

# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SPIRAL

---

Riccardo Giacconi

In 2005 Gabriele Pedullà completes an essay, which will become the introduction to a new edition of Beppe Fenoglio's book *Una questione privata* ("A Private Affair"), published by Einaudi. A significant portion of Pedullà's essay focuses on the place the novel held in the author's life and in the history of Italian literature. *Una questione privata* was first published in 1963.

*After the initial wave of novels about the Partisan movement which occurred between approximately 1945 and 1949 and a lull the following decade, we witness a second wave of novels centred on the Italian Resistance in the beginning of the 1960's. [...] This last phase however was the final one in a declining movement and with the exception of a few short stories by Calvino, Levi, Bilenchi and Rigoni Sern, after the publication of Il partigiano Johnny ("Johnny the Partisan"), published posthumously in 1968, no further significant literature was published on the subject of the Italian Resistance.*

Pedullà's essay uses a perspective, which was formulated in two phases by Italo Calvino to discuss the 'Resistance novel'. In an essay of his written in 1949, Calvino both provides an evaluation of a part of the Italian literary output as well as opening up a sense of expectation:

*To those who ask if Italian literature has produced a novel that encompasses "all of the Italian Resistance" (and I mean "all", whether discussing a single village, or a single group, I mean "all" as in its essence), a work of literature that can honestly claim, "I represent the Resistance", the answer is unequivocally, "Unfortunately, not yet".*

Fifteen years later, in the introduction to the 1964 re-edition of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* ("The Path to the Spiders' Nest"), Calvino completes the former thought expressed above. According to him, when his book was written,

*creating a 'literature of the Resistance' was still a wide open question; writing 'the Resistance novel' was imperative. [...] Not that I was so culturally ill-informed to not know that history's influence over literature is indirect, slow and often contradictory; I knew full well that many great historical events had transpired without inspiring a Great Novel which would capture them, and this was also true of the "century of the novel" par excellence; I was aware that the great Risorgimento novel [Risorgimento being the movement which led to the unification of Italy] had never been written... We all knew that, we weren't that naïve: but I think that once one has witnessed or taken an active part in a significant time in history, he feels the weight of a unique responsi-*

bility [...] By the 1950's the general landscape had changed, starting with the Italian literary masters: Pavese had died, Vittorini closed himself off in silent protest, Moravia in this new context grew to acquire a different significance (no longer existentialist but naturalist), and the Italian novel was moving down its moderate-elegiac-sociological path which we all took and where we all carved out more or less comfortable niches for ourselves (or where we looked for escape routes).

But some writers stayed the course of this fragmentary epic moment: generally, it was the more isolated writers, the ones who were not so 'well-introduced' the ones who kept their momentum. And it was the most solitary of them all who managed to write the novel we all dreamt of writing, when none of us was expecting it to materialise, it was Beppe Fenoglio, who managed to write it but not even finish it (*Una questione privata*) and he died in his 40's before seeing it in print. The book our generation wanted to write now exists, and all of our work makes sense only now; thanks to Fenoglio we can say that an era has been completed, and it is only now that we are certain that that moment in time truly existed.

Calvino sees Fenoglio's novel as the crystallization of the thesis he had laid out fifteen years earlier. He proclaims *Una questione privata* to be a messianic work, a last ditch, defiant gesture that was unexpected but which brought redemption to all the time Italian writers had spent working on the creation of a 'Resistance literature'; the book gave meaning to their imperative beliefs. Said imperative can be specifically traced back to a statement Fenoglio made in May 1959, a watershed moment that separated his 1959 collection of stories, *Primavera di bellezza* ("Spring of Beauty"), together with *Il partigiano Johnny* ("Johnny the Partisan" – which was published posthumously in 1968) from the material that would later become *Una questione privata*:

*The new book, instead of giving an overview from 1943-1945, will focus on a sin-*

*gle episode that takes place in the summer of 1944, and I will attempt to make all the details and facets of the civil war flow into this one episode.*

In March 1960, in a letter to his editor Livio Garzanti, Fenoglio adds another thought to his change of course:

*I have suddenly changed my mind and line of thought. A new story jumped into my head, a story that stands on its own, a romantic entanglement, not with the Italian civil war as a background, but a story that unfolds right in the midst of said war. I instantly felt passionate about it, and I still do.*

How does Story become part of History? This seems to be the fundamental crux of Fenoglio's change of direction: on the one hand is *Il partigiano Johnny*, in which History is perpetually glued to the main character's life, a protagonist who lives his story in a way which allows us to witness the facts of the war as if it were a historical document. On the other, *Una questione privata* is the perfect connection between the Resistance and the shape of a novel insofar as it comes precisely from the articulation of a figure and a ground that Fenoglio manages (and has the courage) to fine tune. History, in this case unfolds purely in function of the events, which touch the main character. However, it is not simply a loss of information about the historical backdrop of the novel, because as Calvino said, in *Una questione privata* "the Resistance is portrayed exactly as it was, on the inside and out, written so truly, as it never had been written about before, limpidly conserved for years". Gabriele Pedullà adds: "Milton's private affair lit up the great collective passion of the time, better than any overview, just like Fenoglio had never been so true to the historic truth as when he decided to sacrifice the cult of lived experience to a writer's freedom". *Una questione privata* (as its title implies, a title which may not be Fenoglio's) holds all the Italian Resistance by way of *example* – a term which Giorgio Agamben says the following of:

*The paradigm is an isolated case that is removed from its context, only in the measure that it, in showing its singularity, makes a new whole comprehensible, a new whole, which the very paradigm builds. Hence, making an example is complex, it presupposes that the term which functions as the paradigm is deactivated from its normal usage, not so it can be moved to another context, but on the contrary, to show the canon of its usage, that is not possible to show otherwise.*

The implicit paradox in the term ‘historical novel’ unmasks the impossibility of a stable and equal relationship between the two terms. It is a fluid articulation between character and background that can assume different shapes. Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* was published in Italy by Mondadori under the science fiction series, “Urania”. The Italian translation of the first book (*Foundation*, 1951), entitled *Cronache della Galassia* (“Chronicles from the Galaxy”), was published in 1963, the same year *Una questione privata* came out. The two subsequent books were published in 1964 under the titles *Il crollo della Galassia centrale* (“The Collapse of the Central Galaxy”) and *L'altra faccia della spirale* (“The Other Side of the Spiral”). They were all translated by Cesare Scaglia. From 1961 Carlo Fruttero was the editor of the “Urania” series, and in 1964 he was joined by Franco Lucentini. In a re-edition of the trilogy, Fruttero and Lucentini have the following to say:

*Where does the fascination with this immense galactic fresco come from, what makes it so irresistibly readable? First and foremost, it is its very immensity, or rather the impression of immensity that it manages to evoke. The ponderous passage of time, [...] the masterful orbiting of intrigues create an indefinable, suggestive sense of ‘expansion’, a sort of infinite background of words, that the reader slowly gets ensnared by. [...] Once he has established the tone (the only tone possible) to convey a remote and cold subject matter by definition, [...]*

*Asimov puts his vast storyline into place, a storyline inspired – as he himself admitted – by Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. [...] There is no doubt that the fundamental reason the *Trilogy* is such a success is the fact that it is a history book.*

Fruttero and Lucentini describe Asimov’s trilogy as a historical novel. It is a completely different figure-ground organization from Fenoglio’s (not only in *Una questione privata*). Asimov’s work is a choral saga, made up of independent episodes with distinct characters: this format is a consequence of the fact that each of the three books was first published in episodes in magazines. Since Asimov’s novel is fiction, one wonders how to justify the term ‘historical’ used by Fruttero and Lucentini. In fact, Asimov employs a series of several events and characters in order to provide the reader with multiple points of view from which to observe a much wider story (literally involving an entire galaxy) unfolding. This background can be described as historical (even if not realistic) by virtue of its operating as a context where various events completely independent of one another occur. And yet in Asimov’s *Trilogy* it is that very context which the author wishes to address – the single events and individual characters being subordinate to the ‘historical’ background.

The *paradigm* device and the study of the articulation of Story and History call for the introduction of the concept of ‘genre’. The possibility of viewing Resistance literature as a literary genre has often been discussed, as have been the possible inauspicious consequences of such a possibility, in terms of loss of an ethical-political worth caused by abstracting and fixing the historical framework. Speaking of the start of a new relationship between figure and ground with reference to *Una questione privata* and Resistance narrative, Pedullà claims that for Fenoglio,

*the fight of the Italian Resistance suddenly took on a completely new meaning in his eyes. No longer the theme, even if it was the privileged theme, but a huge metaphor of the human condition: an inexhaustible subject, at least in terms of potential, since capable of hosting any story within it. Something that was increasingly similar to what sea-faring and the vast ocean meant to his beloved Conrad: a symbol of the spirit, a demanding demon, an experiment with man.*

A genre undoubtedly presupposes the potential of a series of elements to “host any story within it”. The Resistance in literature becomes a landscape, a narrative context whose values are shared by a culture, which *receives* the works and makes them their own. It is by referring to a specific environment (post-war Italy), that the references to values become effective for Resistance literature. And it is only later, when those values are both sufficiently clarified (by almost two decades of literature) and distant (thanks to historical perspective) that one can speak of *genre*: by 1963, twenty years have passed since the war and a countless number of books have been published on the subject. The way in which *Una questione privata* articulates storyline and History gives life to (while also ostensibly putting an end to) the ‘Resistance literature genre’. The responsibility, the imperative, the duty and the drive of which Calvino speaks are tied to the ‘imperative’ of providing society with a pattern of values, a shared horizon where stories can be crafted. Once such shared horizon has been instilled and established in society, then Resistance literature can start including an element of genre that, to a certain extent, moves it away from lived experience. Calvino’s introduction to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* ends with a bitterness which seems to hold on to a sense of regret for having reduced the ethical thrust into a literary genre, through the collateral effect of a group effort shared by many post-war writers.

*So I look back on my life, to that time which was filled with images and meaning: the partisan fight, the months that counted like years and from which we should have been able to cull faces and warnings and landscapes and thoughts and episodes and words and emotions: it’s all distant and foggy, the pages are there with unabashed assuredness that I know too well to be deceptive, the pages that had already been written in conflict with the memories of an event still present, huge, which had seemed stable once and for all: the experience – and I don’t need them, I need everything else, precisely what is missing*

The genre speaks to the society it addresses and in which it finds success; at the same time however, it speaks *of* itself. In the early Sixties, Italian society received the second wave of books on the subject of Italian partisans and Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* at the same time. The reception Asimov received is tied to the science fiction genre on which Mondadori’s “Urania” series (started in 1952) was focused. As already stated, the reception a book receives is tied to a series of values that a society assimilates and to a series of reference points. Science fiction, just like Resistance literature, concerns itself with the creation of a context where to situate a series of actions. Furthermore, in the specific case of Asimov’s novels there is a somewhat precise definition of historical framework. The status of ‘genre’, in terms of both sci-fi novel and Resistance novel, presupposes a stabilization of the historic framework in which the plot is placed, and therefore a certain distance from it. Seeing that the same society, in the same time frame received both *Una questione privata* and the *Foundation Trilogy*, it is legitimate to question whether both works drew on the same cultural landscape and on the same set of values. In the early Sixties, science fiction and Resistance were two genres, which inhabited the same literary panorama.