The Metaphysical Detective Novel
and Sciascia’s *Il Contesto*: Parody or Tyranny of a Borrowed Form?

It is by now a widely accepted fact that the detective novel has become a favorite structuring principle for many post-modern writers of fiction. The detective story with its strong, well-known conventions, its own penchant to parody itself and its privileged status as a natural paradigm for the hermeneutic act of reading, serves well two main goals of much post-modern fiction, namely, the unmasking or flaunting of the linguistic or narrative structures of the text and the challenging of the reader to participate directly in creating or conferring meaning(s). Indeed writers of what is called “metaphysical detective fiction” such as, Nabokov, Dürrenmatt, Robbe-Grillet, John Barthes, to name a few, use the structure of the popular detective novel to shape their narratives and parody its various standard conventions, the most common being that of the detective’s traditional immunity (Hudde 322-42). This immunity was a logical result of the detective’s slightly superior investigative ability; and the reader, who normally identifies with the detective, comes under direct attack when the investigation leads to puzzles, paradoxes, endless labyrinths and, in many cases, death for the investigator. Thus, Michael Holquist concludes that the primary target of parody in the metaphysical detective novel is the popular detective novel’s reassuring ideology of “radical rationality”(135-56). Radical rationality assures that there are no threatening, unsolvable mysteries in the universe, only false theories. The mind, when given enough time, can understand everything because the relationship between ideas and things is a totally rational one.

However, metaphysical detective novels have appeared in almost every national literature since 1945 and it is difficult to generalize about their use of parody and its meaning. The four detective novels of contemporary Sicilian writer and journalist, Leonardo Sciascia (*Il giorno della civetta, A ciascuno il suo, Il contesto, Todo modo*), are a case in point. Although in all four texts the conventional happy ending is subverted—in *A ciascuno il suo* and *Il contesto* amateur detective Laurana and private investigator Rogas, respectively, not only fail to bring the criminal to justice but are murdered as well—only one novel, *Il contesto*, bears the subtitle “una pa-
rodia.” Are we to conclude then that a different type of parody is at work here than in the previous narratives? Ulrich Schulz-Buschaus classifies *Il giorno della civetta* and *A ciascuno il suo* as realistic, social parodies whereas *Il contesto* and *Todo modo* are seen as more complicated, generic experiments in a metaphysical vein (43–53). In this connection, however, Buschaus only discusses the more intensified attack on the reader in the latter two since the murderers of Rogas and Don Gaetano are not revealed. To be sure, the philosophical nature of *Il contesto* is immediately apparent from the increased number of literary allusions to other metaphysical detective novels, such as those of Borges and Chesterton, and references to French philosophers such as Pascal, Descartes, and Sciascia’s self-proclaimed models, Voltaire, Diderot and D’Alembert. Despite this, literary critics have tended in general to dismiss the subtitle ‘parody’ and stress the thematic similarities between *Il contesto* and the previous novels. Here again, with the death of Rogas reason falls victim to superstition, corruption and an irrational desire for power, the main difference being that the defeat of reason is no longer specifically linked to a Sicilian setting. Italian leftist critics have concentrated on Sciascia’s supposed political statement. *Il contesto* is the most controversial of all his works. The cooperation of the Revolutionary Opposition Party (“II Partito Rivoluzionario Internazionale”) with the corrupt and incompetent reigning power which blames murders on leftist “gruppuscoli” for the purpose of frightening the public and staying in power was immediately understood, in Italy, as an attack on the *compromesso storico* made in 1969 between the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats. The tragic and mysterious death of Rogas, a competent detective with a philosophical bent, who was murdered either after he had assassinated Amar, the head of the opposition party, or along with him to prevent the two from uncovering the power conspiracy, seemed only a lightly-veiled prophecy of the result of the *compromesso* Sciascia spoke so openly against; a prophecy that, in view of recent theories of collaboration of political parties with terrorists, has been at least partially fulfilled.

Recently Sandro Moraldo (389–99) has analyzed in more detail the “metaphysical” connection by comparing *Il contesto* to another metaphysical detective novel by Borges, *La muerte y la brújula*. Sciascia is well acquainted with Borges’ work about which he has written admiringly, and the similarities between the two stories have been noted by other critics. Moraldo emphasizes the following similarities in the portraits of the two detectives, and in various themes and motifs. Both Rogas and Lönnrrot are intellectual types who are distinguished in the narrative from the unimaginative police force with which they work. In both novels the mirror motif
is used to suggest a close identification of the killer and detective. It has often been suggested that Red Scharlach is to be understood allegorically as Lönnerot’s alter ego (Wheelock 89–92; Bennett 269). When going to interview the fanatical Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Riches, Rogas, while stepping out of an elevator, comes face to face with the murderer Crès whom he mistakes fleetingly for his own mirror image. During the meeting the judge launches into an invective against Voltaire and demonstrates through abstract logic the impossibility of judicial error. Rogas’ response is to recall word for word Borges’ Argumentum Ornithologicum, in which he (Borges) parodies the Cartesian method of proof by proving with seeming logic the existence of God when the narrator can approximate how many birds he saw in a vision. Finally, Moraldo points out, the ability of both detectives to solve the case at hand turns out to be the ability to play into the trap of the criminal who is planting the clues. Thus, Moraldo concludes that Sciascia, like Barthes, Nabokov and the others depicts here reason’s inability to comprehend the chaos of reality. The idea of order represented by the classical detective novel is parodied by showing that if there were a preexisting cosmic scheme in the world it would more likely result in man’s annihilation and not his salvation.4

However interesting these similarities may be they still do not prove that parody functions here to produce the same meaning as in Borges. Significantly, Moraldo leaves out the most salient difference between the two detectives which is the key to understanding the basic difference between the two narratives. Sciascia radically distinguishes Rogas from the hypothesis-hungry Lönnerot. La muerte y la brújula begins with the murder of rabbi Yarmolinsky who is found stabbed to death in his room. The policeman in charge of the investigation, Treviranus, explains (correctly, we find out later) that the rabbi had been murdered in error, having been sleeping in the very next room to the Tetarch of Galilee, the possessor of some very desirable saphires. Lönnerot haughtily rejects this answer: “Possible but not interesting,” he replies. “You will answer that reality does not have the least obligation to be interesting. I shall reply that reality may dispense with that obligation, but not hypothesis” (Borges 500).

Lönnerot’s exaggerated desire to make an interesting story echoes parodically the great Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collin’s The Moonstone when he announces to his dull sidekick that in all his experience he had never met such a thing as a trifle. Indeed in the classical detective novel, the detective’s job is not only to solve the crime but also to inflate with meaning objects that would normally have been overlooked, trivial objects which then surprisingly make an interesting story (Sturrock 125–33). It is Lönnerot’s invention of a “rabbinical plot” based upon some cryptic notes
found in the rabbi’s typewriter which paradoxically keeps the plot going, since the murder had been solved, and brings about his own murder. In the metaphysical detective novel most often parody is achieved through exaggeration and intensification of the genre’s most well-known conventions (Holquist 145–48). Lönnrot carries Cuff’s remark to the extreme. Thus his fiction is a systematic misreading of reality. Here and elsewhere Borges inflates fictional conventions to examine and parody man’s fiction-making tendency pushed to the extreme.

To be sure Sciascia develops this mockery of extreme rationality, but on a thematic and not structural level. Thematically the conflict is not, as Moraldo and Hudde say, ratio against reality but, more precisely, limited skeptical reason against ratio. Many critics have interpreted Sciascia’s treatment of reason as criticism of the naive belief in reason of the French Enlightenment philosophers. Yet Sciascia’s attack on system building and pure ratio is certainly akin to the distinction made by Condillac and D’Alembert between the metaphysical speculative esprit de système, represented by the great system makers of the seventeenth century such as Spinoza, Leibniz and even Descartes, and the cautious, reasonable esprit systématique of Locke and Newton which they espoused. Detective Rogas is clearly the countermodel for those who think in purely rational terms in the narrative. Rogas forms his working hypothesis as to whom the criminal may be with a deductive search through the police archives deriving his conclusions from facts rather than from previously existing systems. In the course of his investigation Rogas specifically observes that the real enemy of justice is abstract rationalism, a method of thinking he carefully avoids. He notes that in many of the cases he reads, men are judged not on factual evidence but on the grounds of having committed previous unrelated offenses, such as, convicting a man of murder because he stole plums from a neighbor’s orchard as a child (Il contesto 19). Like the classical detective who seeks an original answer, Rogas shuns these “precedenti” which offer easy theoretical solutions and chooses, for further investigation, three men who have no previous criminal record. In a typical ironic aside Rogas pointedly questions why “precedenti” are considered so important in “un paese godendo di tutta una letteratura per gli umori imprevedibili, le contraddizioni, i gesti gratuiti e i radicali mutamenti cui le persone erano soggette” (Il contesto 20).

Since the mockery of ratio is thematic as opposed to structural, reason is shown, as in Sciascia’s previous detective novels, to be a capable cognitive tool. This is pointed out by Herman Wetzel in his detailed examination of the question of parody in Il contesto (567–79). Wetzel argues that for this reason the work is not a parody since even the official government lies—“il
—are shown to be part of a completely logical, thus completely explainable, process. For Wetzel the detective novel genre, and by this he means its critical, rational potential, is not brought into question; and he concludes exactly the opposite of Moraldo and others when he argues that the faith in reason this potential reflects is also left intact.

Thus we can see that attempts to examine the question of parody in Il contesto and in the previous detective novels, even from a generic, literary perspective inevitably lead to the vexed issue of Sciascia’s treatment of reason. Sciascia himself encourages this for although he, on the one hand, speaks of his faith in “la ragione umana e nella libertà e nella giustizia che dalla ragione scaturiscono” (Le parrocchie 11), on the other, he depicts more often than not the defeat of those who espouse these ideals. Of course, part of the problem is caused by Sciascia himself who claims to espouse reason and at the same time parodies certain conventions of the genre which normally defends it. Still, Sciascia’s detective novels remain structurally close to the detective novel. This is true as well for his method of parody. Dennis Porter has described parody in the metaphysical detective novels as a process of defamiliarization of known techniques such as the way Borges ironically shows us at the end of La muerte y la brújula that the conventions we and Lönnrot had taken for granted were false (245–59). The popular detective novel pursues a goal of refamiliarization; its goal is to make what originally had appeared foreign and different familiar again. In all four of his detective novels, whether his target of criticism and parody is the Mafia, Sicilian life, or the uncontrollable desire for power, Sciascia follows the latter procedure since his aim is to show how, under different forms, the same interests of the powerful are perpetually reintroduced preventing change and progress. For this reason it seems less relevant to determine whether or not the detective novel structure and by extension reason are brought into question in Sciascia’s fictional works. It is more relevant and informative to note that the four detective novels follow a more general archetypal literary pattern in which the detective novel and its conventions represent a central and recurring theme in Sciascia’s works, that of the tyrannical and paradoxical effects of imported or borrowed ideas and conventions.

Indeed an important theme in all of Sciascia’s fictional and non-fictional writings is that of the endless imposition of laws, structures and ideas from abroad upon the native Sicilians. Unfortunately, in Sicily not only negative values are imported. In Il consiglio d’Egitto, Sciascia shows how imports such as history and reason become perverted fictions on Sicilian soil: history is created at will by a powerful aristocracy that uses it as a political tool to preserve its interests and reason, an ideal imported from
the French by enlightened Sicilians such as the Jacobin lawyer Di Blasi, comes to be considered as a dangerous fiction by the oppressed who even applaud Di Blasi’s death (Harth 201–14). All that is imported works paradoxically; it is either used for a purpose other than that for which it was intended or it naturally produces the opposite effect.

In a magazine article entitled “In Italia c’è un detective: Dio,” Sciascia emphasizes the borrowed, foreign nature of the detective novel, a genre he claims could only be used ironically or paradoxically in Italy. This is so because the Italian reader is ill-equipped to believe in a detective, “portatore della Grazia Illuminante,” and has no real comprehension of a pre-existing cosmic order. Thus, even if the conventions were followed, the result would necessarily be the opposite of what was intended.

In an older but still seminal work of criticism, Northrop Frye isolates four mythoi or pre-generic plots; the romantic, the tragic, and comic, and the ironic or satiric, each of which he then divides into six phases to show how a particular mode redistributes shared conventions (162–239). Consequently, the first three phases of satire produce types of ironic comedy. Although these satires often deal with themes common to Sciascia’s fiction such as reason and common sense against exaggerated philosophical ideas (an example of such comic satire is Voltaire’s Candide), the hero of satire is usually a comic character as well. The sympathetic human portraits of Sciascia’s detectives and their tragic but always ironic ends brings us to the fourth phase of irony which, in Frye’s words looks at “tragedy from below” (237). The social dramas of Il giorno della civetta and A ciascuno il suo fit well into this phase described as the phase of the most sincere and explicit realism and one in which the humanity of its heroes is the most stressed. The ironic mode permits us to look at tragedy from the moral and realistic perspectives of the state of experience. Tragedy’s sense of ritual inevitability is present but minimized by the social and psychological explanations which Sciascia draws explicitly from Sicilian life.

In these two novels, the social and psychological explanations are cleverly linked to the conventions of the detective novel. Schulz-Buschaus has commented on Sciascia’s original use here of the important generic convention of having an ahistorical, personal motive for the crime (“Sciascia’s” 44–48; Formen 196–204). This convention, laid down by the original legislators of the form, and later defended by Chandler as being essential to the surprise ending, is part of the reassuring nature of popular detective fiction. Although the reader may theorize on political or other threatening and destabilizing motives for the crime, in the end he knows all will be brought down to defeatable size when the detective reveals that the crime was committed for some general reason such as sex, greed, ambition
or the like. In the first two novels, Sciascia shows how the Mafia uses the personal motive, the widely accepted excuse of "delitti passionali," to cover the political nature of the crime (Schulz-Buschaus, "Sciascia's" 47). The borrowed generic convention is clearly a fiction exploited by the powerful. One should note here another important similarity and difference to metaphysical detective novel parody. Like Borges and other post-modern writers, Sciascia, here and elsewhere, does explore how man-made structures (fictional conventions) influence man and can trap him. However, these conventions are not exaggerated or "defamiliarized" to show how man creates but are exposed for the purpose of showing how they oppress. Like his illustrious Sicilian predecessors, Verga, Pirandello and Brancati, Sciascia shows how the stubborn and essentially illogical observance of conventional formalities in Sicilian life prevents all change and progress.

Yet the final judgment of the community concerning the murdered Laurana, "era un cretino," indicates that they are more aware of the fraud than one would think. Clearly, recognition of corruption or an understanding of how it works is no guarantee that one will attempt to change it. The popular detective novel remains a reassuring form although it has, since the fifties, become increasingly explicit in its exposure of corruption. The reader seems willing to live in a partly-evil world if he can see a partial resolution and if this resolution confirms his own prejudices, cultural stereotypes and simpler theories. As Dennis Porter states "the attraction of popular literature resides not least in the authority with which it offers the certainties of myth for the confusion of history" (217). Sciascia seems aware of the problem. In his essay on Tomasi di Lampedusa's controversial novel, Il Gattopardo, he criticizes not the Prince's reasons for why Sicily will never change which he (the Prince) haughtily enumerates for Senator Chevalley, but his "distacco," his sophisticated "qualunquismo" which derives, according to Sciascia, from his satisfaction of having developed a mythical theory on it ("Il Gattopardo" 149–59). It is only when the Prince nears death that he realizes that he is not above the decadence he so eloquently described. A few years before this essay, writer/critic Italo Calvino had slyly criticized A ciascuno il suo by saying that Sciascia's clear explanation of Sicilian corruption had not only confirmed his previous stereotypical picture of the island but left him, like the Prince one could add, totally devoid of any desire to see things change since this would prove him wrong. Thus, in Il contesto and Todo modo not only is the criminal unapprehended but murders are left unresolved and unexplained, a modification designed to involve and unsettle the jaded and complacent reader.
The open-endedness of these last two novels has been praised as a move toward a more post-modern, reader-oriented literature. But Il contesto is also an example of Frye’s fifth phase of tragic irony which leaves its characters and readers little hope of escape. In Il contesto the ideology of radical rationality of the classical detective novel is clearly on the side of the powerful who abuse it repeatedly in very predictable ways. Sciascia’s method of familiarization is everywhere enforced by quotations designed to show that many of these theories date back even to the time of Procopius. But although Rogas’ reaction to the steady barrage of “precedenti” may be a yawn of bored recognition, he cannot defend himself against the system. The fifth phase of ironic tragedy corresponds to the fatalistic phase of tragedy. Emphasis is on the steady, unbroken wheel of fortune or fate “with the point of epiphany closed up” (Frye 237). Thus, although works in this phase such as Il contesto are more generalized and more metaphysical, they are, at the same time, more stoical and resigned. Sitting in a café before he goes to his certain death, Rogas almost succumbs to the temptation of “chi te lo fa fare” when he thinks of the good life he is giving up. In an ironic tragedy this could almost seem more acceptable to the reader than a suicidal attempt at justice.

Even Sciascia seems caught in his own trap of “familiarization” when he writes of his parody “... che ho cominciato a scrivela con divertimento, e l’ho finita che non mi divertivo piú” (Il contesto 121).

It is with Todo modo that Sciascia indicates an overthrow of the borrowed detective structure. The setting is typical of the final phase of tragic irony—an isolated nightmarish weekend retreat replete with symbols of religious parody and headed by the Satanic, Anti-Christ figure, Don Gaetano who represents radical rationality at its best—or worst. It is typical of this last phase that the source of evil takes on a personal form. In this atmosphere, the narrator himself, a writer and reader of detective fiction, refutes the temptation of rationality, the desire for a pre-established order and overthrows it with the murder of Don Gaetano. 10 Of course, with this murder one could not claim that society as a whole has been reinstated, as would be the case in comedy or even ironic comedy. But Sciascia has reached here the final paradox of tragic irony. Frye describes this phase by evoking the scene at the bottom of Dante’s hell where Dante sees Satan standing upright in a circle of ice. However, by following Virgil down the giant’s body and passing the center, he finds himself going up instead of down. Satan is no longer upright but standing on his head. Although tragedy can only take us to the bottom, the mythos of tragic irony brings one past dead centre where satire can begin again.

Todo modo marks the end of Sciascia’s experimentation with the fic-
tional detective novel. But Sciascia continues to apply skeptical reason not to parody but to investigate parodies of an historical nature in his own invented genre the “romanzo-inchiiesta” or investigative essay. In one of his latest essays, La sentenza memorabile, Sciascia examines against the background of Montaigne’s essay Les estropiés—an essay Voltaire had claimed to be essential for anyone who needed to learn the necessity of skepticism and doubt when using reason—the famous sixteenth century imposture case of Martin Guerre. For Sciascia, Guerre’s imposture is, like Vela’s parody of history in Il consiglio d’Egitto and Crès’ parody of justice in Il contesto, a parody of society’s larger imposture, the “errore cattolico.” Thus past dead center but in his own form, Sciascia continues to apply reason to the investigation of the many parodies and impostures that man persists in creating. And it is most likely that the study of such historical parodies and paradoxes will govern the future literary output of Leonardo Sciascia since the writing of these investigative essays ostensibly provides more pleasure than the writing of fictional parodies.

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NOTES

1 Ricciarda Ricorda 59–94 lists the amount of direct scholarly references in Il contesto as around fifteen. Todo modo has more than thirty.

2 The negative reaction of the critical left is perhaps best explained in Emanuele Macaluso’s review in Unità (February 5, 1972), where he accuses Sciascia of having sown “sceticismo e sfiducia, attraverso una deformazione della realtà sociale e politica in cui operiamo, riducendo a un macchinoso gioco delle parti lo scontro politico in corso: e ha così dato oggettivamente una mano—nessuno vuole giudicare le intenzioni—al tentativo di discreditare la politica dei comunisti e della sinistra in chiave qualunque di antidemocratica, tentativo la cui consistenza e asprezza, nemmeno Sciascia vorrà negare.” For a review of critical reaction to other works by Sciascia see Mauro 130–35 and Ambroise.

3 In a footnote of his article “Leonardo Sciascia” (227) Moraldo cites Ernesto Laura’s comment: “A Borges però rimanda Il contesto” (364). Moraldo’s article also includes an excellent summary of the history of the giallo in Italy.

4 Moraldo (270) quotes Bennett, who had come to this very conclusion concerning Borges. He agrees as well with Hudde (341), who had said that Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov and Durrenmatt all agree on “Die Kapitulation der ratio von der Welt.”

5 Ambroise 138 calls Il contesto Sciascia’s announcement of “il tramonto dell’ illuminismo.” See also Abruzzi 150 ff.

6 Condillac’s discussion of the two methods of thought is found in his Traité des systèmes, published in 1749. See Cassirer esp. 3-27.

paese cattolico com’è cattolico l’Italia, la Grazia Illuminante non è di casa.” The second reason, Sciascia says, “ce la suggerisce Borges: l’ordine, l’assenza di ordine nella vita di questo nostro paese.”

8 Jackson comments: “It is Laurana from A ciscuno il suo who is most convincing of all the Sciascian detectives on a human level” (15).

9 In a letter to Sciascia dated November 10, 1965, Calvino writes: “...la voce ‘Sicilia’ ci dà il piacere più unico che raro di confermare a ogni nuova lettura che il nostro bagaglio d’informazione era adeguatamente ricco e aggiornato. Tanto che speriamo ardentemente che nulla cambi, che la Sicilia resti perfettamente uguale a se medesima, così potremo al termine della nostra vita dire che c’è almeno una cosa che abbiamo conosciuto a fondo.” Calvino closes with “attendendo la tua vendetta.” This and other letters from Calvino to Sciascia are reprinted in Forum Italicum, 13 (1984), 62–72.

10 See Cannon (282–91). Regarding the guilt of the narrator, Renard (31) draws the same conclusion.

11 Jackson uses Donald Pizer’s term “documentary narrative” but states as well that this is a new genre (26–29).

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