
The rather gruesome title of Elena Past's study of Italian crime fiction introduces the reader, in a few catchy and vivid phrases, to the author's methods of analysis of Italian crime fiction. Elena Past acknowledges that increasing serious scholarly attention is being dedicated to a genre of fiction that was once considered to be marginal, light and entertaining. Other studies of detective fiction have considered the genre's history and popularity in Italy, directing critical attention to the significance of this type of mass-market literature as an instrument for social and political commentary. This study, however, enters into dialogue with other paradigms of thought, extending its purview beyond that of literary criticism or history.

Past validates the seriousness of Italian crime fiction by documenting its connections to criminology: a scientific discipline with its own history and currents of thought. “If Italians did not begin writing codified crime fiction until many years after its emergence on the global scene, they had been theorizing wrongdoing and actively contributing to international understanding of crime and punishment long before 1841” (9). With this statement, Past claims a genealogy for writings on “society’s relationship to delinquency” (9) originating in Italy, with the fathers of the modern science of criminology, the Enlightenment-era theorist on penal and judicial reform, Cesare Beccaria (1738 – 1794) and Cesare Lombroso (1835 – 1909) of the positivist school of criminal anthropology. Her examination of Beccaria’s Dei delitti e delle pene (1764) and Lombroso’s L’uomo delinquente (1876) forms the basis of an important reconceptualization of Italian crime fiction. Past dedicates a chapter to each of the popular, contemporary or canonical authors Sciascia, Camilleri, Carofiglio, Gadda and Lucarelli, and to the filmmaker Argento in her project of recontextualization. Her critique is bisected into “Beccarian Introspection” and “Lombrosian Vivisection”.

Past, necessarily, begins with an introduction to these diverging theoretical points of view, prior to classifying the practitioners of the Italian mystery. Beccaria’s work focuses on judicial reform. His approach “begins with the idea that the system, and not the criminal is the primary object of study, the first consideration when contemplating the problem of crime” (15). Past identifies the strategy of introspection, a process of mental investigation, to Beccaria’s methods. The Enlightenment thinker has reconstructed the criminal subject. In Beccaria’s Dei delitti e delle pene, the criminal becomes the “citizen-delinquent”, a “disembodied criminal” a thinking being that is connected to, and acts within, the society of which he is a part. The apprehension and punishment of the criminal thus becomes in Beccaria a “lamentation of the sick body politic” (26) and constitutes a diagnosis of the “maladies of the system”. Justice, according to Beccaria, is something that transcends subjectivity; it is “materially non-existent, whereas men are not: it is an abstract concept, not a physical force, and thus something that must be applied to the very different world of human bodies with care” (35). A proper-
ly functioning justice system, should protect the physical bodies of the criminals from torture and harm at the hands of the penal system, as the cause of crime, the truth of the problem does not lie in the bones and the tissues of the criminals.

Past posits a corresponding Beccarian investigator, a kind of detective-philosopher who hunts down his prey through his acute mental processes. Camilleri’s police commissario, Salvo Montalbano is, in Past’s estimation, such a Beccarian thinker. The Sicilian investigator retreats into his own mental space to mull over the crime, to dialogue with himself and to imagine a solution. Sciascia’s works of detective fiction illustrate the rational, thoughtful, curious, Beccarian protagonist in the context of a sick body politic. Sciascia’s detectives are denied a completely satisfactory denouement and are doomed to fail. The detectives, victims and criminals are portrayed impersonally. “Sciascia’s texts are peopled less by protagonists than by figures representing ideological positions, however, complicated, in relation to the societies in which they live” (70). Guido Guerrieri, Carofiglio’s attorney-protagonist, is an actor in the Beccarian courtroom. The novels are preoccupied with the violence of law. Violence in litigious language and in action recur in the Guerrieri novels, leading the protagonist to react pathologically to his career: the sickness and corruption of Carofiglio’s Italy manifest themselves as physical “side-effects”, such as nausea, fighting back tears, panic attacks, in the protagonist. The attorney, in a manner akin to Beccaria, seeks to shield his clients from the application of the law.

Lombroso’s L’uomo delinquente analyses the data collected from his measurements and dissections of the dead bodies of imprisoned criminals and results in the hypothesis of the “born criminal”. In contrast to Beccaria, here “the physical body of the delinquent is at the centre of the investigation” (136). Lombroso’s invasive ideas seem to “advance a dangerous incursion literally into the human subject” (138) and Lombroso himself was accused of lurking around the prisons, questioning and studying the prisoners and waiting for their deaths, so he could dissect, weigh and measure. Past suggests a metaphorical vivisection as one of the techniques of crime fiction in the Lombrosian vein, for a dead body can no longer commit crimes and is less interesting to study. The criminal is the focus of this strain of fiction. Lucarelli’s accounts of criminal investigation are punctuated by narrative passages from the perspective of the criminal, usually a serial killer. The mangled bodies of the victims, the blood, torn flesh and viscera, become central. Gadda’s investigators are seduced by the exposed innards of the victims on the threshold between life and death.

Past presents a convincing argument for a lineage of contemporary crime fiction written in Italy with roots in philosophical paradigms that date back to the Enlightenment. Her book inspires curiosity about the shadowy figures of Beccaria and Lombroso, and the way in which traces of them can be found in today’s popular authors.

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