more manifest the plot structure of the novel, its narrative mechanism and its nature as *sjuzet* deforming/covering the *fabula*. If, at the structural and thematic level, the fascist is what the partisan good hero needs to eliminate in order to preserve himself from the corruptions and perversions of evil, at the level of narrative discourse, the fascist is precisely what the hero needs to have around. Alex Woloch locates the minor character precisely at the intersection between an implied person and narrative form, «in the shadow-space between narrative position and human personality».¹³

In this sense, the minor character, by calling attention to character-space, helps establish the relationship of "story" and "discourse"—the events in the novel and the rendition of these events in the narrative itself. [...] I am arguing that narratives themselves allow and solicit us to construct a story—a distributed pattern of attention—that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse. This strikes near the

12 Ibidem, 24. «it is also an absurd, mysterious book, in which the object of pursuit is only pursued in order to pursue something else, and this something else is in turn pursued for the sake of something else again, and we never reach the ultimate goal.» [Calvino, *The Path of the Spider's Nests*, trans. by Martin McLaughlin 28.]

13 Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005), 40.

essential openness of the literary text. The literary text solicits reinterpretation; it creates disjunctions between story and discourse that facilitate the production of meaning, the production of significance. It creates, more specifically, disjunctions between the attention the discourse grants certain characters and the attention that they would grant themselves and that the reader might grant them.¹⁴

The fascist character is at once a grotesque, expressionist deformation of reality and, as a minor character, they embody this fracture between stories and discourse and that between truth and language. The characteristic of this type of character is, then, precisely, the gap, the activation in the text of a sort of disjunction that produces meaning by emphasizing the split between signifier and signified historical past reality and 'myth.' With this in view, I aim to investigate the possibility of a form of gap specific to the fascist 'minor' character, reinterpreting the texts in which they appear by bringing them to the center of the critical reading. Also, the purpose of my research is to attempt a possible extension and further problematization of the above discourses on the contradiction inherent to neorealism as a gap between story and discourse, reality and myth, and also to genre criticism. Enabling with them the gap, the fascist character might also trigger an ambiguity at the level of genres and a consequent clash of different narrative types, thus concretizing that contradictory coexistence of tendencies toward the real, the *fabula* and their deformation-configuration in literary and film form. Alex Woloch has identified in the synecdoche the trope that best describes the minor character's function in a text (*Pride and Prejudice* in this case) as they get converted into one single characteristic «just as the whole gets filtered through the essential part, so the full person is squeezed into the flat character, a flatness motivated and sustained by the characteristic that gets derived from the individual only to subsume her».¹⁵ Following this, I will propose that the fascist character functions as an *enigma* or 'riddle', a rhetorical figure which, according to Aristotle, triggers an ambiguous relationship between myth and reality, fable and truth, and thereby stimulates the reader to know more. Enigmas lead to knowledge by

14 Ibidem, 38,41.

15 Idem, 69.

means of obscurity. In this case, the thwarting of objectivity and the disruption of the usual connections between things create a language that, by covering truth, actually provides it as a result of a pleasurable cognitive process.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle defined enigmas or riddles as «impossible combinations of words (which can be done with a combination of metaphors).»¹⁶ Riddles are difficult metaphors that at first seem to frustrate the reader with obscurity, only to give pleasure later and higher wisdom to the reader who is forced to get to meaning through a convoluted and indirect path. Aristotle develops this argument further in *Rhetoric*:

Metaphor above all give perspicuity, pleasure and a foreign air, and it cannot be learnt from anyone else [...] And generally speaking, clever enigmas furnish good metaphors; for metaphor is a kind of enigma, so that it is clear that the transference is clever. [...]

A riddle may mislead the listener at first, but only for the sake of good metaphor and wider knowledge: for the mind seems to say, 'How true it is! But I missed it.' And clever riddles are agreeable for the same reason; for something is learnt, and the expression is also metaphorical.¹⁷

Riddles, then, are complicated metaphors that express a truth that could not be represented otherwise, in plain language. The uncommon, tortuous sequence and the junction of two 'distant' metaphors, on the one hand, complicate and seem to forestall the attainment of wisdom completely, but, on the other – and herein lies the unique fascination that has always accompanied this trope – it allows the reader to have a hint, a sense of the hidden meaning thanks to the decipherment of a combination of words that only allude to, but never directly refer to, the message. If, as we have seen, between language and the real, there is always an unsurpassable gap, riddles turn that gap into an opportunity not only to know but to reach knowledge with pleasure, thanks to that very same deformation imposed by words on facts. Enigmas make use of the disjunction and find in it the way to truths that would be impossible to grasp otherwise. If, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, enigmas were used

16 Aristotle, *Poetics* xxii in Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 32.

17 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* III.ii. 9, 12, III.xi. 6, in Cook *Enigmas and Riddles*, 33.

to convey the perfect knowledge of divine wisdom, the same rhetorical strategy might also work for traumas and difficult memories, such as fascism, the Resistance, and the civil war have been, and continue to be, for Italy.

Riddles are typical in Greek tragedies, and Gloria Ferrari, in analyzing Aeschylus's use of metaphor, defines enigma as not simply a more complex kind of metaphor but as a discursive mode in its own right with specific rules and structure. The particular manipulation of metaphor is only one of the operations that the riddle requires to work. What makes the tragic riddle unique is the presence of a 'block' between the two conjoined metaphors. This gap halts the comprehension of the reader/listener, who perceives something 'off' between the two sets of images used to expose the 'fabled narrative' of the riddle. This moment of crisis in the interpretation of the enigmatic sequence is, in fact, due to a shift in the frame of reference entailed by the passage from the initial metaphorical expression to the second one. The frustration is generated by the dark intuition that the images that make sense in the second context are not the same ones that made sense in the first. The solution lies in realizing that a shift from the literal to a metaphorical code, and vice versa, has been taking place. Ferrari's in-depth analysis of the riddle of the 'vultures' in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is worth quoting, as it is one of the models for my reading of plots with fascist characters:

The vultures metaphor has, in fact, the characteristic structure of the riddle: an opening frame of reference (the gathering of the host); descriptive elements, both literal and metaphorical (the war-cry, the oared wings); the "block," or elements that are in conflict with the preceding (the *goos*, "these" metics); and a concluding frame of reference, different from the initial one, in which the conflict is resolved (the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the revenge of Clytemnestra). Solving the puzzle depends on the ability to recognize that certain features—the pains "on untrodden ground," the *gods* of the metics, the Erinyes—are a block. They refer to a different subject: not the rape of Helen leading to the destruction of Troy, but the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the choir of Furies and the imminent murder of Agamemnon. In order to respond to the clues given in the "block," the audience must realize that at that point the context has become unstable, as regards both the subject at hand and the mode of discourse. With a switch in terms of the metaphor, the vultures are described just as Atreidae did. In moving from the initial frame to the final one, the ambiguous items mentioned above, are points of transition,

being applicable to one as well as the other, that produce a moment of hesitation between two equally viable solutions.¹⁸

The riddle, then, causes in the audience a “moment of hesitation,” a cognitive crisis that frustrates at first but only bolsters the wisdom later attained, now with a gain in pleasure. The richness in dissonance and incoherence of the enigmatic structure has the power to disrupt both the audience’s certainties and fixed static meanings and to make meaning dynamic, relative and ambiguous.

Also influential on my approach has been Peter Dronke’s rethinking of fables as more than fabled narratives, as having a cognitive function and value of their own. Dronke reformulates fables as «speculations about man and his place in the universe.»¹⁹ In *Fabula*, he traces the history of the ‘defense’ of the realm of imagination that culminated eventually in the 12th century thanks to Platonist thinkers. Signals in that direction were already present in the patristic period and in the new meanings assigned to the rhetorical concepts of *integumentum* (covering) and *involutrum* (wrapping), both suggesting how «hidden meanings may lurk in imagery and story matter.»²⁰ This concept began to counter the prevailing, older tendency to evaluate those two tropes as obscurity and mystification. Augustine first and then Scotus Eurigena renewed the relevance that Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) had given to *aenigma* and *symbolum*.

Nevertheless, it was in the 12th century that William of Conches and Peter Abelard almost equated *fabula*, *integumentum* and *involutrum* with myth, «but with a special emphasis on the ‘inner’ meaning of the mythic narrative, which is the philosopher’s task to discover.»²¹ Fabled narratives became then an effective linguistic solution to relate human knowledge to divine knowledge, dealing with figures belonging to the higher, heavenly spheres such as cosmic timeless and eternal gods and spirits. Enigma is not an allegory, as Isidore of Seville specified, inasmuch as the former

18 Gloria Ferrari, “Metaphors and Riddles in the Agamemnon,” in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), 34-35.

19 Peter Dronke, *Fabula* (Leiden and Köln: E.J. Brill, 1974), 2.

20 Idem., 4.

21 Idem., 5.

does not allude to a second meaning as the latter does. Enigmas have only one dark meaning, adumbrated by means of images; they do not link together one meaning with an allegorical second level of signification:

As an enigma 'means more' than the images that adumbrate it, so too such 'meaning more' is implied in the twelfth-century Platonists' concept *integumentum*. Literally a covering, *integumentum* is used both for a myth that conceals hidden meanings and for the hidden meanings themselves, that lie covered beneath its narrative surface. In principle there is no limit to the meanings that an *integumentum* can conceal and generate; like a *symbolum*, it can 'show invisible forms', taking the reader to the unfathomable realm of the intelligible and the divine. This holds even if the literal meaning of the myth should be a scandalous account of pagan gods and goddesses—indeed, in the mystical Platonic tradition that Dionysius had transmitted to the medieval West, the unfitting and the monstrous is, by its sheer bafflement of human attempts to imagine the divine, most apt to convey truly how far the divine is beyond all imagining.²²

"The unfitting and the monstrous" might reveal good coverings to pass on listeners' divine wisdom. The turpitude of a fabled narrative of adultery, for example, might be an *integumentum*, a way of expressing holy truths about souls and planets with rhetorical beauty and dignity. Also, the darker and more mystified the enigma, the more 'carnal' and debased the fable's material, the more enriched with multiple meanings the listener might be at the end of their 'textual journey':

And that men might come away from it the more enriched, finding something enclosed that could be opened in many ways, more than if they had found it, already open, in one way only. [...] Thus the writer's use of *involutura*, enclosing meaning within a wrapping or covering it by veils, is significantly linked with the possibility of a richer range of meanings for his reader. Both for the poet (David) and the prophet (Isaiah), the sacrifice in immediate clarity may entail a gain in multivalent meaning, which is suggestive rather than fixed.²³

The monstrous fable, as a cognitive and speculative practice that results in a dynamic openness to a multiplicity of meanings that

22 Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.), 25.

23 Dronke, *Fabula*, 57.

counter fixed classification, is one of the qualities of the rhetorical trope *enigma-integumentum* that works particularly well with the fascist character and its narrative function in the plot-*sjužet*. The truth about the past of the Resistance, fascism and civil war is unattainable, but the expressionist and grotesque character might have a cognitive function pointing to reality through channels different from those of an objective, realist account of those same facts.

Hesitation, disruption, monstrous and polysemy. These qualities granted to riddles and enigmas have also had an important social and educative function since the primitive stages of civilization. Riddles, in fact, were often linked with taboo and threatening items that were possibly disruptive of both the individual and collective identity. Functionally, riddles question the established order by playing with conceptual borderlines and giving pleasure by this crossing and blurring of boundaries that reveals the festive relativity and instability of all things and how their supposed stability and fixity are just an appearance. Most likely to be tabooed are the ambiguous spaces between different categories, those equivocal characteristics that are shared by multiple sets of categories. Enigmas thus disrupt classification by means of the ambiguity of certain components of their configuration, as Ian Hammett explains:

Riddles are one form of ambiguity or ambivalence, and they can be understood in the light of the social and cognitive function of ambiguous or ambivalent utterances, concepts and actions. An ambivalent word, concept or item of behavior can be considered as belonging to any of two or more frames of reference according to the interpretation brought to bear upon it, or indeed to several or all such frames at once. It can therefore operate as a point of transition between these different frames of reference or classificatory sets. It can indeed mediate between sets that are not only different, but in many aspects opposed, and in this way it can form the basis for a differing system of classification, or allow contrasting classifications and conceptual frameworks to co-exist at the same time.²⁴

Therefore, ambiguous and ambivalent objects put the stability of any classificatory system in danger, as shown by riddles that refer to processes of social change or the qualities of alien, newly

24 Ian Hammett, "Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles," in *Man*, New Series, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Sep, 1967): 381-382.

introduced objects, or bodily excretions. For the same reason, though, they can be used to mediate and compromise between opposite categories of concept, person or object. They reinforce the gap by turning ambiguity into a taboo, but at the same time, they allude to and reveal that same ambivalence, bringing to the surface all its disruptive and confusing relativity that destabilizes classificatory distinctions between things, ideas and also – maybe more importantly – between self and other:

Ambiguous and ambivalent items threaten the integrity of the system and are, therefore, especially likely to be subject to taboo. Nowhere is the ‘danger’ inherent in classificatory confusion so intense, nor the prohibitions therefore so stringent, as in the separation of the thinking subject from his environment – of ‘ego’ from ‘not ego.’ It has been suggested that bodily excretions are objects of taboo, at least partly because they are a potential threat to this primary discrimination, being ambiguous in so far as they are part of a person’s body and at the same time separate from him. (Both A and not A). Riddles in general, therefore, and riddles concerning the body or its parts and functions in particular, can be said to threaten a breakdown in cultural segregation of conceptual categories and might be expected to fall under taboo.²⁵

The rhetorical structure and procedure of the enigma mirrors its social and cognitive function. The “block” first confirms the distance and incoherence between fixed, static categories, and second, the compromise and shift between them that disrupt and relativize the previous classification.

I suggest that the fascist character brings the ambiguity of riddles to the formal, cognitive discourse of the plot and also seems to share its social and educative function. By reading the fascist as an enigma, it is possible to identify some recurrent formal patterns in the plots of a selected group of novels and films from 1945 until 1970. In fact, besides the already formulated characteristic physical and psychical features of the fascist – a sadist with some sort of bodily deformity or disease – the character appears to enable some formal modifications, some *topoi* that, in my opinion, allow us to group plots with fascist types into a sort of subgenre, with its own rules and structure, of Italian literature and cinema. The most frequent

25 *Idem.*, 389.

plot structure is based upon rational plans gone wrong. It is clear that the hero has acted in a certain way and that their actions have caused a definite effect. However, in the end, there is the sudden, unexpected revelation that those actions were never committed, and thus, the expected effects did not take place at all. A plot configured in this fashion also inevitably entails the problem of human agency and responsibility, the contrast of voluntarism and determinism being one of the main controversial areas of the philosophical and political debate between liberalism and socialism.

A disruption of the logic sequence cause-effect—beginning-middle-end—has occurred, and the author has kept from both the audience and hero some key information necessary to postpone the solution to the puzzle until the very end. The problem is that, from the perspective of the hero and the reader, there was no riddle whatsoever until the entire plot is revealed as a riddle only retrospectively from the final point of view. It is, then, what Roland Barthes defined as a lure when the author intentionally hides—for reasons that exceed the inner dynamic of the events as reconfigured by the plot—information only to surprise the reader. The narrative structure of Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) turns on the belief, the certainty that the hero has about a crime he did not commit, and the final astonishment in finding out that the crime *mysteriously* actually happened, but that nevertheless the agency is uncertain and that he cannot be blamed. The story is set in Ethiopia during the fascist colonial war. The protagonist first robs a major who kindly offers him a lift and then sabotages the wheel of his truck in order to kill him so he cannot report the theft. He carries the missing screw in his hand, so he is certain that the wheel will eventually detach, thereby letting the truck precipitate from the road. However, he observes the truck through his binoculars as it continues its journey without problems until it gets lost from his view. At the end of the novel, he is sure that the major has reported him, but he is told that the truck never actually reached its destination.

Alberto Moravia's *Il conformista* (1951) has a similar structure: the hero is sure of being a murderer, and then, in the end, he finds out that he actually never committed the crime. Also, in Renata

Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949), the protagonist thinks she killed a Nazi officer – and there are, once again, no textual clues to doubt it – and at the end, after having been arrested because of her role in the Resistance, she sees him alive. Both in *Il conformista* and *L'Agnese va a morire* the truth about the initial crime, and then its hidden nonexistence, is uncovered through a recognition scene, the *anagnorisis* of Greek tragedy, which itself works as the moment of truth in which the protagonist faces the riddle of time, the mystery of what was thought dead and is now alive, the recognition of the identity between what was and what is. Another recurrent *topos* is the emphasis on voyeurism, on scenes with characters spying, peering through keyholes or half-closed doors, overhearing behind screens or trying to gaze at almost invisible silhouettes hidden behind veiled windows and semitransparent curtains. Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* begins precisely with the protagonist spying on his sister while she is in bed with a German soldier. Also, *Il conformista*, both film and novel, reiterates on many occasions the theme of voyeurism. In Vasco Pratolini's *Un eroe del nostro tempo* (1947), Goffredo Parise's *Il prete bello* (1953) and Florestano Vancini's film *La lunga notte del '43* (1960), the very layout of space where the story takes place favors a voyeuristic dynamic with many characters frequently depicted spying or overhearing each other. In all these cases, the subject finds the way to truth barred by all sorts of screens that, like *enigmas*, both frustrate and arouse the desire to know. Cesare Pavese's *La luna e i falò* (1949), Fenoglio's *Una questione privata*, Curzio Malaparte's *Il Cristo proibito* (1951), and Bertolucci's *Strategia del ragno* all share the same plot structure with an enigma that needs to be deciphered and a secret that awaits to be unearthed. In Pavese's novel, Nuto waits until the very end to confess to Anguilla the difficult, monstrous truth about what happened to Santina; in Fenoglio, Milton desperately tries to seize a fascist officer to offer in exchange for his captured partisan friend Giorgio to ask the latter the truth about Fulvia finally; in Malaparte the protagonist comes back to his hometown after the war, with the priority of finding and then killing the person who betrayed his partisan brother by consigning him to the Germans. The people in the hometown, even his mother, know who the traitor is but are still

too wounded by the atrocities and conflicts of the war. Therefore, they place a veil of silence over the spy's identity, forestalling the hero's quest for truth and the final uncovering of how the past events actually occurred. In Bertolucci's film, the son of a local partisan martyr comes back to his hometown to enquire about the circumstances of his father's death. He will eventually discover the ambiguous nature of his father, who, instead of the partisan hero everyone thinks he was, may have actually been a traitor and a spy.

There seems always to be a gap and a disjunction between the subject and the reality of things, and in all the plots sketched above and in the many others, I will analyze in the chapters that follow how the fascist character has precisely this barring and mystifying function of standing in the way of the unveiling of truth. In most cases, they are the very object of that search. Nevertheless, in all these instances, the only attainable truths seem to be incomplete, shattered, ambiguous ones. The interpretation of the fascist type as a riddle also allows us to challenge and invert the commonly accepted view of the fascist character as a stereotype, cliché and mere villain of a melodrama. If we approach the fascist as an enigma, the clear-cut Manichean classification that grounds the 'melodramatic imagination'—as in Peter Brooks' famous work—suddenly collapses and is replaced by that multiplicity of meanings, ambivalence and ambiguity disruptive of categorizations that underlies the very social and cognitive function of riddling practices. Athos Magnani, Marcello Clerici, Sandrino, Virginia, Don Gastone, Santina, Alarico, Lucini, Pelle, Daniela/Lili Marleen, and Pino Barillari are both thematic and semantic enigmas, characters whose ambiguity thwarts the clear-cut classification of identities in fixed categories of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, fascist and antifascist, helper and villain. The expressionist caricature and grotesque mask works as a riddle that, after blocking the detection of truth and reality, actually multiplies meanings, favoring a relativity that mediates between categories, thus revealing the unsuspected and unexpected ambivalence of a certain demarcation between fascism and antifascism themselves. Through the obscurity and opacity of the riddle, a dialogizing compromise might be found between opposite and clashing concepts and political ideals. I suggest that this new

approach would allow other alternative readings of those same texts, until now too frequently 'marked' by psychoanalytical interpretative narratives that, while being necessary and still mostly undeniably pertinent and valid, risk on many occasions to crystallize and limit them to discourses of repressed memory and mourning.

My work suggests that, by enabling in the text a riddling structure, the fascist might also be read as a dynamic and carnivalesque character that escapes finalization and brings ambiguity and relativity to the plot rather than a fixed and static stereotypical, uncomplicated coherence. I draw here on Mikhail Bakhtin's formulations of the carnivalesque and grotesque, as much as from his early investigations of heroes who seem to escape finalization into a coherent, 'consummated' aesthetic form. The eccentricity and festive relativity of the carnivalesque destroys the integrity of the subject's identity, revealing it to be unfinalizable in a stable form and its noncoincidence between image and meaning: «scandals and eccentricities destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of the world, they make a breach in the stable, normal ("seemly") course of human affairs and events, they free human behavior from the norms and motivations that predetermine it.»²⁶ Absolute contingency takes the place of necessity, as happens in the recognition scenes briefly sketched above. A similar disruption of the logical, causal sequence of cause-effect, beginning-middle-end – that forms the basis also of the narrative plot itself, as analyzed by Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* – characterizes the grotesque, that, as Bakhtin claims:

liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world. This concept is uncrowned by the grotesque and reduced to the relative and the limited. Necessity, in every concept which prevails at any time, is always one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable. But historically the idea of necessity is relative and variable. The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities.²⁷

26 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota press, 1984), 117.

27 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 49.

The carnivalesque and grotesque characteristics of the fascist type make them a difficult 'hero' to finalize and enframe as *other*. The past of more or less active collaboration with the fascist regime of certain authors and the inescapable degree of sameness of the fascist as fellow Italians turn these characters into ambiguous items that the author fails to take a step back from and look at from an external, transcendental, detached perspective which would grant them that 'excess of seeing' necessary to endow the hero with a coherent, causal destiny with finalized form and meaning. As Ilya Kliger and Michael Holquist explain, at the end of an investigation of the Kantian gap opened between the self and the world by the inevitable need for language as a filter for human experience and contact with the surrounding reality:

According to Bakhtin, the *self* perceives the world as the horizon for its activity. It is spatially, temporally, and "meaningfully" open to the surrounding world. It always projects in space toward the object of its intentionality, in time, toward the ever-receding goal in the absolute future. In a way, the *self* is contemporaneous not with its time but with its meaning: it cannot die or be born, cannot be temporally bound, but exists insofar as it continues to project itself meaningfully into the future.

The *other*, as *other-for-me*, stands in a very different relation to the surrounding world, a relation of an object to its surroundings. In space, the other is externalized as a bounded body among other physical objects; in time, the other is temporally bound by birth and death, as if already dead and brought to life again as a hero of a biography. The bounded space and biographical time of the other is, furthermore, filled with a stable meaning, a determinate, unchangeable manner of comportment in the surrounding world.²⁸

Out of the above epistemological basis, Bakhtin structures an aesthetics of narrative founded on the author-hero duality that would lead to a disruption of all synthesis and the final unveiling of all unity of either object or subject as a metaphoric configuration. In this sense, enigmas and riddles, as particularly complicated, 'looping' metaphors, deepen the gap even further. In fact, as Michael Holquist and Ilya Kliger notice, the hero, conceived as absolute projectuality, transforms the act of aesthetic contemplation from a passive, detached and disinterested one into a dynamic, vivified

28 Michael Holquist and Ilya Kliger, "'Minding the Gap:' Toward a Historical Poetics of Estrangement," in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 2005), 633.

knowing process that, in a way, is perhaps adumbrated in the conception of knowledge entailed in the medieval trope of *integumentum* as analyzed by Peter Dronke. For Klinger, Bakhtin's aesthetics occupies an ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* Kant's:

The hero can be understood as a *self*, forward-looking, project-directed and, within the parameters of his own consciousness, forever incomplete. It is only the external perspective of an *other* – the author, in possession of an essential “excess of seeing” – that endows the hero and his path with fate-like completeness and stable meaning. [...] If in Kant, the aesthetic experience of disinterested pleasure was paradigmatically conceived as a confrontation of a contemplative subject (author, producer of a coherent whole) with the object of contemplation, here, a third element is inserted between the two: the hero's pre-formative activity, vivifying the contemplated word, rendering the object of contemplation dynamic. Stable, static knowing is supplemented by a kind of knowing-in-motion, a vision of the object world as it appears to a valuating, striving, self-transcendent self-consciousness. [...] The dual synthesis of self-other that comes to replace Kant's transcendental synthesis of apperception reappears, in the realm of aesthetics, as the two-headed author-hero, the subject of contemplation-empathy supplanting the unified subject of mere disinterested contemplation.²⁹

That inescapable *quid*, that inherent impossibility of capturing, remembering and communicating to an audience of non-witnesses the reality, the truth about the Resistance, about the 1943–45 civil war between fascism and antifascism, seems to be a constant ‘thorn,’ the recurrent regret of neorealism. Natalia Ginzburg will later talk in these terms: «Ma poi avvenne che la realtà si rivelò complessa e segreta [...]; e si rivelò ancora situata di là dal vetro, e l'illusione di aver spezzato quel vetro si rivelò effimera.»³⁰ Secrecy and revelation are the two poles toward which the literature of the period oscillates. The ‘spirit’ of those events, as in the words of Calvino, seems to be doomed to escape indeterminately just for a tiny bit to the author, who wants to approach reality with an objective stance. They occupy a position on the threshold, both inside the events as witnesses side by side with ‘the masses’ and outside as an author, a bourgeois intellectual inevitably linked to Tradition.

29 Ilya Klinger, “On Genre Memory in Bakhtin,” in Ilya Klinger and Boris Maslov, edited by, *Persistent Forms. Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 233.

30 Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare* (Torino: Einaudi, 1963), 32.

Through the duality of author-hero and the introduction of a dynamic role of the hero, I aim to propose a type of approach that can 'free' certain melodramatic caricatures from the dangers of too static readings. It is a critical operation that intends to involve the reader as well as the character, casting a renewed focus on characters who are often overlooked, if not downright despised, as low-brow, and thereby opening the way to new interpretations of both the formal and social functioning of the texts taken into consideration.

The conflict between fascism and antifascism is displaced in fiction as a conflict of formal tendencies: a realist vocation inherited from the popular oral tradition of the Resistance and expressionism derived from more traditional literature. If the vividness and closeness to the reality of things of the oral accounts get lost in the literariness of more traditional and fixed literary forms, I believe that the oral source still retains traces in 'neorealism,' as the orientation of those texts remains, in a sense, oratorical. This is an orientation which, in the words of Yuri Tynianov, commenting on Lomonosov's *Rhetoric*, consists of «diversity, surprise and unexpectedness.»³¹ The final discourse in *La casa in collina* or the 'ideological' dialogue in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* are examples of a tendency to speak directly to the reader and—since there is the perception of a gap between author and reality—to try to persuade, communicate, win over them by a straightforward address rather than objective representation. Therefore, the enigmatic or riddling structure might also be seen in view of this oratorical orientation toward the audience, functioning as an effective rhetorical strategy to catch the reader's attention toward that lost truth by means of frustration, surprise and finally, enriched pleasure. The fascist character is the structural element whose function is precisely to break, to create a block and then allow the junction of distant ideas and forms. Drawing again on Tynianov, we could say that this character functions as a dynamic structural component of the text, «renewing the dynamics in the relationship of factors. Such is the dialectical

31 Yuri Tynianov, "The Ode as an Oratorical Genre," in *New Literary History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (Summer, 2003), 576.

development of form, modifying the correlation between the constructive principle and that which is subordinated to it.»³² The fascist enables a sort of ambiguity of genres, transforming the text into a sort of hybrid form that borrows formal tendencies from different genre traditions. In two interesting separate remarks, Calvino notices how the two most widely diffused tendencies of postwar Italian literature were, first, the creation of a political *Bildungsroman* and, second, the fabrication of melodramatic fascist villains. The *Bildungsroman* is, in fact, the most recurrent plot structure in the period I examine.

On the one hand, authors such as Moravia in *Il conformista*, Pratolini in *Un eroe del nostro tempo*, Fenoglio in *Primavera di bellezza* and the historians in the area of the *Partito d'azione* seem to refer to its 19th century "Stendhalian" version. In contrast, Pavese in *Il compagno*, Viganò in *L'Agnese va a morire* and the historians of Marxist inspiration appear to look back at the social realist version of the genre. In the former case, the spontaneity of the hero wins over the organization by means of a higher entity (destiny, history, party). In the second instance, the organization enframes the hero's spontaneity within its caged trajectory and collective, universal goals and values. Katerina Clark draws attention to the shared structure between *bildungsroman* and social realist novels, precisely through this dynamic between spontaneity and organization, which also dominated the historiographical and political debate on the Italian resistance within the Left:

As is generally true of ritual forms, the master-plot personalizes the general processes outlined in Marxist-Leninist historiography by encoding them in biographical terms: the positive hero passes in stages from a state of relative "spontaneity" to a higher degree of "consciousness," which he attains by some individual revolution.³³

According to Franco Moretti, the hero of the 'classic' 18th century *bildungsroman* reaches at the end of the plot a sort of compromise between his inner, true ideals and the current social values, which

32 Yuri Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language*, (Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1981), 35.

33 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 16.

are in total opposition and contrast with them. There is not, then, in the 18th century *Bildungsroman* a preference over spontaneity and organization, but a sort of accord between the two poles of individual freedom and inclusion in a collective, universal perspective. In the Stendhalian *bildungsroman*, though—and there are many ‘heirs’ of Julien Sorel and Fabrizio del Dongo in the works examined in this essay—the hero never actually ‘buys’ the imposed, external rules of social organization, and his faith in his own beliefs disrupts his formation and development. The hero is left somehow in isolation and disjointed from the rest of society: the junction between two different sets of values does not lead to a ‘working’ compromise but to the recognition of a gap between the two. The absorption of spontaneity into the organization is rejected, and it results in a mismatch. Postwar Italian *bildungsromane* follow this thread and are, in fact, mostly accounts of failed formations, educations, and inclusions within the social frame of the newborn republic. This is particularly evident in those *bildungsromane* that have a fascist character not as a marginal figure but as a protagonist: *Il conformista* and *Un eroe del nostro tempo*. In both cases, the fascist is a ‘stranded’ object whose entrance into postwar society fails. Marcello and Sandrino are *others* who, despite their attempt to conform, remain ambiguous, tabooed objects that refuse classification. They are examples of carnivalesque and dynamic heroes who refuse finalization and a clear-cut assignation of meaning. Borrowing from Hayden White, in my book, I will try to argue that the many examples of disrupted *Bildung* are the narrative shape of a parallel historiographical failure of the ‘emplotment’ of the fascist character within a linear, coherent scheme and categorization. The fascist past and its narrative embodiment in the fascist type are always an *enigma*. At the structural level, this means that what the riddle does with metaphors, the fascist character does with different narrative types: joining together different genres and creating hybrid texts characterized by formal ambiguity.

Moravia ‘emplots’ Marcello Clerici in a structure that is at once *bildungsroman* and tragedy. His great intuition was, in my opinion, to make a structural choice also work as a critical tool since Marcello’s tragedy intertwines with that of Professor Quadri, whose

character was 'inspired' by the exiled antifascist and leader of Giustizia e Libertà Carlo Rosselli. Marcello, I will argue, is, in fact, enframed not only in his *bildungsroman* but also in the tragedy of Professor Quadri. The emplotment of both Quadri and Marcello in a common tragic destiny – culminating in *anagnorisis* and *deus ex machina* scenes – hides a precise ideological response to, and judgment of, Carlo Rosselli and his social liberalism. Moravia, Rosselli's cousin, opposed and criticized Rosselli's antifascism as corrupt and counterproductive – Marcello is a former student of Quadri's in the fiction – given its historical roots in bourgeois liberalism and the Risorgimento nationalist tradition. Tragedy, then, becomes the narrative shape of a precise political criticism, translating, by means of the tragic fate, a determinism of Marxist inspiration. The ambiguity of genres mirrors an ideological interpretation that saw fascism, and also a type of antifascism, as two ambiguous intertwined categories.

Therefore, I am suggesting a use of narrative genres that draws from Fredric Jameson's use of generic categories «as mere ad hoc experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work.»³⁴ His formulation of realism as dissymmetry, as a non-genre always on the brink of collapsing into something else, and thus of genre as an imaginary solution to real conflicts, as formal resolution of actual social contradictions, and as «a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms which have their own specific and contradictory ideological meaning,»³⁵ directed my research toward an in-depth investigation of the generic patterns characteristic of texts with fascist figures, too often considered as monolithic static traditional genres, which often use melodramatic categories. Besides the stereotype of the 19th-century melodramatic villain, the fascist activates complex generic discontinuities that might also lead to a reassessment and reconsideration of the ideological debates and contradictions that

34 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 145.

35 *Ibidem*, 144.

characterized postwar Italy. With this in view, my analysis proposes that observing the evolution of generic patterns and their interaction and coexistence in certain texts can lead to a more synchronic consideration of the ideological knot of fascism and antifascism—and behind it of Marxism and idealism, voluntarism and determinism—rather than ‘framing’ it only in the narrative of repression and resurgence that favored the products of the more mature critical and political consciousness of the 1970s over the works of two decades earlier. Through this kind of ‘genre criticism,’ it is possible to observe certain ideological tendencies in their latency as symbolically present in the text as specific generic categories or configurations, such as a type of character or a typical scene.

The gap between self and world, between the construction of a realist epic and historical events, is occupied by the fascist character, which—adapting Frye’s terminology in *The Secular Scripture*—harmonizes the “then” narrative of romance and the “hence” one of myth. Italian literature and cinema about the fascist past might, then, be a fruitful case study to read in the light of Fredric Jameson’s work on realism and his definition of the genre in *The Antinomies of Realism* as constantly menaced by melodrama, and therefore, as a battlefield between two temporalities, between the marked time of fate, of the *récit*, of the completed event, of the teleological succession of beginning-middle-end, and the ‘open’ unfinalized time before destiny of the eternal present, of the unnamable emotion, that is to say of affect.

In Calvino’s first collection of short stories, published in 1949, there is one in particular, “Ultimo viene il corvo” (which gives the title to the whole collection), in which the fascist character reveals all of his enigmatic roles. This story, in its brevity and simplicity, yields the perfect example with which to start my inquiry. While trout fishing in a mountain stream, a group of partisans meets a young boy with an unerring aim. With one of their rifles, he is, in fact, able not only to kill one trout after the other but also a falcon up in the sky and pine cones on distant trees. Impressed by his aiming capacity, the group decides to let him join the fight. The story is told from the point of view of the young boy who seems to use the rifle as a sort of camera, a lens through which he can observe a new

world unfolding in front of his eyes, and a measure with which to calculate distances between things:

Si fece dare altre cartucce. Erano in tanti ormai a guardarlo, dietro di lui in riva al fiumicello. Le pigne in cima agli alberi dell'altra riva perché si vedevano e non si potevano toccare? Perché quella distanza vuota tra lui e le cose? Perché le pigne che erano una cosa con lui, nei suoi occhi, erano invece là, distanti? Però se puntava il fucile la distanza vuota si capiva che era un trucco; lui toccava il grilletto e nello stesso momento la pigna cascava, troncata al picciòlo. Era un senso di vuoto come una carezza: quel vuoto della canna del fucile che continuava attraverso l'aria e si riempiva con lo sparo, fin laggìù alla pigna, allo scoiattolo, alla pietra bianca al fiore di papavero. [...]

Andare via era bello perché a ogni svolta si vedevano cose nuove, licheni sulle pietre, tutte cose nel raggio delle distanze finte, delle distanze che lo sparo riempiva inghiottendo l'aria di mezzo.³⁶

Not only is the story told from his point of view, but the 'point of view' is the very object of the story. With the rifle, the young hero begins to be aware of perspective as an illusion and of the space that separates him from the surrounding world. The rifle makes him think that there is no distance between himself and things because the moment he presses the trigger, the target falls, and all that space and distance seem to be annihilated. Between the time of the shot and the space linking him as subject with the target as object of the shot, there seems to be a disjunction, a mysterious gap. Since the other partisans forbid him to shoot at whatever he sees moving, he decides to take the rifle with him and venture alone into the forest.

36 Italo Calvino, "Ultimo viene il corvo," in *Ultimo viene il corvo* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002), 126-127. «They gave him some more cartridges when he asked for them. Lots of men were looking on now from the bank behind him. Why, he thought, could he see the pine cones at the tops of the trees on the other bank and not touch them? Why was there this empty distance between things and himself? Why were the pine cones—which seemed part of him, inside his eyes—so far away instead? Surely it was an illusion when he aimed the gun into the empty distance and touched the trigger and at the same second a pine cone dropped in smithereens? The sense of emptiness felt like a caress—emptiness inside the rifle barrel continuing through the air and filling out when he shot; the pine cone up there, a squirrel, a white stone, a butterfly. [...] It was fine to leave, because there were new things to be seen at every turn, trees with cones, birds flying from branches, lichen on stones, all at those false distances, the distances that could be filled by a shot swallowing the air in between.» [Calvino, "The Crow Comes Last," in *Difficult Loves*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun and Peggy Wright (New York: Harvest/HBJ Book, 1985), 96-97.]

His journey proceeds aimlessly with no other logic than moving from target to target. He kills in sequence: one hare, partridges, a red mushroom, pine cones, jays, a dormouse, a lizard, a big snail, and a frog. Suddenly, warned by the gunshots, a group of German soldiers start running after him, and he kills one of them, aiming at one small button of his uniform. As the other partisans come to rescue him, he and another German soldier start a private duel, chasing and firing at each other and eventually ending in an isolated field. Tracked down by the fire of the young boy, the desperate Nazi soldier hides behind a rock, with no possible way out: if he tries to put his head out, the young boy will instantly kill him as he holds him up at gunpoint, not too far away. As soon as the soldier hides behind the rock, something curious happens in the story: a sudden, unexpected shift of point of view. The author, in fact, abandons the point of view and the viewfinder of the protagonist and now tells the story from the enemy's point of view, from the object's perspective. We are now dragged into the suspended time of the target's wait for the right moment to run away. In order to seize the right opportunity, the soldier begins, then, to interpret his enemy's behavior to find a logical and rational motivation for the order and cause behind his shots. In fact, the soldier notices—but we readers already know this—that the partisan, while waiting for him to come out, 'kills the time' by shooting at every bird he sees moving around the rock: a song thrush, a snipe, a cockerel. He infers from this a causal plot, a rational thread, motivating the boy's conduct. Therefore, when he sees a raven beginning to descend slowly in circles toward them, the soldier expects the partisan to aim at the raven and kill the bird. The boy, though, instead of shooting at the raven—which keeps descending and getting closer to the ground—shoots at pine cones:

A ogni sparo il soldato guardava il corvo: cadeva? No, l'uccello nero girava sempre più basso sopra di lui. Possibile che il ragazzo non lo vedesse? Forse il corvo non esisteva, era una sua allucinazione. Forse chi stava per morire vede passare tutti gli uccelli: quando vede il corvo vuol dire che è l'ora. Pure, bisognava avvertire il ragazzo che continuava a sparare alle pigne. Allora il soldato si alzò in piedi e indicando l'uccello nero col dito, — Là c'è il corvo! — gridò, nella sua lingua. Il proiettile lo prese giusto in mezzo a un'aquila ad

ali spiegate che aveva ricamata sulla giubba.
Il corvo s'abbassava lentamente, a giri.³⁷

First, the mysterious shift of perspective, now the final riddle: why does the partisan not follow his previous logic and shoot at the raven? The change of perspective makes us readers, for just a little while, know more than the soldier. He needs to look at and infer the logic that seems to guide the shots. Once he understands that, the reader and the character are once again united, both sharing the same expectation and surprise: yes, from what we have seen, the young boy should shoot at the raven. The fact that he delays the shot is frankly illogical. What is even more so is that the partisan will kill the soldier by aiming at the eagle on his uniform. In a way, then, this final shot seems to follow once again the previous logic since he does aim at a bird. But if so, why then did he not aim at the raven, too? At once irrational and rational, the short story ends with a veritable enigma. Was his not shooting at the raven part of a strategy to fool the German soldier? It seems unlikely given his naïve 'hillbilly' nature and also given the fact that he at last points at the eagle. This last detail, in fact, seems to reconstruct the rational causality that structured the short tale from its beginning. The Nazi falls victim to his deductive operation because of the mismatch separating his expectations, the way his mind 'emplotted' the actions of his enemy, from the way the events betrayed his calculations, escaping the finalization of the mental scheme framing reality. The death of the fascist character is an enigma, and it is emplotted as a failure to frame reality within a coherent, completed series of events, as the disruption breaks the scheme and reveals it as a mere image and illusion of the subject's observation of reality.

37 Idem, 130. «At every shot the soldier looked at the crow; was he falling? No, the black bird was making lower and lower turns above him. Surely it was impossible the boy hadn't seen it? Perhaps the crow did not exist? Perhaps it was an hallucination of his? Perhaps when one is about to die one sees every kind of bird pass; when one sees the crow it means one's time has come. He must warn the boy, who was still going on firing at the pine cones. So the soldier got to his feet and pointed at the black bird. "There's a crow!" he shouted in his own language. The bullet hit him in the middle of an eagle with spread wings embroidered on his tunic. Slowly the crow came circling down.» [Calvino, *The Crow Comes Last*, trans. by Archibald Colquhoun and Peggy Wright, 101.]

Maybe the boy learned the lesson that by means of the viewfinder, by embracing his rifle as a film camera, perspectival vision is nothing but an illusion, a subjective distortion of space. The final riddle is activated precisely through an unexpected, because narratively unjustified, change of perspective. Through a perfect estrangement, the self is seen from the point of view of the other, and what was believed to be rational reveals its simultaneous irrationality. The gap separating self and other is inhabited by the illusionary organizing principles of the narrative, of the plot. The automatic process of the young boy advancing from target to target is disrupted by the estrangement that lays bare the boundaries between fiction and reality, enabling the subject to see reality once again. If Calvino had kept on narrating the story from the point of view of the boy, the tale would have stayed limited by the automatization of its logic. Paradoxically, it is the estrangement that allows the raven to be seen but not shot that allows the object to be different from all the preceding objects in the series. In a way, it is the estrangement that causes the death of the fascist. The young partisan, by aiming at reality through the lens of the rifle-camera, engages in a sort of miniature optics-*bildungsroman*—at the end of which he learns that his looking deforms the things he looks at, and then he is able to look at himself from the point of view of the other, guessing what the other is expecting from him—the fascist is killed by that *bildung* which has culminated in the estranged understanding of the world. Calvino enframes the duel between a fascist and a partisan as a riddle and as a playful reflection on perspective and on the unbridgeable “false distance” between the self and the world that narrative inhabits.