



Camillieri's Sicily: between History and Identity.

Italian fiction in the last two decades has been characterised by an increasing interest of both publishing houses and readers in detective fiction. This is not surprising as, over the last two centuries, this genre has been one of the most popular narrative forms. However, the number of Italian crime writers has increased not only in the traditional 'serie gialla' of Mondadori (1929 saw the birth of this series with its distinctive yellow cover which eventually gave the name to the detective genre in the Italian language, the *giallo*) but also among the volumes of highbrow publishers such as Einaudi. This phenomenon, which deserves further critical attention, has been characteristically undermined by literary critics, despite the fact that the rebirth of the Italian novel, in 1980, with Umberto Eco's *Il nome della Rosa*, can be viewed as the first sign of a renewed Italian interest in this traditionally Anglo-Saxon genre. Other established writers, during the 1980s and early 1990s, have also demonstrated a sustained interest in this genre, the best example being Antonio Tabucchi. Besides, there is a considerable number of younger writers interested in the tradition of the *roman policier* – to name but a few Carlo Lucarelli, Marcello Fois, Andrea G. Pinketts, Pino Cacucci, Danila Comastri Montanari, Paolo Colaprico, Lorian Macchiavelli and the duo Macchiavelli/Guccini. Is this the rebirth of the detective novel in Italy? For years critics have discussed the death of traditional narrative and literary genres, but there is a new generation of writers who exploit the old genres. In France, for instance, the works of Daniel Pennac – whose commercial and critical success in Italy is significant – Didier Daenincks, and of more established writers such as J. Echenoz, are a clear example of the enduring legacy of the *noir* in contemporary fiction. Petronio, who has worked extensively on the Italian *giallo*, in 1978, pointed towards the bias against this popular genre in Italy. During a congress in 1978-79 on *Trivialliteratur*, Petronio emphasised the prejudice and snobbism of the Italian academic and literary establishment against the detective novel. This attitude has changed little since then and many still seem to view the *giallo* in terms of the Literature/popular literature binary, with the implicit denial of proper literary status to the latter. Gramsci posed a similar question, in 1930, in a long note 'Sul romanzo poliziesco', in which he argued that: 'in questa letteratura poliziesca si sono sempre avute due correnti: una meccanica, d'intrigo, l'altra artistica: Chesterton oggi è il maggiore rappresentante dell'aspetto "artistico", come lo fu un tempo Poe', shifting the focus on the issue of artistic merit. Todorov, in *The typology of detective fiction*, claimed that in High Literature the mark of quality is to break the canon; in mass literature the best novel is that which does not go beyond the canon otherwise, Todorov says, from *roman policier* it becomes literature. Do we still need to redefine this genre or can we simply accept that in our postmodern age the boundaries between different literary genres are constantly being crossed and re-defined?

The following analysis of the works of the contemporary Sicilian writer Andrea Camilleri is a means to engage with two wider issues: the need to re-address the definition and status of the detective genre in Italian fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, and the relationship between the *giallo* and representations of identity. The latter issue is closely interlaced with one of the underlying questions of the 1998 Edinburgh conference on the European *roman policier*: whether detective novels are especially appropriate to convey a sense of cultural identity. In this article, a brief overview of Camilleri's works will be followed by an analysis of his use of history and his representation of cultural identity with particular reference to his detective novels. I shall also refer to other issues, namely Camilleri's debt to Sciascia and Pirandello, and the symbolic meaning of Camilleri's complex plots.

Sicilian literature has a tradition of detective novels, and more generally Sicily itself is commonly associated with mystery, crime, and dark deeds and with Sicilian stereotypes, such as murder, vendetta,

the presence of the Mafia and criminality, and *omertà*. Camilleri's novels belong to this tradition, but should also be viewed as an interesting and innovative example of the use of *giallo* to assert issues of cultural identity, or *sicilitudine*.

Camilleri is fundamentally a storyteller: he weaves complex plots and invents stories. His writing is characterised by an exceptional *vis comica*, which combines farce, slapstick and subtle irony. He has written several detective novels and two collections of detective stories. He has enjoyed a sensational popular success in Italy in the late 1990s, and especially in 1998 when seven of his books were in the top ten of the best-sellers of Italian fiction. However, he does not fall into the category of the *caso letterario* orchestrated by the cultural industry which has been, according to Pertile, a feature in Italy from the 1960s. Rather, he is a case of the 'più straordinario passaparola che la storia recente dell'editoria possa vantare'.

Success, humour and detective novels do not easily fit into the canon of High Literature and indeed Camilleri's work has not been taken seriously by the Italian literary establishment as there is still generally a diminutive attitude towards popular culture and the mere fact of popular and commercial success seems to encourage a dismissive position of Italian literary critics. The critical response to Camilleri's works is significant. There are many detractors. Giorgio Ficara in *Panorama* placed him in the illustrious tradition of Sicilian literature, and mentioned Verga, De Roberto, Tomasi di Lampedusa and Sciascia as his masters, though scathingly remarked that: 'ovviamente Camilleri è appena l'ombra di un'ombra di un'ombra di tali progenitori'. On the other hand, Raffaele La Capria, reviewing Camilleri's *La concessione del telefono* in the *Corriere della Sera*, praised his works and affirmed: 'io credo che il romanzo italiano contemporaneo abbia in Andrea Camilleri uno dei suoi rappresentanti più notevoli ed originali', and highlighted Camilleri's mastery of human comedy, the careful balance between narrative tension and the proliferation of plots; and finally, the implicit but constant and never superficial 'critical sociale' (social commentary) which we find in all his works.

Camilleri was born at Porto Empedocle in 1925 (we are thus 'in zona Pirandello': Girgenti-Agrigento is not far) and now lives in Rome. He has worked as a television and theatre director, has taught regia teatrale at the Accademia d'arte drammatica in Rome where he himself studied; he is a screenwriter and television producer - while working for the Italian RAI he produced the highly popular series of the Simenon's Maigret, as well as Eduardo De Filippo's Neapolitan plays, an early instance of his engagement with theatre and literature in dialect. So far he has written 16 books, the majority of which have been published by Sellerio, with the exception of his first novel, *Il corso delle cose* (Lalli, 1978), recently republished by Sellerio; his two collections of short stories *Un mese con Montalbano*, 1988, and *Gli arancini di Montalbano*, 1999, published by Mondadori; and the 19th-century thriller *La Mossa del cavallo* (1999, Rizzoli). These books, although different in genre, form a coherent set and parallels can be drawn among them. *La strage dimenticata* (1984) and *La bolla di componenda* (1993) are historical accounts of 19th-century Sicily which refer to episodes of Sicilian history in the age of the Risorgimento and the first decades after the unification of Italy. *Un filo di fumo* (1980), *La stagione della caccia* (1992), *Il birraio di Preston* (1995), *La concessione del telefono* (1998), and *La mossa del cavallo* (1999, Rizzoli) are novels set in the 19th-century, in the Sicilian town Vigàta, the invented name of one of the most vividly portrayed towns of contemporary Sicilian fiction. Fictional and real events depicted in his works set in 19th-century Sicily are based on the Parliamentary *Inchiesta sulle condizioni sociali ed economiche della Sicilia* (1875-1876) published in 1969 (Cappelli, Bologna). His essay *La bolla di componenda*, and novels *Il Birraio di Preston* and *La Mossa del Cavallo*, explicitly refer to the *Inchiesta*. Vigàta is also the setting of the four classic novels on which I shall concentrate in this paper, the series of four books which have as protagonist Inspector Salvo Montalbano; the novels are: *La forma dell'acqua* (1994), *Il cane di terracotta* (1996), *Il ladro di merendine* (1996) and *La voce del violino* (1997).

Though Camilleri can be described as a traditional writer, who sees his work as the deceptively simple art of storytelling, several of his works are original and innovative in terms of narrative structure. Besides, all his writings are characterised by a very distinctive use of language (dialect is inserted in the

text in a creative and idiosyncratic way still perfectly understandable on an Italian national level) and by the use of many elements of cinematic and/or theatrical art, namely the use of dialogues as the way to portray the characters, and what Camilleri describes as the ‘taglio narrativo della scena’; chapters have been replaced by sequences. Camilleri’s characters are above all ‘voices’; he has a remarkable gift for dialogue, which he described as ‘piena fiducia nel dialogo’, and which he links to his activity in the world of theatre, where the actor is primarily a voice and a body. On the written page the physicality of acting is expressed by the voice of the characters. Camilleri understands and fully exploits the function of dialogues and keeps the narrating voice to a minimum. In *La concessione del telefono* this results in the total absence of the narrator: there are only ‘Cose dette’ and ‘Cose scritte’ and a host of different characters whose distinctive features are defined by their spoken words and correspondence. Camilleri combines a Calvinian preoccupation with the narrator’s voice as a sign of the identity of the author with the art of digression, which he claims is a manifestation of the story’s own will: ‘questa parentesi non viene aperta per volontà del narratore, ma per una necessità che il racconto stesso manifesta protervamente’. The final effect is that of a polyphony of voices, which make each secondary character unique in language and tone, and which complement the proliferation of stories or microstories in which, as La Capria perceptively noted, ‘si sente che un occhio ironico coglie ogni gesto dei personaggi ed un orecchio altrettanto ironico è attento ad ogni intonazione espressiva o sottintesa’.

A distinctive feature of the Sicilian writer is his engagement with the detective novel which permeates all his literary production; his novels set in 19th-century Sicily, which are a counterpart to his two volumes of Sicilian history, share with the books on Montalbano a similar detective structure. This *récit policier*, or struttura gialla consists of the conventions of the detective genre such as suspense, the proliferation of clues, enigma and doubts, the delay in resolution of the mystery; all these maintain the reader in a state of tension between desire to know the truth and pleasure in the delay of the conclusion. The *giallo* is, thus, characterised by a progressive unfolding of a complex investigation into the initial crime, entailing the examination and evaluation of clues and hypothesis. However, the *giallo*, is not only a genre, but above all a technique, a narrative tool. What is this technique; how is it used; and to what ends? Paul Auster in *House of Glass* in his *The New York Trilogy* suggests that the central characteristic of the detective genre can be identified with the fact that in a ‘a good mystery’:

there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so (...) Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end

The crime writer, thus, plays with the centrality of details which mark the difference between the way in which the reader responds to the detective genre and other texts. Camilleri’s works with their proliferation of plots and narrative voices, and their intertextuality (instances of this can be found in the structure of *Il Birraio di Preston*, and the final ‘Catalogo dei Sogni’ in *La mossa del Cavallo*, with among others a Sicilian version of Kafka’s *incipit* of *The Metamorphosis*) have no real ‘centre’ and transform the central plot into a labyrinth, one of the recurrent metaphorical devices of Camilleri’s fiction which ultimately symbolises, as I shall argue, the Sicilian *forma mentis* and cultural identity. Besides, the continuous narrative digressions, which interrupt the flux of the narrative but also constitute the actual narrative, point to Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio*. Camilleri strongly denies the influence of Gadda on the grounds of his humbler position in comparison with one of great masters of Italian 20th-century literature. However, if one can argue that all Sicilian writers live in a post-Pirandellian age (see below), I would argue that Italian writers, and even more so detective writers, live in a post-Gaddian age and, whilst being influenced by Anglo-Saxon or European models, find in Gadda a central model.

The Sicilian writer’s choice of the detective novel is also connected with his social commitment. The attraction of the *giallo* for an author is that he/she can reach a large audience with the aim of entertaining and at the same time revealing some of the contradictions of contemporary society. Leonardo Sciascia

used the investigation to reveal social and political realities which are usually ignored or suppressed, i.e. the connivance of illegal organisations with the power élite, and the corruption which permeates Sicilian life. The failure of legal institutions and the State to guarantee the rights of its citizens encourages Sciascia to examine metaphysical concepts such as the nature of truth and the definition of law and justice. Camilleri touches upon similar issues but they are not central to the narration, though they reappear in unexpected places; for example moral judgement is left to secondary characters such as Signorina Clementina, Montalbano's primary school teacher. Sciascia's works can be differentiated from the mainstream *giallo* by his interest in revealing social and political realities, by the presence of conspiracies and attempts to occlude what is really going on. They partake in, and are among the highest examples of, a long established tradition of the *giallo engagé*. Sciascia in this respect played a seminal role firmly establishing the *giallo* as part of the tradition of *engagement* which characterised post-war French and Italian cultural production. Camilleri was a friend of Sciascia and greatly admired his works, but, despite his age, he belongs to a new generation of writers; he is a writer of the late 1980s and 1990s, and belongs to a different social and political climate. His interest in the detective genre, although it has links with the Sicilian literary tradition, should be viewed as part of a wider narrative interest in the *giallo* as creative Literature.

There is a strong similarity and osmosis between the contemporary Sicily of Inspector Montalbano and the real but also surreal world of his 19th-century Vigàta and Montelusa and the reader is induced to look for clues of this correspondence - for instance one of the characters in *La stagione della caccia* is a name-sake of Inspector Montalbano. More generally there is a strong sense of the presence and legacy of the past throughout the novels set in contemporary Sicily. In *Il cane di Terracotta*, Inspector Montalbano, while investigating a crime in which Mafiose families are involved, finds the traces of an old crime, which happened some fifty years before, and, deserting his duties, feels compelled to solve the old mystery, conducting what he calls 'un'indagine in pantofole, in case d'altri tempi, davanti a una tazza di caffè'. The theme of a lost Sicily is indeed a powerful one and Inspector Montalbano seems to take refuge in the dream of an irrevocably lost Sicily, rural and solitary which he describes as 'aspra, di scarso verde, sulla quale pareva (ed era) impossibile campare e dove ancora c'era qualcuno, ma sempre più raro, con gambali, coppola e fucile in spalla, che lo salutava da sopra la mula portandosi due dita alla pampèra', and who would have probably later told his wife and kids: "'U sapiti stamattina? Un'automobili passò!'".' It is an almost utopian space, a space of nostalgia, memory and history. The meaning of Camilleri's writing is precisely an attempt to save the cultural and historical memory of Sicily, as he argues in *Il gioco della mosca*, in which, talking about his land, he declares:

Il mio era un paese di terra e di mare. Aveva un hinterland abbastanza grande da potervi fare allignare i germi di una cultura contadina che s'intrecciavano, si impastavano con quelli di una cultura più articolata e mossa, che era propria dei pescatori e dei marinai. Dal tempo della mia infanzia molte cose sono naturalmente *cambiate*, in meglio o in peggio non m'interessa, ma proprio perché *cambiate* rischiano di *perdersi*, di *svanire* anche all'interno della *memoria* (my emphasis)

To preserve the memory of the past Camilleri chooses the detective novel. The investigations of Inspector Montalbano are, thus, an inquiry into the mystery of Sicilian identity.

The cultural heritage of Sicily, the mediterranean melting-pot, has helped to shape a peculiar image of this land. Traditionally Sicily has been viewed, and I refer here to its own writers, as the place in which many contrasting elements, which are difficult to decipher, come together. Camilleri has identified this enigmatic character of Sicily with a precise historical moment, the 1860s and 1870s, the first two decades of the Italian Nation State, the time when the reasons for the existence of a subterranean culture, of powers different from the Piedmontese-Italian United State, were born - and *Il Birraio di Preston* is an amusing symbol of this, with the exhilarating linguistic collision of many dialects: Tuscan, Piedmontese, Milanese, Roman and the Italo-Sicilian of Camilleri's prose. This peculiar character of Sicily seem to lend itself to the laws of detective investigation and Camilleri chooses the detective story, and exploits the genre as if it were better able than any other type of writing to recapture some essential

elements of Sicilian identity/ *sicilitudine*.

There are many ways in which Camilleri conveys issues of cultural identity. The following analysis will concentrate on subject matter, food, characters, language and space.

In Camilleri's novels, there are obvious references to the Mafia; most of the detective novels of Inspector Montalbano deal with crimes related to Mafiose families. Leonardo Sciascia from the early 1960s focused on the interrelationship between the Mafia, organised crime, and the political establishment, and on the problems encountered by those who wanted to execute justice and the web of crime/Mafia/state, that is the *oscuri complotti* which took an existential dimension - this culminated in the chilling tale of murders and corruption of *Il contesto* of 1971. Camilleri in his *gialli* does not focus on Mafiosi crimes, although Mafiose families are sometimes involved. His latest novel *La gita a Tindari* features for the first time a Mafioso, albeit of the old generation. The Mafia and the corruption of the Italian central government are present and visible, but they are the backdrop against which Inspector Salvo Montalbano investigates the crimes of ordinary people, or old crimes; and against which a host of other characters have their own private mysteries. Camilleri's detective novels tell not so much the story of a murder but the story of a social context; its past, traditions and *forma mentis*. There are also other critical references to current Italian political affairs - the *pentiti*, the corruption of the centralised Roman Government, which is and has always been unable to understand the peculiar problems of Sicily, and, related to this issue, also the Italian regional and local divide and North-South rivalry. These elements ultimately have their roots in 19th-century Sicilian history, and they bring back the issue of the 'questione meridionale' and the way the North-South divide was created by the 'malgoverno'.

Food is another symbol of the Sicilian land and it also belongs to a Mediterranean and /or Latin tradition which stresses the symbolic and highly cultural nature of food. The recurrent motif of food in Camilleri's detective novels suggests the influence of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and his Catalan inspector, Pepe Carvalho, who is obsessed by food and sex. The allusion to the Catalan writer is explicit in *Il cane di terracotta*, in which Inspector Montalbano is said to be reading a book by Vázquez Montalbán: 'lesse qualche pagina del libro di Montalbán capendoci poco'. Besides, Camilleri admitted that he chose the name Montalbano as a reference to Vázquez Montalbán: 'ho scelto il nome Montalbano perché è uno dei più comuni in Sicilia, e anche come omaggio a Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, scrittore che amo moltissimo'. However, Montalbano does not model himself on the Catalan inspector and in respect of food he is a distinctly Sicilian gourmet - he has a Sicilian 'cammarera' Adelina, who cooks the most refined delicacies for him, such as 'la salsa corallina, fatta di uova di aragosta e ricci di mare, per condire gli spaghetti'. In September 1998, Camilleri was invited at the Festa dell'Unità in Bologna to participate in a meeting with Vázquez Montalbán: Camilleri made clear his debt to the Catalan writer and referred to two books in particular which influenced him: *El Pianista*, which helped Camilleri to solve the problem of narrative time in *Il Birraio di Preston*, and *Asesinato en el Comité Central*, a detective novel with Inspector Pepe Carvalho. Camilleri shares with Montalbán the use of the detective genre, with the male detective as the chief protagonist; they both created a highly successful series. What is different is the way in which they tackle the problem of the political agenda of fictional works: the Catalan writer, who was a member of the Catalan Communist Party under Franco's regime, takes an overt political stance; Camilleri, a member of the old PCI, though at times very critical of the Italian establishment, consciously detaches himself from the open political engagement; he uses irony as both a filter and antidote against political literature. Paradoxically, Camilleri's critique of contemporary Italy is stronger in his novels set in 19th-century Sicily, than in Inspector Montalbano's series.

The protagonist of Camilleri's detective series, Inspector Salvo Montalbano, is another signifier of *sicilitudine*. His instinct, the weapon which he uses to decipher the clues around him, is, of course, a chief characteristic of many detectives, who either possess the rational and inflexible logic of Sherlock Holmes or have a more creative and instinctive method of analysis. Montalbano undoubtedly belongs to the latter category and brings to the instinctive type of detective a distinct Sicilian flavour. He is like a hunting dog surrounded by colleagues who, by a strange coincidence, are called Augello (Bird), Gallo

(Rooster), Galluzzo (Little Rooster), Tortorella (Turtle-Dove), as in a Sicilian *bestiarium* or rather hen-house. Indistinct thoughts or intuitions suddenly come into his mind; they are forebodings which he himself cannot decipher: 'un pensiero del tutto immotivato gli passò fulmineo per la testa lasciandosi appresso un sottilissimo odore di zolfo, quello di cui abitualmente si profumava il diavolo'. He also has his own way of conducting investigations of crimes by listening to rumours and gossip. He sends off his assistants to find out everything about their suspects, and on one occasion specifies what he means by 'everything': 'Tutto tutto per me significa macari le voci, le filàme'. In *Il gioco della mosca*, Camilleri explains the meaning of this word: 'filamento quasi invisibile, ancor più sottile di quelli che costituiscono la tela del ragno (...). Significa calunnia. Dalle mie parti il venticello rossiniano si muta in questa aerea rete di filame la cui invisibilità non significa mancanza di resistenza'. Here Camilleri represents Sicily as the land of the word which is not spoken but that is like an imperceptible web, and unless one knows the rules he/she is trapped. But, above all, Montalbano possesses the innate Sicilian capacity, or rather acquired skill, to sense and understand reality from the slightest hints. This peculiarly Sicilian character is embodied in the portrait of a 'cammarera', a waitress, who, entering the room in which Montalbano and his assistants are, exclaims "Sbirri siete?" and makes Montalbano wonder to himself 'Quanti secoli di soprusi polizieschi c'erano voluti per affinare in una fimmina siciliana una così fulminea capacità d'individuazione di uno sbirro?'. The *sicilitudine* of his investigations is also portrayed at the beginning of *La voce del violino* in a comic episode. One of Montalbano's assistants, Mr Catarella, who hardly speaks Italian or indeed Sicilian at all and who takes Montalbano's calls, informs the inspector of a phone-call from Florida, which conjures up to the mind of a panic-stricken Montalbano memories of American cop movies: 'In un lampo vide se stesso in felpa fare footing assieme a baldi, atletici agenti americani dell'antinarcotici impegnati con lui in una complessa indagine sul traffico di droga'. The reader is also induced to think that this time a new adventure, possibly American, awaits him/her. However, later on, Florida turns out to be the police station of Floridia, near Siracusa.

As Knight has argued in his study of form and ideology in crime fiction, different types of detectives result from different epistemologies. Montalbano has both logic deductions and an instinctive method of detection which is presented as typically Sicilian but also suggests a world in which a different epistemology reigns. It is both a postmodern labyrinth in which irrationality prevails, and a Sicilian maze which encapsulates a number of socio-cultural responses to the problem of crime of which Sicily itself is a most potent symbol.

Montalbano's unglamorous and understated investigations - his 'indagini in pantofole' - the contrast between the Sicilian inspector and the efficiency and confidence of the American cops and the hard-boiled Private Eyes, introduce another element which is a powerful way to represent the *sicilitudine* of the fictional microcosm of Vigàta and Montelusa: the anti-heroic nature of Camilleri's characters. Camilleri's anti-heroes are Sicilian women, with their old-fashioned dignity and beauty; old pensioners who help Inspector Montalbano in his investigations; his assistants, who at a crucial moment of investigation want to have their lunch break and fail to understand why their chief is upset by their behaviour. One of them is particularly interesting: Catarella, the receptionist of the police station, who is totally inept, though in a comical twist he becomes in the latest novels of the series the computer expert of the provincial police station. He is a typical 'raccomandato'; his portrayal, although critical, avoids bitterness, since Catarella represents just another aspect of contemporary Sicilian or rather Italian society. A crowd of anti-heroes can be found in the collection of stories *Un Mese con Montalbano*. Many of these characters have a Pirandellian echo. They are placed in socially abnormal situations, and are forced to wear masks. Their acts are always apparently inexplicable, and they are absorbed in their own mysteries. The crime marks the moment of rebellion, the violent contrast between madness and the 'normality' which is structured and defined by social conventions. In *Il Gioco Della Mosca*, the Pirandellian nature of Sicily and its people is amusingly portrayed in the entry 'Sunnù Così di Pirinnellu', which explains the meaning behind one of Camilleri's examples of *lessico familiare*.

Una sera d'estate del 1960 (...) stavo a guardare alla televisione Enrico IV di Pirandello quando bussarono alla porta e si presentò un vecchio contadino: in mattinata mi aveva chiesto il favore di

stilargli una lunga e complessa petizione. Fornito dei documenti che mi aveva portato, cominciai a scrivere mentre lui si sedeva davanti al televisore rimasto acceso . Lo vidi via via farsi sempre più attento, chino in avanti, le braccia appoggiate sulle gambe. Finii che anche la commedia era da poco terminata.

"Vi è piaciuta?" domandai.

Fece una smorfia, si raddrizzò.

"Bah! C'è uno che dice di essere imperatore ma non lo è per davvero. Però lo diventa sul serio quando gli fa comodo per scansarsi da un omicidio. E gli altri ora ci credono, ora no. Mi parinu cosi di Pirinnellu"

Though there are no precise textual references, Pirandello is the single most important influence on Camilleri, since, as he admitted, most Italian and, in particular, Sicilian writers live in a post-Pirandellian age.

Other symbols of Sicilian identity, such as language and the description of the land, although they might seem obvious ways to depict *sicilitudine*, are articulated in a less obvious way and shape the image of Sicily as the land of mystery, which can be penetrated only by the laws and structure of the detective novel.

Language is a common means to represent the character of a country and its culture. In Camilleri, this is one of the most interesting aspects of his writing, in which he incorporates words from dialect in an otherwise fully Italian prose. From a brief analysis it is possible to establish Camilleri's linguistic game: he plays with selected dialect words, inverting the position of noun-adjective or noun-adverb, or repositioning segments of phrases in an unfamiliar order, but his syntax is fully Italian. The use of dialect is, of course, a signifier of Sicily and a statement of the independent status of Sicilian culture. The expressiveness of dialect is such because it can convey nuances of language which would otherwise be lost; nuances which are expressive of a specific culture and past. However, Camilleri is not interested in a linguistic study of the Sicilian dialect. Instead, he created his own language, a pastiche of Italian and Sicilian, which combines the immediacy of the spoken language with the image of Sicily as an enigmatic land, in which language is itself a riddle to solve. *Il gioco della mosca* is fundamental to understand the complexity of Camilleri's portrayal of Sicily in which language plays such a central part. This little dictionary of the words and sayings of Camilleri's hometown, Porto Empedocle, which also contains cameos of Pirandello, is half-way between a linguistic analysis and *petite-histoire* or rather Camilleri's personal history. In the introduction to the book, he defines the entries as microstories or histories in the double meaning of the Italian 'storia': 'io ho raccolto alcune microstorie, anzi sarebbe meglio dire storie cellulari, e le ho rielaborate: le intitolazioni sono la conseguenza logica delle storie, la conclusione posta in testa e non in coda'. The metaphor of the riddle is used; the proverbs and sayings are 'micro-investigations' which the reader can operate in the Sicilian language. One of the entries explains the meaning of the verb 'taliari', which is a powerful symbol of *sicilitudine*. 'Taliari', also used in the reflexive form 'taliarsi', means 'to look', however it also means 'the word which is not spoken' but which asserts its presence powerfully by a simple glance, a mute system of communication which is peculiarly Sicilian and which Camilleri suggests might derive from the history of the island, in which words could not be trusted. What I would like to suggest here is that the double meaning of this word and the culture it expresses imply that reality never is what it looks like and, thus, life is ultimately an investigation into the nature of reality.

Pertile, talking about plurilingualism and postmodernism, noted how it has become customary in Italian literary criticism to mention Gadda's influence 'every time a piece of narrative seems to deviate from the norm at the lexical syntactical or rhetorical level'. This has happened to Camilleri as his engagement with both detective fiction and plurilingualism seemed to naturally lend itself to a Gaddian interpretation. However, in Camilleri the use of the linguistic pastiche has a different function from Gadda's *macaronico*: the ethical function of Gadda's expressionist parody and the gnoseological dimension it

entailed have been replaced by a mimetic search for cultural and historical identity. This is Camilleri's own idiom, the language of his childhood and youth, his own 'lessico familiare'. It is also a choice in line with contemporary Italian narrative which, by and large, bears a close resemblance to the spoken language. Finally, it is a choice which underlines the political dimension of language and the culture it represents. By presenting Sicily as a colonised land, which has suffered linguistic and cultural cleansing, Camilleri's language becomes the essential vehicle to retrieve memory and the past, and a symbol of the history and identity of the culture it represent.

The final element to undergo my scrutiny is the portrayal of the Sicilian land and its labyrinthine ways. As Schmid as argued, space is never a neutral backdrop for the action of the detective stories, 'rather, the spaces of detective fiction are always integral to the texts'. The detective has to engage with the setting in order to understand the space which has produced the crime and solve it. Vigàta is a microcosm of Sicily and the way in which the reader can identify with this imaginary town by means of a precise topographical survey of the land recalls once again the metaphor of the riddle, of Sicily as the land in which everyday life is a *giallo*. The reader knows every turn of the ideal road which leads from Vigàta to Montelusa and often the route itself is a riddle to solve, as in this passage from *La voce del violino*. The description of the 'ideal' route from Vigàta to a village in the middle of the countryside combines actual references to problems caused to the land of Sicily by the *speculazione edilizia* in the 1960s and 1970s with a symbolic reference to the mystery of that land and its impenetrable ways/roads:

ogni persona di buon senso, dotata di un conoscenza macari superficiale della viabilità siciliana, per andare da Vigàta a Calapiano avrebbe in primisi pigliato la scorrimento veloce per Catania, poi avrebbe imboccato la strada che tornava all'interno verso i millecentoventi metri di Troina, per calare dopo ai seicentocinquantuno metri di Gagliano attraverso una specie di viottolo che aveva conosciuto il primo e l'ultimo manto di asfalto cinquanta anni avanti, ai primi tempi dell'autonomia regionale, e infine raggiungere Calapiano percorrendo una provinciale che chiaramente si rifiutava d'essere considerata tale essendo la sua autentica aspirazione quella di tornare ad assumere l'aspetto della terremotata trazzera che un tempo era stata. Non era finita

He then goes on to describe a little path 'una striscia di pietrisco a serpentina che persino le capre nutrivano qualche perplessità a metterci sopra una sola delle quattro zampe di cui disponevano' and finally concludes 'quello era, diciamo così, il percorso ottimale', however, Montalbano 'naturalmente non lo scelse'. Sicily is a labyrinth, where the land itself is a maze in which one has to know the byways, in which a trip by car becomes an adventure and an encounter with the past, which is usually figured in the solitary peasant in a landscape still untouched by civilisation.

As I have suggested above, alongside the main investigation and narration, Camilleri constructs a labyrinth of other stories or microstories. Many of the secondary characters have their own mysteries and the structure of the narration is continuously fragmented. The best example of this practice is in the novel *Il Birraio di Preston*. The very structure of *Il Birraio di Preston* is a mystery to unravel: the chapter headings are taken from titles or introductory phrases from other novelists (one of the chapters is entitled 'Se una notte d'invernata tinta' which obviously refers to Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*) and the first chapter, which tells the story from the point of view of a different narrator, is the conclusion of the novel, with an explicit reference to André Gide's *La porte étroite*. The reader has already heard at this point the other side of the story and is invited to distrust the second and last narrator and his pro-government bias. The reader is also openly invited to construct his/her own novel, changing the order of the chapters; in a post scriptum, Camilleri wrote 'Arrivati a quest'ora di notte, vale a dire all'indice, i superstiti lettori si saranno certamente resi conto che la successione dei capitoli disposta dall'autore non era che una semplice proposta: ogni lettore infatti, se lo vuole, può stabilire una sua personale sequenza'. Besides, the obscure historical event which suggested Camilleri's imaginary account - the decision of the Florentine prefetto Bortuzzi (in real life Fortuzzi) to open the newly built theatre of Vigàta/Caltanissetta with an unknown opera and the mysterious fire which destroyed the theatre - suggests that historical research is ultimately a detective story. As a consequence, this allegedly popular genre is invested with a new power. It is the old question of crime and punishment: when the

latter is not possible one should at least avoid the biggest crime, which for Camilleri is oblivion, as he stated in *La strage dimenticata*: 'a me interessa che la seconda strage, quella della memoria, sia in qualche modo riscattata'.

Finally, Camilleri suggests a further dimension of the detective novel. In *La voce del violino*, a dialogue between Inspector Montalbano and signorina Clementina, has an explicit reference to the existence and meaning of the detective story, as well as containing a metaphor of life as an investigation, a riddle to solve:

"Non legge libri gialli?"

"Raramente. E poi che significa libro giallo? Che significa romanzo poliziesco?"

"Beh, c'è tutta una letteratura che ...".

"Credo ma non mi piacciono le etichette. Vuole che le racconti una bella storia gialla? Dunque, un tale, dopo molte vicende avventurose, diventa il capo di una città. A poco a poco però i suoi sudditi cominciano ad ammalarsi di un male oscuro, una specie di peste. Allora questo signore si mette a indagare per scoprire la causa del male. Ingada che t'indaga, scopre che la radice del male è proprio lui e si punisce'

Clementina, who initially denies the existence of the detective novel as a literary genre, via the reference to Oedipus, the ancestral detective story, creates a fascinating hypothesis of the detective nature of all stories and of human life as one of them. The many ways through which Camilleri represents *sicilitudine* - social, linguistic, political and historical themes - ultimately all come together to form a metaphor of Sicily as the land where the very shape of the landscape, and its history, find their place in the realm of the detective novel, which is a symbolic model of the Sicilian collective *forma mentis*.

Giuliana Pieri
Royal Holloway
