

Book Review: Maria Anna Mariani, *Italian Literature in the Nuclear Age. A Poetics of the Bystander*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023

By Gianluca Cinelli

During the Cold War, the number of nations that built, detained and stockpiled nuclear arsenals was limited, and among these, the United States and the USSR were the superpowers that could wage a globally destructive atomic war. However, other countries, either as allies of the Soviets or the Americans, were indirectly involved in the strategy of nuclear deterrence, and Italy was one of the most relevant actors in such a geopolitical scenario. Italy was not allowed by the international treaties to detain its own nuclear arsenal. However, owing to its strategic geographical position amid the Mediterranean Sea, the Italian peninsula provided an ideal launch platform for NATO's warheads and aeroplanes. Thus, the indirect involvement of Italy in the Cold War was crucial, albeit underrated and too often passed over in silence by both Italian politicians and intellectuals.

Mariani's fine volume aims to challenge such a grey zone of the Italian memory, by investigating how the discourse on Italian participation in the Cold War was addressed by some Italian authors and intellectuals of the time, namely Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Leonardo Sciascia. These authors "addressed the atomic question through a wide range of experimental forms, approaching the nearly unthinkable theme in allusive and oblique ways" (p. 5). Mariani's approach is valuable not only because it sheds light on one under-researched aspect of contemporary Italian culture and history but also because considering those intellectuals through the filter of the nuclear question permits the author to re-examine and re-assess their works and poetics challenging some stereotyped interpretations.

Alberto Moravia is presented as "a bystander who no longer wants to be one" (p. 10); Italo Calvino's work and thought are freed from the critical label of "lightness" and reconsidered from the perspective of the "apocalyptic obsession" (p. 11); Elsa Morante is considered from the standpoint of her reflection about the "entangled relationship between rationality and barbarism" (p. 11); Sciascia is approached as an intellectual who focused on a "productive

tension between archival documents and invention” delving into the responsibility borne by physicists and scientists (p. 11); and Pasolini is eventually observed as an author and director who addressed “the problem of other people’s suffering when contemplated at a distance” (p. 12), thus denouncing the implicit complicity of the bystander.

Mariani convincingly shows how the five authors approached the topic of participating passively in the Cold War by focusing on the use of different forms of writing, including fiction, journalism, film, and public speeches, and on the way in which the five intellectuals put the problem into words. Moravia, for example, chose journalism as the medium and plain language as the expressive form best suited to convey his reflections. As a consequence, “for Moravia, the idea is to make it a familiar, close, household reality. This, then, is his strategy for the mind to grasp the nuclear problem. This is the familiarizing perspective from which we should read the countless similes that he employs in his newspaper and magazine interviews, all of which work by converting the phantasmal atomic issue into a phenomenon that is embodied in the worlds of the private and the known” (p. 27).

As for Calvino, Mariani strives to liberate the writer from the yoke of a critical prejudice, namely that his postmodern inclination to play disengaging literary games makes his literary works *Cosmicomics* and *T Zero* escapist books. Calvino’s perspective, Mariani claims, is “posthuman” in that the writer shifts his focus from the question of human ethics to a question of cosmic ethics: “We cannot be innocent bystanders when it comes to the future and other places. This cosmic point of view, which emerges for the moment only through its opposite, will soon become central to Calvino’s work” (p. 79). Therefore, *Cosmicomics* should be read as a political book (p. 84) rather than mere literary playful escapism.

In Morante’s case, the topic of the atomic bomb begins to emerge in 1965 “at a structural and atmospheric level” (p. 102), neither as a precise political issue to address as Moravia did nor as a possible topic for fiction as in Calvino: Mariani claims that “Morante only seems to be able to speak about the bomb in conceptual and structural terms” (p. 131). In a way, the discussion of Morante’s stand on the atomic question does not sound as convincing as the previous ones concerning Moravia and Calvino. Morante, Mariani seems to imply, remained elusive when she came to grips with the need to translate her thoughts and impressions about the nuclear problem into formal and artistic terms to avoid any illusion of redemption and consolation through art (p. 133).

Even more polemical sounds Mariani's interpretation of Sciascia's standpoint expressed in the novel about Italian physicist Ettore Majorana, for Sciascia defends the scientist "to the utmost, even when he is indefensible" (p. 146), to the point that he makes of Majorana almost a saint, as the physicist stands alone as an individual against the depersonalising experience of the atomic age. Thus, Sciascia would provide a "moral allegory that spurs the reader to meditate on the concept of complicity" (p. 160). By showing the physicist refusing to be an accomplice of the technological endeavour that led to the atomic bomb, Sciascia claims that "Italy is anything but a passive, innocent bystander: in Sciascia's book the country's historical responsibility is flagrant" (p. 160).

The last author analysed is Pasolini, with a particular focus on his work *Rage*, by which he makes a stand against the visual media and the "images of catastrophes stamped on illustrated news magazines, transmitted by newsreels in theaters and on television, and then replicated incessantly, to the point that they create an addiction in viewers" (p. 168), which Pasolini called the "state of normalcy". Mariani claims that Pasolini's contribution to the discourse on the Italian responsibility in the atomic question consisted in his ability to take those images and use "montage to estrange them, pluck them out of their usual domesticated context, and then re-arrange them in completely new relationships", so as to trigger the viewers' critical awareness (p. 168).

In conclusion, Mariani makes a valuable contribution to the study of the contemporary Italian literary response to the cultural and ideological context of the Cold War. By focusing on five well-known Italian authors, she points out how they used their art and rhetorical expertise to address an uncomfortable topic from which the public attention was too often diverted. Mariani presents sound evidence by closely analysing a limited number of texts in context, with attention to their rhetorical and ideological implications. Moreover, Mariani makes a clear stand in the face of the different attitudes and approaches of the selected authors, pointing out their strengths as well as weaknesses in addressing the Italian responsibility concerning the atomic question.