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Overlapping Words: Peter Robb’s *Midnight in Sicily* and Leonardo Sciascia’s Detective Stories in Italics


This paper discusses Peter Robb’s non-fictional *Midnight in Sicily* (1) and the manner in which the author uses his chosen source materials, in particular, Leonardo Sciascia’s detective novels. I argue that Robb is reliant on Sciascia’s reflections on the impossibility of justice to eventuate. In fact, the Sicilian author breaks with the convention of detective story telling and escapes the
comforting and restoring ending where justice is done (Ambroise 2004a; Sciascia 2004d). Sciascia’s detective novels are a fictional political critique which at times foreshadows history (2), thus providing an eloquent and assertive background to Robb’s political commentary of Midnight in Sicily. The difference in the style of the two authors is evident: Robb is a baroque writer, a sort of bricoleur drawing on many and heterogeneous sources. He poses as a reliable and well informed, although extravagant, guide. On the other hand, Sciascia is terse and concise. He embodies the eternal polemicist who uses the art of controversy in both his literary work and his engagement with current affairs. In his fierce critiques, he literally wages a verbal war, as the Greek etymology of the word ‘polemica’ (polemikos: warlike, belligerent) suggests (Ambroise 2004b). The diverging styles of the two authors do not hinder Robb from engaging in a dialogue with Sciascia’s work. This paper argues that Sciascia’s polemical tone in his literary inquiries, and his involvement in the political discourse through the media, provide Midnight in Sicily with an authoritative milieu which adds depth to Robb’s observations on the Italian political scene from 1978 to the early 1990s.

Midnight in Sicily and its Sources

Peter Robb wrote Midnight in Sicily in 1995. It was commissioned by his publisher, Michael Duffy, to give an account of Robb’s 14 years in Italy as a journalist, investigating events of mafia from 1978 to 1992 (3). As the author reports, the book was researched and written in seven months, searching through his memories of fourteen years: “I was amazed by how much I remembered. It all came back. I was drawing on resources I didn’t know I had. I hadn’t written anything in all those years, but I hadn’t forgotten” (Sheehan 1997: 3).

The book is an account of the mafia’s chokehold on Sicily and the corruption of the political class in Rome. Robb’s harsh depiction of one of Italy’s most prominent post-war statesmen, Giulio Andreotti, culminates with the reconstruction of the events that allegedly reveal him as the bridge between
the Italian state and the mafia. The book won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Non-fiction in Australia in October 1997 and has been reviewed by many newspapers and translated into many languages. But not in Italy, because according to Robb: “The Italians are so cynical they think they know it all [...] there is a very great reluctance to face the Andreotti saga in Italy because it implicates the entire political class, a whole generation of Italians, all these people who quite happily worked with him” (Sheehan 2003: 355).

To trace Midnight in Sicily’s sources is not an easy task, as Robb does not make them obvious through an academic notation (Behan 1999: 116). The reader is however able to quickly form an idea of the sources Robb will be using for his engaging account: starting with the epigraph, Robb presents himself as a very eclectic writer and quotes Satura by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale and the song lyrics of a pop music band, the Everly Brothers. Their lyrics give the title to the book: “when it’s night time in Italy it’s Wednesday over here. When it’s midnight in Sicily [...]”. The passage from Satura (Montale 1971) hints at the difficulties of reconstructing history (4). It suggests that a submerged and mysterious truth lurks beneath a surface of written and official history. This sunken truth that has escaped the dragnet of a scraping history urges to be told. Robb quotes one of the most famous Italian poets preparing the reader for the pronounced literary background to Midnight in Sicily. Robb draws on many and heterogeneous literary sources, mainly Sicilian, interweaving rich and most exquisite tales of the country’s food and history with the most sordid revelations about corrupt political leaders. The book is tightly woven; the story unravels like a spiral and the reader is continuously left to wonder “How did I get here?” The reader is stunned by the amount of information and can only feel unsure whether a reading thread can be grasped at all, whether the reader will be given any unequivocal clue as to who has truly spoken.

Robb uses italics to suggest quotations. The true source is revealed but always in a slanted fashion and tinged with a shade of doubt. As Robert Nowak
argues: “Italics [...] seem to indicate quotations. The problem is that Robb never makes this explicit. As a result, though you feel he has it right [...] the provenance of his information is usually mysterious. It is left vague whether these are surmised conversations or verbatim. This vagueness is a disservice to the reader. (Nowak 2004: 194). Robb’s writing can be seen as designing spirals around a subject, an event, a place: he presents a subject, leaves it to digress on something, only to return, take up the threads and expand the story. His writing style is interspersed with italics, asides, digressions full of literary and culinary anecdotes. In his interview with Claire Sutherland, Robb explains that his style is an “obvious way to hold readers’ attention” and is dictated by “an effort to reconcile different sides of a story, different elements of a reality” (Sutherland 2003). We can delineate four main sources for Midnight in Sicily: food, art, literature and politics. Elizabeth David’s Italian Food and Ada Boni’s Talismano della felicità are some of the main sources of Robb’s digression on culinary art. The Sicilian painter Renato Guttuso is often quoted to represent Sicilianness in art. Tomasi di Lampedusa and Leonardo Sciascia are Robb’s favourite literary sources. La vera storia d’Italia (The True History of Italy) (Caselli 1995), the reconstruction of 20 years of Italian history (1975-95) based on the investigation, witnesses and analysis conducted by Magistrate Giancarlo Caselli when he was Procuratore della Repubblica (Public Prosecutor) in Palermo is the source of his political account of the last thirty years of the Sicilian mafia. All of these sources continuously intermingle with each other through the perspective of the writer.

In Sutherland’s interview, while commenting on his sometimes condemning blend of subjects, to the question of whether he indulges in sumptuously detailed descriptions of culinary art in order to avoid inflicting tedium on his readers, Robb responds: “Well, an unrelenting diet of political corruption and violent death is nauseating after a while” (Sutherland 2003). The Vuccirria Market in Palermo is the icon of the city and Robb mediates it by Guttuso’s famous painting The Vuccirria, a recurring image in Robb’s book, a
sort of circular vision that haunts his writing. It is the triggering image of a trail of associations and the imaginary site of an opulent blend of food, art, literature and politics. Food festively and abundantly on display alludes to what it negates: hunger, poverty, lack. Leonardo Sciascia commenting on Guttuso’s painting will highlight the absence oozing from its opulence, “a hungry man’s dream” (Robb 2003: 3) and Robb echoes Sciascia’s comment juxtaposing the Vuccirria to other markets:

That seems to realize a hungry man’s dream, so the most abundant and overflowing markets, the richest and most festive and the most baroque, are those of the poor countries where the spectre of hunger is always hovering [...] Baghdad, Valencia or Palermo, a market is more than a market [...] it’s a vision, a dream, a mirage (Robb 2003: 3).

Proceeding from the juxtaposition of opulence and dearth typical of the iconic image of the Vuccirria, speaking through Guttuso’s voice, Robb points to want of truth as the counterpart to the incredible diversity of Sicilian richness. In the land of omertà (the conspiracy of silence), words are scarce, but they are the only salvation. Sciascia’s highly politicised detective novels and Caselli’s La vera storia d’Italia are summoned to gather at the Market of Vucciria to witness their truth:

Guttuso remarked himself about Sicily, you can find dramas, pastorals, idylls, politics, gastronomy, geography, history, literature [...] in the end you can find anything and everything, but you can’t find truth [...] truth in Sicily has always being seized on and twisted into something else by interested parties. It was less a problem for a painter dealing in images than a writer who dealt in words. Truth was a function of language. Sciascia’s stripped down stories found their own truth in the absence of certainty, the impossibility of knowing, and I wondered what Sicily that came from, and what it had to do with The True History of Italy’s hope of shedding light (Robb 2003: 303).
"Midnight in Sicily’s Debt to Sciascia’s Detective Stories"

Robb constantly pays homage to Sciascia by quoting passages from his novels and by using the Sicilian author’s writing to uphold his political commentary on Italian history. In one instance, Robb assumes a critical stance vis-à-vis Sciascia: his sceptical opinions in regard to the group of magistrates investigating mafia crimes, the so-called anti-mafia pool in the late 1980s (5). Sciascia’s famous article ‘Professionisti dell’antimafia’, published in Il Corriere della Sera on 10 January 1987, was the starting point of a political debate where he argued that anti-mafia initiatives and rhetoric could be used as tools to manipulate political factions and public opinion. Sciascia also famously criticised Magistrate Paolo Borsellino’s nomination as procuratore della Repubblica (public prosecutor) for the city of Marsala. Sciascia criticised the rationale behind the Consiglio superiore della magistratura (CSM) for its decision, not Borsellino’s suitability for his new role. Sciascia argued that the CSM, in its notiziario straordinario (no. 17, 10 September 1986) adopted a new criterion to nominate its procuratore, departing from the letter of the law which would require nominating the most senior candidate, and not the most experienced prosecutor in mafia processes, as in Borsellino’s case. In spite of Sciascia’s attempt to clarify and explain the true nature of his critique, he has been attacked and heavily criticised by journalists and the anti-mafia coordinating pool who expressed their distance from him in an official press communiqué (6). Robb positions himself in the same line of fierce criticism, which was also shared by journalists Giampaolo Pansa and Eugenio Scalfari (7). This is Robb lamenting Sciascia’s accusations against the leaders of the anti-mafia maxi-trial in 1987:

Sciascia never retracted his words. He became increasingly intolerant of imbeciles, cretins and anyone, always in bad faith, who disagreed with him. He showed a certain odd self-identification with Voltaire and some reluctance to admit in those confused and violent years that he might not know the answers.
to questions about mafia and politics [...] Sciascia's deepening gloom was sometimes lit by flashes of arrogance, meanness or perversity. He didn’t seem to realise how much people had come to value his thought or what damage he did. He didn’t seem to realize how dangerous a gift a nonconformist reputation was (Robb 2003: 319-20).

Despite Robb’s disappointment with Sciascia’s point of view, Sciascia’s polemical comments on the role of the anti-mafia pool offer Robb the opportunity to discuss and contextualise an important issue of 1980s Italian politics. Also, the main idea that springs from the maze of Robb’s writing is profoundly indebted to Sciascia and it represents the dominant chord of *Midnight in Sicily*. It is the connivance of the state and the anti-state. It is the desolate belief that history does not carry out all its vendettas as the Satura epigraph Robb chose for his *Midnight in Sicily* says. Power manipulates and conceals truth in order to guarantee its existence. Robb hints at the idea of ‘the state within the state’ when describing the evil power of the mafia:

> Cosa Nostra was a state within the state [...] Cosa Nostra was a state that maintained relations with professional, political and judicial representatives of that other state, the Italian republic [...] when Totò Riina had entered the Salvo drawing room that summer afternoon, he’d entered as a head of that other state, and it was as such that the past and future leader of the Italian government had greeted him. It was a summit. They were Kennedy and Krushchev, Nixon and Mao, and thus the two leaders greeted each other (Robb 2003: 56-57).

Robb here alludes to the kiss between Giulio Andreotti and the mafia boss Totò Riina. This implied that in recognising the other state – the illegal – the Italian state was somehow negating its own independent existence, entrusting itself as prisoner of the other state. Sciascia famously points to the state held prisoner in *Il contesto*, where detective Rogas painfully ponders over the paradoxical...
necessity to defend the state against the crimes committed by its own representatives, raising the pressing question of the ‘legitimacy of Power’ (Onofri 1997: 155). Rogas eventually chooses to become un giustiziere, an executioner who takes justice into his own hands, outside of the law, thus giving up his role of representing the legality of the state (Farrell 1997: 26):

Dentro il problema di una serie di crimini che per ufficio, per professione, si sentiva tenuto a risolvere, ad assicurarne l’autore alla legge se non alla giustizia, un altro ne era insorto, sommamente criminale nella specie, come crimine contemplato nei principi fondamentali dello Stato, ma da risolvere al di fuori del suo ufficio, contro il suo ufficio. In pratica si trattava di difendere lo Stato contro coloro che lo rappresentavano, che lo detenevano. Lo Stato detenuto. E bisognava liberarlo. Ma era in detenzione anche lui: non poteva che tentare di aprire una crepa nel muro (Sciascia 2004b: 66, my italics).

Robb testifies to Sciascia’s great ability to prefigure history in his literature: “to reread The Context after an immersion in The True History of Italy is to be struck by how early and how acutely Sciascia sensed what was going on in Italy” (Robb: 130). Sciascia himself reflects on this same ability in an interview for La Repubblica of 23 March 1978: “rivedo nella realtà come una specie di proiezione delle cose immaginate” (Ambroise 2004c: XLIV). Like the crack in the wall, which alludes to the captivity of the Italian state in Il contesto, webs, nets and embroideries are other images representing confinement. They hint at some mysterious and evil force that weaves its pattern of secrecy and violence strangling the state. Only a break in the net could guarantee truth and perhaps salvation:

In 1981 and 1982 there were two hundred bodies on the streets of Palermo. There were at least three hundred other disappearances […] Una mattanza […] the Sicilian word for the annual tuna killing, when the school of great fish migrating past the island are corralled into traps of nets and harpooned en
Robb himself talks about truth coming out of a rip in the net: “preparing to dive into the past, to explore things once half glimpsed and half imagined, desiring knowledge but afraid of entrapment [...] I wanted to know how [...] what was holding up Sicily. Ready to dive and hoping to surface again, or at least find a rip in the net (Robb 2003: xix). Sciascia often hints at nets revealing an illegal and parallel world: “un discorso che dice e non dice-allusivo, indecifrabile come il rovescio di un ricamo: un groviglio di fili e di nodi, e dall’altra parte si vedono le figure” (Sciascia 2004a: 400). The same thread can be found in another passage: “Per la prima volta, da che faceva il confidente, aveva dato in mano ai carabinieri un filo da tirare che, a saper fare, avrebbe potuto smagliare tutto un tessuto di amicizie e di interessi in cui la sua stessa esistenza era intramata” (Sciascia 2004a: 427).

**Detective stories versus non-fictional crime stories**

At the core of every detective story there is a mystery to be solved and the broken order is re-established by the final sentence. As Sciascia states in his *Breve storia del romanzo poliziesco* (Sciascia 2004d: 1183), detective stories presuppose the belief in metaphysics: the existence of a just spiritual world. The detective is the guardian of this justice on earth. As many critics have observed, Sciascia’s detective novels do not follow this golden rule. The novels quoted by Robb in *Midnight in Sicily – Il giorno della civetta, Il contesto* and *Todo Modo* – are examples of this. Bellodi in *Il giorno della civetta* and Rogas in *Il contesto* fail to restore order not because they lack the ability to do so, but because the environment within which they act – ‘the context’ – is flawed. The mystery is solved but cannot be voiced. The detective’s investigation results in an anticlimax: the guilty ones are not punished. An untrue interpretation of the case
is applauded. In *Todo Modo* the atypical improvised detective – the painter – improvises himself as the executioner as well. The mystery is left unsolved due to the ostracism enacted by Don Gaetano. And Don Gaetano, ironically resembling the devil, incarnates the power. Eventually Don Gaetano – the power – is killed, we infer, by the improvised detective in a free and liberating act mimicking *l’acte gratuit* of André Gide, whose *Les caves du Vatican* is quoted as a coda to *Todo Modo*. The official detective does not take into account the painter’s ambiguous confession whereas the reader is left to speculate. The solution is thus merely hinted at in the text, in a communicative space concerning the writer and the reader only, but out of the diegesis, the narrating time (Traina 1999).

**Conclusion**

Sciascia’s atypical detective novels are absorbed by Robb’s non-fictional narration. His detective stories – in tampering with the genre and subverting the cathartic re-establishment of order – are a vigilant critique of the idea of justice and power: metaphysics is in doubt. He is an enlightened and parsimonious writer who subtracts words so as to illuminate their meaning. Robb, on the other hand, is a baroque, flamboyant writer who has gathered all his information and is laying it out for the reader. His book is a sort of pastiche, and it is not always clear what piece of mosaic comes from where. The facts, the information, the author’s impressions and memoirs all mingle together: the author-ventriloquist speaks through the voice of some unidentified other, using italics. Robb has somehow absorbed all the complexity and hybridism typical of a land that has known many colonisations – land where tracing the sources of the contemporary phenomena has become a difficult task.
NOTES

1. In this article, I will be quoting excerpts of *Midnight in Sicily* from the 2003 Duffy & Snellgrove edition.

2. See Paccagnini’s observations on Sciascia’s *Il contesto*: “con gli occhi del poi è fin troppo facile vedere come nel racconto di Sciascia fosse anticipato *in nuce* quel che di lì a poco sarebbe stato chiamato ‘compromesso storico’, che Sciascia non avrebbe mai approvato, non considerandolo una soluzione per il degrado del sistema politico in atto” (Paccagnini 2006: 43). See also Robb 2003: 130.

3. For an analysis of *Midnight in Sicily* within the tradition of Australian travel to Italy, see Trapè 2012: 308-313.

4. See Robb: “History isn’t the devastating bulldozer they say it is. It leaves underpasses, crypts, holes and hiding places. There are survivors. History’s also benevolent: destroys as much as it can: overdoing it, sure, would be better, but history’s short of news, doesn’t carry out all its vendettas. History scrapes the bottom like a drag net with a few rips and more than one fish escapes. Sometimes you meet the ectoplasm of an escape and he doesn’t seem particularly happy. He doesn’t know he’s outside, nobody told him. The others, in the bag, think they’re freer than him”, Robb 2003: xvii.

5. Sciascia’s article ‘Professionisti dell’antimafia’, published in *Il Corriere della Sera* on 10 January 1987 was later included in “A futura memoria”, Opere 1984-1989 (Sciascia 2004e: 862-869). Sciascia has been accused of ‘spirito di fazione […] pseudo-garantista’ (Lupo 2007: 29), and often misread in his polemic against the anti-mafia pool. In fact, his main criticism in this famous article was against the decision to bypass the Italian Constitution and the law in general to facilitate the anti-mafia pool: ‘nel mio articolo di sabato 10 gennaio, c’era in effetti soltanto un richiamo alle regole, alle leggi dello stato, alla Costituzione della repubblica’ (2004e: 870).


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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