

Responsible Testimony: The Memory of Fascism in Carlo Lucarelli's Inspector De Luca Series (1990–2020) between Complicity and Implication

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Abstract: This article examines the memory of Fascism in Carlo Lucarelli's Inspector De Luca series (1990–2020), exploring how these popular crime fiction novels address themes of complicity and implication. By tracing the ethical dilemmas and evolving self-awareness of De Luca—a detective navigating Italy's transition from dictatorship to democracy—the series provides a compelling reflection on the dynamics of complicity and personal involvement in Fascist violence. Through detailed literary analysis, the article demonstrates how Lucarelli's works resist uncritical or redemptive narratives by foregrounding the protagonist's shared responsibility for Fascist crimes and his entanglement in structural violence. Drawing on theories of complicity, implication, and perpetrator testimony, it argues that the series performs an act of 'responsible testimony', challenging dominant mnemonic frameworks in Italian culture that have historically minimized complicity. The study underscores the value of contemporary literary fiction in reshaping Italian cultural memory by foregrounding complicit voices that compel readers to confront uncomfortable ethical questions about the interplay between individual agency and systemic oppression.

Keywords: complicity, implication, Italian memory, fascism, cultural memory

Introduction: Fascism in Italian Memory Culture

The Italian memory of Fascism has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. A broad range of studies has explored how the discourse surrounding the Fascist past has evolved within Italian society, tracing recurring patterns and significant shifts in public debate, cultural production, and historiographical interpretations of the regime, its colonial enterprise, the Second World

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War, and the Holocaust.¹ This body of research has made it possible to understand how Italian memory has been largely affected by a set of uncritical—and thus unethical—narratives that have minimised engagement with ideas of responsibility for and complicity in Fascism.² The formation of this uncritical memory began in the postwar period, when debates around collective responsibility for Fascism proved short-lived and had limited impact.³ In contrast, memory agents from all major political cultures advanced narratives that emphasised Italian victimhood while downplaying the crimes committed by Italians during the Fascist era. This self-absolving discourse was crafted thanks to dominant narrative tropes that portrayed the Italians as inherently good-hearted people, *brava gente*, while presenting Fascism as a lesser evil through a constant comparison with the magnitude of Nazi crimes.⁴ Moreover, it resulted from narrative patterns influenced by Christian ideals, which facilitated the portrayal of the Fascist past as tales of atonement and redemption.⁵

- 1 Significant monographic studies include: Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002); Pier Giorgio Zunino, *La Repubblica e il suo passato: Il fascismo dopo il fascismo, il comunismo, la democrazia: le origini dell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003); Cristina Baldassini, *L'ombra di Mussolini: L'Italia moderata e la memoria del fascismo (1945-1960)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008); Maurizio Zinni, *Fascisti di celluloido: La memoria del ventennio nel cinema italiano (1945-2000)* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010); Guri Schwarz, *Tu mi devi seppellir: Riti funebri e culto nazionale alle origini della Repubblica* (Turin: Utet, 2010); John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Robert Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Giacomo Lichtner, *Fascism in Italian Cinema Since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2013); Alberto De Bernardi, *Fascismo e antifascismo: storia, memoria e culture politiche* (Rome: Donzelli, 2018).
- 2 On how narratives can expand or diminish our ethical understanding of reality, see Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 3 Luca La Rovere, *L'eredità del fascismo: Gli intellettuali, i giovani e la transizione al postfascismo (1943-1948)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008). For an exploration of how postwar Italian literature both engaged with and disguised issues of responsibility, see Guido Bartolini, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) and Franco Baldasso, *Against Redemption: Democracy, Memory, and Literature in Post-Fascist Italy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).
- 4 Claudio Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 147-76; Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano*.
- 5 Rosario Forlenza and Bjørn Thomassen, *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Despite inevitable evolutions and transformations, the uncritical discourse created in the postwar years has continued to influence Italian memory culture throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. In contrast with other Western European countries, where post-1968 culture prompted the younger generations to confront the collective responsibilities of their parents, Italian society has not seen such substantial alteration of its narratives about the past, which have continued to be affected by a limited investigation of issues of complicity and responsibility. The maintenance of a biased and uncritical memory discourse was inadvertently aided by the formation of a strong mnemonic paradigm centred on the experience of the anti-fascist Resistance, i.e. the military struggle against Fascist supporters and German occupiers undertaken by a part of the Italian population from 8 September 1943, when Italy plunged into civil war. Mobilised by left-wing parties as a source of identity and legitimisation, the memory of the Resistance has been simultaneously contested by right-leaning groups as an unaccepted basis for a common national history.⁶ The continuous debates on the Resistance had a distorting effect on Italian memory culture. As Susanne Knittel notes, 'this "memory war" serves ultimately to preserve the status quo, becoming a screen memory in and of itself, preventing an engagement with questions of Italian guilt and collaboration'.⁷ The Italian case can thus be counted among those cultural contexts studied by Mihaela Mihai in which the discourse about the past tends to be structured by a 'double erasure' that minimises experiences of complicity in past injustices and overlooks complex forms of non-heroic resistance.⁸

While Italian memory culture has long appeared resistant to engaging with questions of historical responsibility—and the ascension of Giorgia Meloni's far-right government has increased this conservative tendency—notable new trends have begun to emerge since the end of the Cold War. Alongside the growth of memory studies scholarship, which has fostered more self-reflective approaches to the past, Italian historians have conducted extensive research into the history of colonialism and the Italian occupations during the Second

6 On the memory of the Italian Resistance, see Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005) and Philip Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

7 Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 28.

8 Mihaela Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

World War, shedding light on war crimes committed by Italians that had long been overlooked.⁹ An equally significant development yet to be mapped by memory scholars has started to emerge within the field of Italian literature. Since the 1990s, numerous writers have approached the Fascist past through the perspective of main characters who are themselves implicated in Fascism. From works concerning Italian colonialism in Ethiopia—such as Andrea Camilleri's *La presa di Macallè* (2003), the detective stories by Davide Longo, Luciano Marrocu, Domenico Dodaro, Luigi Panella, and Marco Consentino, and the book *Cronache dalla polvere* written by the collective Zaya Barontini (2019)—to award winning novels such as Antonio Pennacchi's *Canale Mussolini* (2010 and 2015) and Antonio Scurati's book series *M* (2019–2024), passing through less known texts such as Oreste del Buono's *La nostra classe dirigente* (1986), Alessandro Gennari's *Le ragioni del sangue* (1995), Edoardo Angelino's *L'inverno dei mongoli* (1995), and Beatrice Salvioni's *La malnata* (2023), in the past three decades a wealth of fictional accounts have been narrating Italy's Fascist past through narrative voices and main characters that are somehow complicit with the regime. This production has also been enriched by works that have explored the perspective of the descendants of perpetrators, such as Franca Cavagnoli's *Una pioggia bruciante* (2000), Francesca Melandri's *Sangue giusto* (2017), and Michela Marzano's *Stirpe e vergogna* (2021).

This article initiates the investigation of this recent trend within Italian contemporary literature by developing an in-depth analysis of the Inspector De Luca series—a collection of six crime fiction novels by Carlo Lucarelli published over thirty years from 1990 to 2020. Across Western literature, historical crime fiction has often been deployed to address past histories of violence, forming a genre closely intertwined with the concerns of memory studies. As Claire Gorrara has argued in relation to French literature, crime fiction enables writers to interrogate the past, unearth counter-histories, and address ethical questions that may have been silenced in official memory.¹⁰ Similarly, Bruce Campbell has contended that in German literature crime fiction has functioned

9 On Italian colonialism, see Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, *Storia del colonialismo italiano: Politica, cultura e memoria dall'età liberale ai nostri giorni* (Rome: Carocci, 2024). On the wave of studies on Italian war crimes and military occupation during World War II, see the extensive literary review in Filippo Facardi, *Nel cantiere della memoria: Fascismo, Resistenza, Shoah, Foibe* (Rome: Viella, 2020), pp. 95–100.

10 Claire Gorrara, *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War: Past Crimes, Present Memories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 12–14.

as a 'site of memory', forcing readers to engage with the Nazi past and take a position towards it." Barbara Pezzotti has identified comparable dynamics within Italian literature, demonstrating that, at least since the 1990s, the historical crime novel has served as one of the most effective forms of media for engaging with the most contentious chapters of Italian history, including the period of unification, the Fascist *ventennio*, and the years of terrorism.¹²

By examining the De Luca series as a whole while also tracing the transformations between individual texts, this article argues that Lucarelli has used the medium of popular literature to carry out a significant intervention in Italian memory culture. His novels approach Italy's dictatorial past from the perspective of a main character who is caught between implication in and complicity with Fascist injustices, and they employ the ethical dilemmas faced by their protagonist to enact a responsible act of testimony about the past, one that enables readers to grasp the shared responsibilities of ordinary individuals in the crimes committed by the regime. In doing so, the series makes an important contribution to Italian memory culture, which has long resisted critical engagement with issues of complicity, implication, and historical responsibility. Moreover, through its development from the 1990s to the 2020s, the series bears witness to the emergence of conceptualisations of complicity in contemporary Italian culture.

Inspector De Luca: Between Implication and Complicity

To date, the series about Inspector De Luca includes six crime fiction novels published by Carlo Lucarelli over a span of thirty years, from his first novel *Carta bianca* (1990) to *L'inverno più nero* (2020).¹³ The books recount six independent investigations that are resolved by the end of the respective texts. Each novel is narrated by an extradiegetic narrative voice, is focalised on the protagonist, and is set in a different historical moment. *Carta bianca* takes place in April 1945 in the context

11 Bruce Campbell, 'Justice and Genre: The Krimi as a Site of Memory in Contemporary Germany', in *Detectives, Dystopias, and Poplit*, ed. by Bruce Campbell, Alison Guenther-Pal, and Vibeke Rützou Petersen (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), pp. 133–51 (p. 134).

12 Barbara Pezzotti, *Murder in the Age of Chaos: Investigating Italy's Past Through Historical Crime Fiction, Films, and TV Series* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 4–5.

13 In the acknowledgements at the end of *Peccato mortale*, Lucarelli anticipates his plan to write a seventh novel set in the 1950s.

of the Italian Civil War during the last days of the Fascist Social Republic—i.e., the German puppet state created by Fascist supporters after the liberation of Mussolini on 12 September 1943. *L'estate torbida* (1991) is set a few months later, in early summer 1945, after Fascism has been defeated, anti-fascist partisans have yet to lay down their weapons, and a new and divided democratic ruling class begins to take power. *Via delle oche* (1996) unfolds in 1948 at the time of the Italian Republic's first political election. *Intrigo italiano* (2017) is set in between 1953 and 1954 when Italian society is in the grip of Cold War dynamics. *Peccato mortale* (2018) goes back to 1943, running from 24 July 1943, the day before the fall of Mussolini, to some months after Italy's surrender on 8 September 1943. Finally, *L'inverno più nero* (2020) is set in the winter of 1944, in the most dramatic weeks of the Civil War.

The series is characterised by several recurring traits that have been observed by scholars who studied the first three texts. The novels tend to revolve around a conflict between Inspector De Luca and the power structures in which he operates, which try to impede or control his investigations. Hence, as Elisabetta Bacchereti notes, they cultivate a reflection on the 'prevarication of Power over truth and justice'.¹⁴ Additionally, while readers always discover the identity of who committed the crime, ultimately the murderers do not serve their time in jail. This narrative trajectory, on the one hand, seems to reproduce the 'textual crisis' that Katharina Hall has identified in British and German crime fiction about Nazi detectives, where it reveals the impossibility of establishing justice within a dictatorial regime.¹⁵ On the other hand, as pointed out by Pezzotti, in Lucarelli's series this avoidance of justice extends beyond a condemnation of the Fascist dictatorship, since it also occurs under democratic systems as well as in the murky phases of transition between different political eras, thereby constituting a more general critique of political power as a whole.¹⁶

Despite this more general theme running throughout the series, the novels about Inspector De Luca also articulate a more specific perspective on the Fascist past, which is centred on the exploration of complicity

14 Elisabetta Bacchereti, 'Un'idea di noir: Carlo Lucarelli par lui-même', in *L'Italie en jaune et noir: La littérature policière de 1990 à nos jours*, ed. by Maria-Pia De Paulis-Dalambert (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), pp. 97-107. My translation.

15 Katharina Hall 'The "Nazi Detective" as Provider of Justice in Post-1990 British and German Crime Fiction: Philip Kerr's *The Pale Criminal*, Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, and Richard Birkfeld and Göran Hachmeister's *Wer übrig bleibt, hat recht*', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 50.2 (2013), 288-313.

16 Pezzotti, *Murder in the Age of Chaos*, p. 79-82.

with injustice. To unpack how this discourse is developed, it is necessary to focus on the protagonist. Inspector De Luca has a formidable career in Fascist Italy, where he becomes known as, arguably, the most competent and skilful police investigator of his time. Notwithstanding the professional success he gains under the regime, De Luca lacks clear political convictions and is far from any sympathy for Fascist ideology. From the first to the last instalment of the series, this police detective appears as a good man who believes in the social value of his job. Because of his unwavering commitment to truth and justice, which is often carried out against his superiors and the powerful, the protagonist emerges as a palatable character who can garner the favour and support of readers. This process is facilitated by De Luca's complete rejection of violence: in all his investigations, the Inspector does not resort to violent means to achieve his goals.¹⁷ This virtuous behaviour is openly emphasised in *L'inverno più nero* when, during an argument, De Luca uses an envelope to slap his colleague Petrarca, prompting the narrative voice to stress that 'it was the first time he had committed violence against someone [...] he had never directly raised his hands against anyone in his entire life, perhaps only when he was a child'.¹⁸

In the light of this portrayal, which is consistent throughout the series, early reviewers of *Carta bianca* criticised the novel's representation of Fascism, arguing that through Inspector De Luca, Lucarelli created an innocuous and agreeable Fascist police officer who contributed to normalising the authoritarian state and therefore promoted an indulgent depiction of the regime as a soft and acceptable dictatorship.¹⁹ This hasty evaluation has been corrected by Luca Somigli and Barbara Pezzotti, who in their work on the first three novels of the series point out that Lucarelli does not absolve his protagonist, but instead uses him to develop poignant reflections on issues of personal responsibility under the dictatorship.²⁰

17 In *Carta bianca*, however, De Luca engages in abusive sexist behaviour by slapping his lover, Valeria, during an argument. Carlo Lucarelli, *Carta bianca* [1990] (Turin: Einaudi, 2014), p. 99. In *Peccato mortale*, he is repaid when his partner, Lorenza, slaps him. Carlo Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018), p. 217.

18 Carlo Lucarelli, *L'inverno più nero* (Turin: Einaudi, 2020), p. 111. This statement seems to overlook the slap De Luca gives to Valeria (discussed in the previous footnote)—an event that, however, in the time of the story, happens at a later stage, months after the end of this novel. The translation provided here, as well as all translations throughout the article, are my own.

19 For instance, see the review by De Federicis discussed in Pezzotti, *Murder in the Age of Chaos*, p. 81.

20 Luca Somigli 'Fighting Crimes in Times of War: Detective Fiction's Visions and Revision of Fascism', in *Uncertain Justice: Crimes and Retribution in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, ed. by Nicoletta Di Ciolla (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 15–35 (p. 23); Pezzotti, *Murder in the Age of Chaos*, p. 80.

Even though the main character may appear as a positive figure, from the opening novel of the series readers are made aware that De Luca occupies a troubling and complex ethical position since he works for the Fascist state. Importantly, readers know that not only does De Luca operate within the police force of the Fascist Social Republic, but for a short period he was also part of the Fascist political police, serving in the *Ettore Muti* Brigade—a corps where he eventually felt out of place and which he voluntarily left. Such clear involvement in Fascist institutions, even within its most repressive security forces, casts a dark light on the protagonist from the very outset of the series.

Through the figure of De Luca, Lucarelli offers his readers a specific viewpoint to think about the Fascist past. On the one hand, because of his behaviour and his firm refusal to resort to violence, De Luca cannot be considered a perpetrator—and therefore, despite following an investigator of the Fascist Social Republic's police force, the novels cannot be labelled as examples of perpetrator fiction. On the other hand, it is undeniable that De Luca is highly involved in the repressive apparatus of the Fascist state. Lucarelli's character is thus a murky figure who, without being directly a Fascist, shares some degree of responsibility for the crimes of the regime. In recent years, much discussion on these in-between positionalities has revolved around Michael Rothberg's theorisation of the 'implicated subject', a notion that refers to individuals who are involved—either synchronically or diachronically—in the injustices that others have committed by enabling, perpetuating, or benefitting from them.²¹ According to Rothberg, the implicated subject is an umbrella term that aims to map the grey zone between victims and perpetrators by capturing individuals' involvement in collective injustices. Moving in the same direction advocated by numerous scholars of complicity studies, who have argued that our understanding of complicity ought to depart from a narrow definition based on the inevitably individualistic perspective of the law, Rothberg proposes a notion that, contrary to complicity, is not strongly associated to an understanding of responsibility as liability.²² As he notes, while

21 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

22 Ibid., p. 14. On the broadening of the notion of complicity, see *Exploring Complicity: Concept, Cases and Critique*, ed. by Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, and Michael Neu (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), pp. 2–7; *Complicity and the Politics of Representation*, ed. by Cornelia Wächter and Robert Wirth (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019); and Minna Johanna Niemi, *Complicity and Responsibility in Contemporary African Writing: The Postcolony Revisited* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 8.

complicity presupposes implication, the latter does not always involve the former, since it also relates to cases where no proper cause-and-effect relationship can be established, as well as to the diachronic relationships between present and past.²³

Rothberg's reflection on the relationship between implication and complicity suggests that his concept tends to fluctuate between a more general reference to all the potential subject positions existing between victims and perpetrators—in which complicity can also be included as a subgroup—and a narrower, more specific application that can be said to cover the space between accomplice and bystander.²⁴ This article posits a fragile yet significant distinction between implication and complicity, understanding the latter as a deeper form of involvement in injustice that requires greater agency and shifts individuals into darker shades of grey, closer to the position of perpetrators.²⁵ Nonetheless, despite this conceptual distinction, the study of Lucarelli's novels will reveal that these two notions are not mutually exclusive but can instead reinforce one another. The literary analysis will demonstrate that the De Luca series transitions from an implicit thematisation of implication to an explicit narrativisation of complicity, which ultimately culminates in a broader recognition of pervasive forms of implication in the crimes of Fascism. In other words, the series explores complicity to generate a stronger understanding of implication, with both concepts sustaining the act of responsible testimony through which Lucarelli challenges the unethical forms of storytelling that have tended to affect the Italian memory of Fascism.

23 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, pp. 13–14.

24 Here, as in Rothberg's work, subject positions should not be understood as ontological conditions or fixed identities but rather as situated interpersonal roles shaped by actions, structures, and the unfolding of history. For critiques of the concept of the implicated subject—viewed either as excessively broad in scope or marked by an unspecific polyvalence—see Juliane Prade-Weiss, 'Guilt-tripping the "Implicated Subject": Widening Rothberg's Concept of Implication in Reading Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 3.1 (2020), 64–84; Mary Fulbrook, 'Conformity, Compliance, and Complicity: "Ordinary People" and the Holocaust', in *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised Identities?*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook, Bastiaan Willems, Stephanie Bird, and Stefanie Rauch (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), pp. 38–53 (pp. 38, 49).

25 This idea is in line with Ivan Stacy's distinction between complicity and implication based on the higher amount of agency that the former requires. See Ivan Stacy, *The Complicit Text: Failures of Witnessing in Postwar Fiction* (Lanham: Lexington Books: 2021), p. 4.

The Implication of an Apolitical Subject

From the first novel of the series, De Luca is presented as a man uninterested in politics. In *Carta bianca*, in a dialogue with his colleague Marshal Pugliese—who readers will later discover supports the anti-fascist Resistance—De Luca reveals his worldview, according to which a policeman is not a politically connoted figure. In one of their first encounters, Pugliese tests the waters with his new superior by comparing him to his predecessor, Investigator Lenzi, who assumed an anti-German stance after Italy's surrender on 8 September for which he was killed. The comparison is not appreciated by De Luca, leading to the following exchange:

'What happened to him? To this Lenzi, I mean, did he die from an ulcer?'
Pugliese sighed [...] 'He was a confused man,' he said, 'A good cop but confused... After 8 September he made a few mistakes and ended up against the wall. You know, the Germans.'
De Luca nodded 'I understand' he said softly 'but I don't think I am like him. I am a policeman.'²⁶

For De Luca, his identity as a policeman starkly contrasts with any form of political activism. As he recounts in *Peccato mortale* after the fall of Mussolini, he believes that his loyalty as a police officer is towards the Italian state regardless of any political viewpoint: 'I must have said it a million times these days, but I'll say it again. I am a policeman. [...] I serve the State [...] it is my job, which remains the same even when the State changes'.²⁷ De Luca's non-political nature is a recurrent refrain throughout the series. For instance, in *Via delle oche*, in the completely different context of 1948, De Luca shows his complete indifference to the political landscape of his time. During a casual conversation with one of his superiors, the communist sympathiser Dr Scala, it does not even occur to De Luca that the upcoming Sunday, 18 April, will be one of the most significant days in Italian political history, marking the first democratic election of the newly established Republic.²⁸ This complete detachment from the political domain, rather than seeming implausible, is a defining feature of De Luca, who, throughout the

²⁶ Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 21.

²⁷ Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 155.

²⁸ Carlo Lucarelli, *Via delle oche* [1996], in Lucarelli, *Il commissario De Luca* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2008), p. 240.

series, repeatedly and openly expresses his indifference to political considerations. As a policeman, he views his sole duty as focusing on his job and solving his investigations.²⁹

The consistency of this characterisation stems from the fact that this apolitical worldview served as the original source of inspiration for the creation of this literary character, which marked the beginning of Lucarelli's highly prolific career as a writer. As he has recounted several times, while he was conducting research for a university thesis on the Fascist police, Lucarelli interviewed a retired policeman who had begun his career in 1941 under Fascism and then served in the partisan police force and the postwar Italian police. When the young interviewer asked him about his political views, the ex-officer replied with surprise, negating the validity of the question, as he considered himself to be *just a policeman*.³⁰ This statement set Lucarelli's imagination in motion, providing the access point to his first literary work, in which he infused the information he had gathered through his historical training and his passion for crime fiction, with influence from the works of Raymond Chandler and Giorgio Scerbanenco.

Following this original inspiration, Lucarelli creates a detective who sees his role as politically neutral and is driven by a sole compelling urge: to carry out his job as precisely and carefully as possible. Importantly, it is exactly this desire to get his job done that led De Luca to work for a short period in the political division of the *Ettore Muti* Brigade. As he professes in *Carta bianca*:

'When I was called to the Muti's special section I went there immediately, in a hurry, because it was a good place to work, you understand? [...] Everything there was very efficient, there were the best investigators, the best files, there was money... [...] You don't ask a policeman to make political choices, you just ask him to do his job well.'³¹

Indifferent to the political dimension of his actions, De Luca only wants to solve his investigations. Throughout the series, the Inspector is taken by a feverish obsession that keeps him awake at night and that can be placated only when he makes progress with his cases. De Luca's fixation with his work is explained by his extremely curious

29 See for instance Lucarelli, *Via delle oche*, pp. 248-49; Carlo Lucarelli, *Intrigo Italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), p. 39; and Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, pp. 84, 131.

30 Lucarelli, 'Nota', in *Il commissario De Luca*, pp. 10-11.

31 Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 76.

and rational nature, which urges him to understand and explain how a crime happened in order to re-establish order into the chaos of reality.³² At the beginning of *Intrigo italiano*, when the protagonist has not been assigned to an investigation for the past five years, he is tormented by an excruciating insomnia, but he finally manages to sleep again when he is asked by the Italian secret services to investigate a murder.³³ The feverish obsession to solve this case will keep him sleepless for many more nights, until the end of the book when, having comprehended what really happened and having found a way to blackmail the secret service's deviant officer who orchestrated several of the crimes, he feels that '[h]e has solved his case', and finally manages to sleep.³⁴ In *Peccato mortale* and *L'inverno più nero*, the compulsion that dominates De Luca is defined as an urge [*smania*], a fever, an obsession, and a worm [*tarlo*] or a splinter inside his head.³⁵

Yet, despite De Luca's fervent dedication to his investigations, the monomaniacal focus on his work is also the most overt sign that his psyche is trying to flee from something. The insomnia that torments the protagonist can undoubtedly be explained by his obsessive urgency to solve the investigation; however, it is also a clear sign that some unsettling burden is disrupting his soul. This is already evident in *Carta bianca*, where the Inspector is on the verge of a psychological breakdown, worn out by prolonged sleeplessness and sudden bouts of nausea.³⁶ No matter how many times De Luca professes the unpolitical dimension of his role, his troubled mental state attests that his body and parts of his mind are aware that something is amiss in his contribution to the Fascist system of power and repression. Lucarelli's detective testifies to how implication is a state that individuals experience through an array of affective reactions and emotional responses, in line with Rothberg's most recent theorisation around the idea of 'feeling implicated'.³⁷ The sickness, insomnia, and general malaise that torment the protagonist are manifestations of the feelings of guilt, discomfort, and uneasiness for his involvement in the dictatorial system, which De Luca tries to resist through the justification of his apolitical role.

32 See Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 76; *Via delle oche*, pp. 207, 270; *Inverno più nero*, pp. 220-21.

33 Lucarelli, *Intrigo Italiano*, pp. 38-42.

34 Ibid., p. 192. For the nights of insomnia see *ibid.*, pp. 64, 95.

35 See Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, pp. 10, 150, 188; *Inverno più nero*, pp. 15, 58, 87, 214.

36 See Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, pp. 7, 11-12, 36, 77.

37 Michael Rothberg, 'Feeling Implicated: An Introduction', *Parallax*, 29.3 (2023), 265-81.

Throughout the series, secondary characters serve to challenge De Luca and disrupt the novels' restricted focalisation on the protagonist's worldview, enabling readers to develop a more critical perspective on him. In *Carta bianca*, it is Valeria who draws attention to De Luca's psychological mechanism of self-defence:

I know what kind of person you are [...] You are someone who hides [...] You are someone who always thinks about his work and dreams about it even at night, someone who is always busy, who runs without ever stopping [...] you are so attached to your role, you who have it, that you say it whenever you can, I'm a policeman, I'm a policeman. So you don't have to think about the war front that is approaching [...].³⁸

Valeria highlights that De Luca's behaviour is the result of hidden psychological coping mechanisms through which the man tries not to think about the reality he is living through. This is the same defence system that the detective puts in place in *L'inverno più nero*—set four months before *Carta bianca*—in which his colleague Petrarca poignantly underscores that the obsession with his work allows him to 'look fixedly to one side because [he is] afraid to see everything else'.³⁹ However, in the previously considered excerpt, Valeria offers a limited interpretation of De Luca's psychology, suggesting that the Inspector is above all fleeing from the anxiety of the war and the fear of being killed once the Fascist Social Republic, for which he works, is defeated. It is in a scene towards the end of the novel, where De Luca and Valeria have a heated argument, that the detective's single-minded self-defence begins to crumble, revealing that what the man is actually fleeing from is his involvement in Fascism:

'I don't want to tell you anything.'

'You have to.'

'Why? What will you do to me? Tie me to a chair and burn me with a cigarette, like you used to?'

'I never did that!' shouted De Luca, clenching his fists. 'It wasn't me doing those things! I was just doing my job, being a policeman, and that's all!'

[...]

'Tell that to the partisans,' she whispered. De Luca sat on the bed, resting his arms on his knees. He sighed, utterly exhausted.⁴⁰

38 Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, pp. 47–48.

39 Lucarelli, *Inverno più nero*, p. 160.

40 Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 100.

Valeria's words, accusing De Luca of acts of torturing that he has not committed, draws attention to the vicarious responsibility that the Inspector bears for wrong actions perpetrated by the Fascist political police where, as readers know from the beginning of the novel, he has agreed to work—a choice that constitutes the 'capital sin' explored by the homonymous fifth instalment of the series. The detective's heartfelt reaction, ranging from a first burst of rage to a gloomy sense of despair, testifies that De Luca himself knows that there is something true in this accusation.

In *Carta bianca*, it is also the development of the plot that highlights the extent of De Luca's involvement in Fascism beyond his repeated self-justifications. Stuck with his investigation, the Inspector decides to pay a visit to Rassetto, his former superior in the political police. When he enters his previous headquarters, De Luca is welcomed by the guard at the entrance, who recognises him and greets him with the Fascist salute, highlighting the familiarity that linked the protagonist to the repressive arm of the state apparatus.⁴¹ Then, the conversation with Rassetto proves extremely fruitful, as it is thanks to the information he receives from him—while the screams of a prisoner tortured by the Fascist militia resonate from the basement—that De Luca can move forward with his case.⁴² This meeting is crucial in clarifying how *Carta bianca* conceptualises the protagonist's relationship with Fascism. Throughout the novel, De Luca does not take part in the perpetration of wrongdoings, and he no longer collaborates with a military force that tortures its prisoners. Yet, the fact that he manages to put together the pieces to solve his investigation only because of his contacts in the Fascist political police reveals how the Inspector continues to benefit from his past collaboration, showing that at the beginning of the series the protagonist occupies the position of an implicated subject.

De Luca's implication is epitomised in the grave news he receives from his former superior. The anti-fascist National Liberation Committee (CNL) has circulated a list of wanted Fascists to be sentenced to death: Rassetto is the first name on the list, while De Luca's is the fifth. Rassetto's reply to De Luca's surprised reaction clearly highlights that the protagonist's ties to Fascism cannot be brushed away:

41 Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 63.

42 Ibid., pp. 64–67.

Did you think you were exempt just because you did the intellectual work here? Or because you managed to get transferred? [...] But don't delude yourself, don't think you've regained your innocence just because you're now chasing petty thieves.⁴³

This exchange dismisses any redemptive narrative through which De Luca may have tried to distance himself from his past involvement in the regime's repressive machine. De Luca's implication is then clarified by the conclusion of the novel. After repeatedly denying his political role and trying to resist the recognition of his past involvement, on 25 April 1945 De Luca again meets Rassetto, who is fleeing with other Fascist supporters as the front is collapsing, the Allies are invading Northern Italy, and the partisans are taking control of many cities. After further hesitation, De Luca decides to run away with the Fascists, implicitly admitting his implication, as he must have understood that, in contrast to those Italians who fought on the anti-fascist side—such as his colleague Pugliese, who indeed advises him to run away—he has been contributing to an unjust dictatorship.⁴⁴

From Implicit Implication to Complicity

Carta bianca is a powerful short novel that portrays Fascism from the perspective of an implicated subject plagued by guilt for his present and past involvement in the regime. Yet the text does not clarify the extent of the protagonist's past contributions to the dictatorship, nor does it lead De Luca to become fully aware of his implication, which remains something readers must infer from the protagonist's emotional reactions and the development of the plot. The following two novels in the series, all set after the end of World War II, portray De Luca's struggle to rehabilitate his name and find a place in postwar society. In *L'estate torbida*, set in the spring of 1945, De Luca hides under a false name but is recognised by Leonardi, a member of the partisan police who engages him to help solve a brutal murder. De Luca resolves the case, proving that the killer was a corrupt local partisan leader, but at the end of the book his identity is discovered and he is arrested as a supporter of the Fascist Social Republic. Three years later, in *Via delle*

43 Lucarelli, *Carta bianca*, p. 28.

44 Ibid., pp. 106–07.

oche, De Luca is working in Bologna as a member of the police in a low-prestige administrative division responsible for monitoring prostitutes working in legal brothels. From this role, De Luca ends up investigating a new murder, which involves powerful local Christian Democrats as well as one of his superiors, police commissioner D'Ambrosio. In this power struggle, De Luca's past implication in Fascism becomes a weapon to be used against him: D'Ambrosio has a dossier proving that, after his arrest, De Luca managed to evade the purge by providing limited information on his involvement in the Fascist Social Republic. At the end of the book, an orchestrated scandal erupts in the newspaper, and De Luca is arrested again as a Fascist who evaded punishment.

Through these arrests, the two novels keep the focus on De Luca's past implication in the dictatorship, which remains an undercurrent issue that constantly resurfaces.⁴⁵ This is further underscored by De Luca's emotional reactions, which continue to reflect a distressed state of mind, seemingly caused by a disturbing feeling of guilt for his past involvement in Fascism. In *L'estate torbida*, De Luca suffers from a constant nausea that impedes him from eating and often gives him the impression of being on the verge of vomiting.⁴⁶ During the investigation of a farm, the protagonist hears the loud noise of a pig being slaughtered and is overtaken by a sudden bodily reaction. The sound seemed to him 'so loud [that] it filled his ears and pierced his brain', and when it stopped 'it almost hurt'.⁴⁷ Feeling overwhelmed, De Luca suddenly stops walking, his mouth goes dry, and he has to sit on a nearby stone, panting, while a drop of blood comes out of his nose. As a later allusion will make clear, the cries of the suffering animal reminded him of the screams of prisoners being tortured that he had heard many times coming from the basement of the Fascist police headquarters where he worked. This emotional response shows the disturbing feelings that torment the mind of the protagonist, who knows he was involved in violence and the suffering of others. In *Via delle oche*, after D'Ambrosio threatens to reveal information about De Luca's past and cause a scandal that would

45 De Luca's arrests also serves to articulate a criticism of the limitations and ethical complexities of the Italian postwar transition, showing that the purges were both a mild and often unfair way to mete out justice—De Luca indeed is not expelled from the police and is only arrested a second time because he went against his superior. On the limits of the Italian purges see Hans Woller, *I conti con il fascismo: L'epurazione in Italia, 1943-1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

46 Carlo Lucarelli, *L'estate torbida* [1991] in Lucarelli, *Il commissario De Luca* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2008), pp. 113, 135.

47 Lucarelli, *Via delle oche*, p. 148.

push him out of the police, the detective is overcome by a sudden crisis and has to hastily retreat to the officers' toilet, where he bursts into tears. This breakdown testifies to the fear that De Luca feels at the possibility of losing a job he considers the only precious thing in his life. However, as with his insomnia and bouts of nausea, it also attests to the underlying sense of guilt that weighs on his soul.

Besides these affected reactions, the protagonist's responsibility for Fascism is also kept alive by secondary characters, who reproach De Luca for his involvement in the dictatorial system. For instance, both Leonardi in *L'estate torbida* and Pugliese in *Via delle oche* deconstruct De Luca's most common defence, contesting the idea that he bore no responsibility since he was playing a non-political role.⁴⁸ An interesting variation of this narrative situation is developed in *Intrigo italiano*, in which De Luca is once again involved in a security force that commits criminal activities, this time the Italian Republic's secret service operating in the context of the Cold War. After the arrest at the end of *Via delle oche*, the Inspector is summoned by a judge but never goes to trial. He spends the following five years in limbo, affiliated with a police station where he does not receive new investigations, until he is called to Rome and recruited by the secret service to investigate the murder of Stefania Cresca, the wife of a famous university professor of physics who had died two months earlier in an car accident along with his twelve-year-old nephew. It turns out that the accident was caused by the Italian secret service, who were asked by the Americans to eliminate Cresca because he was likely to begin working for the Soviets—the young boy was an unintended casualty, as he was not supposed to be in the car with his uncle. After being informed by his superior about how the accident happened, De Luca confronts his assistant, Giannino, accusing him of knowing how the professor and the poor boy died:

[']You knew about it.'

[...]

'No. They told me not to get involved, and I figured there was a reason, but I didn't know.'

'Christ, Giannino! A twelve-year-old boy!'

'It wasn't us two, engineer! It wasn't me. I had nothing to do with it; I'm just doing my job.'⁴⁹

48 Lucarelli, *L'estate torbida*, p. 174; Lucarelli, *Via delle oche*, p. 249.

49 Lucarelli, *Intrigo Italiano*, pp. 93-94.

The scene generates a role reversal, putting De Luca in the position of the accuser and obliging him to listen to the justifications that he uttered on so many occasions. In the night, De Luca is unable to sleep as he thinks about his investigation, but also what his assistant said; outraged by the killing of the professor, the words he had often used to justify his own actions now sound far less convincing to him. On this umpteenth sleepless night, the Inspector reflects on Giannino's implication in this crime, as well as on his own since he is collaborating with the agency. Here De Luca begins to consider more openly how even those who do not directly commit certain crimes bear some form of responsibility for them, and he realises that everyone working for the secret service bears a part of responsibility for the murder.⁵⁰

Although in *Intrigo italiano* De Luca begins to cultivate a rational and explicit understanding of the process of implication, the development of this awareness remains confined to limited scenes, is not central to the plot of the story, and does not lead the main character to a thorough confrontation with his Fascist past. It is with the two final instalments of the series that Lucarelli offers the most thorough and overt examination of De Luca's sense of guilt by narrating the events that caused it. These issues are particularly central in *Peccato mortale*, which recounts how De Luca joins the political unit led by Rassetto in Bologna, before moving to the North of Italy in the *Ettore Muti* Brigade at the end of *L'inverno più nero*. The fifth novel of the series is the one set furthest back in time, beginning in July 1943 before the arrest of Mussolini. De Luca is a successful officer working for the criminal police and, in this period of his life, he is also involved in a serious relationship with a young pharmacist, Lorenza, the daughter of two anti-fascist intellectuals. As readers might expect, this relationship creates an unsolvable conflict within the detective between private desires and professional duty, and it is not meant to last. After weeks in which De Luca neglects her because of his work, Lorenza, who is about to migrate with her family to Switzerland, invites her lover to come with them. But the Inspector is too obsessed with his job and feels that he cannot 'leave his dead behind'.⁵¹ He chooses to stay and causes a final rupture that puts an end to their relationship.

More than a predictable subplot, the love story with Lorenza allows Lucarelli to explore the private sphere of De Luca's character, shedding light on certain traits of his personality. This aspect is brought to the

⁵⁰ Lucarelli, *Intrigo Italiano*, p. 96.

⁵¹ Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 216.

fore by Lorenza's parents, who have conflicting views about their daughter's partner. According to her father, De Luca's obsession with his job is the result of a belief in high moral values. As Lorenza relays: 'When you talk about your work, you do so with such fervour, such zeal, your eyes shine like... he says he sees in you the *Sense of Truth and Justice*'.⁵² Her mother, however, disagrees. She believes that De Luca is selfish and egocentric, driven by a fixed mania for resolving his cases to the point that, as Lorenza reports, 'you can forget about everything else: the daily struggles, the responsibilities of a normal life, even politics'.⁵³ These two conflicting portraits elucidate the ethical issue that Lucarelli has raised via his detective since the beginning of the series: the issue of a man who acts in the name of positive values while being oblivious to the broader political and societal context in which he operates.

In *Peccato mortale*, De Luca's obliviousness to the ramifications of his actions and inactions takes on a sharper and more explicit form. In this novel, his implication becomes tainted by complicity. While investigating two macabre murders—a body without a head and a head without a body—De Luca discovers that the main perpetrator is Fratojanni, an officer working in his police department with close political ties to the Fascist apparatus. At the end of the book, in order to continue his investigation—but also to protect his own life—De Luca chooses to join the political unit led by Rassetto. The latter belongs to a radical and revolutionary current within the Fascist party, and therefore he welcomes De Luca's investigation on his former colleague, who is affiliated to moderate and corrupt figures of the Fascist establishment. The change of agency proves successful: De Luca manages to gather the evidence he needs and incriminates Fratojanni, who, backed into a corner, prefers to commit suicide. The cost of this victory, however, is immense, as De Luca becomes more directly involved in the most violent sections of the Fascist repressive machine.

The case is indeed resolved thanks to information that the protagonist's new political unit acquires from an anti-fascist activist, Andrea Luria, whose brother Franco—a criminal working for Fratojanni—tried to kill De Luca. When he goes to see the incarcerated person in the basement of the headquarters, De Luca finds Andrea 'bruised and covered in blood': he has been beaten up and tortured.⁵⁴ In the cell, the Inspector notices the hands of policeman Massaron, 'dirty with blood and scraped

⁵² Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 157.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 233.

on the knuckles', and he is hit by the 'smell of blood, faeces, and urine'.⁵⁵ At first he is shocked, especially because he had hoped that Rassetto's men would have arrested Franco Luria and not his brother. Nevertheless, he does not miss the opportunity to gain what he needs. Despite Andrea not having said anything relevant up to that point, and the other policemen believing that he knows nothing, De Luca asks for the torture to continue:

De Luca said it instinctively, without almost thinking about it:

'Could you ask him a few more questions?'

Rassetto smiled with his wolf-like teeth, looked at Massaron, who emerged from the darkness and punched what was left of Luria's face.⁵⁶

It is only thanks to this further violence that Andrea provides the information that will lead to the conclusion of the investigation. De Luca does not witness the end of the interrogation, as he leaves the room, overcome by sudden nausea. As the narrator states, 'it was not just disgust that choked him, nor even horror', suggesting that his reaction is a direct result of the self-reproach that De Luca feels for what he has done.⁵⁷ The scene closes with the appearance of Massaron who, slightly embarrassed, communicates that he went too far: Andrea Luria is dead. The narrative trajectory of *Peccato mortale* unveils that, driven by the desire to solve his case, De Luca has become an accomplice to murder. Through this novel, Lucarelli clarifies the extent to which De Luca has been implicated in Fascism and is co-responsible for its violence, showing that his participation went beyond membership in the political police, as suggested by the first novels of the series, to include involvement and complicity in the torture and murder perpetrated by his unit.

Through the focalisation on De Luca, Lucarelli's novels perform an act of 'mnemonic care' towards the Italian Fascist past by exploring the perspective of a man complicit in wrongdoing.⁵⁸ Scholars who have examined the testimonies of perpetrators have underscored the importance of critically engaging with such voices—including through the mediation of fiction—which can illuminate the worldviews that underpinned the perpetration of injustices and reveal the self-justifications employed to obscure or rationalise these acts retrospectively in order

⁵⁵ Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 234.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ For the idea of 'mnemonic care', see Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*, p. 9.

to evade responsibility.⁵⁹ A similar broadening of our understanding of reality can be achieved through the critical examination of fictional or real-life testimonies from individuals complicit and implicated in injustices.⁶⁰ The adoption of this specific perspective can foster what Susanne Knittel and Juliane Prade-Weiss, drawing on Foucault, have respectively termed an ethics or poetics of discomfort. The terms refer to the articulation of narratives about the past that, as Knittel argues, can expose 'ambiguity and uncertainty' and compel individuals to question the 'assumptions and the conceptual frameworks' through which they understand reality.⁶¹ As Prade-Weiss observes, this sense of discomfort can become a central aspect of the reading experience through texts that bring 'past problematic involvements into an uncomfortable proximity to the present act of reading'.⁶² Lucarelli's series manages to create such productive space to think through Italy's dictatorial past. By exploring its protagonist's shared degrees of responsibility for Fascism, his novels draw readers into an unsettling engagement with the history of the dictatorship. The series illustrates how Fascist crimes were enabled by well-meaning, ordinary individuals who, facing the choices created by the historical context in which they had to live, exercised their agency in ways that aligned with oppressive power structures. This narrative sustains a responsible depiction of the Fascist past, which compels readers to avoid comfortable, redemptive understandings of history and to reflect on complex ethical dilemmas. In the series, this representation is constructed through the open thematisation of De Luca's complicity, which then paves the way to an explicit acknowledgment of his deeper implication in Fascist injustices.

59 Sybille Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 85-104 (pp. 97-98); Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice, 'Perpetrator Testimony', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Wood (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 567-96 (p. 577); and Juliane Prade-Weiss, Dominik Markl, and Vladimir Petrović, 'Beyond Denial: Justifications of Mass Violence as an Agenda for Memory Studies', *Memory Studies*, 16.6 (2023), 1546-1562.

60 See also Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, pp. 201-02.

61 Susanne Knittel, 'The Ethics of Discomfort: Critical Perpetrator Studies and/as Education after Auschwitz', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 379-84 (p. 380).

62 Juliane Prade-Weiss, 'Responsibility, Complicity, and the Poetics of Discomfort: Commemorating Dictatorships in Contemporary Central and Eastern European Documentary Fiction', in *Mediating Historical Responsibility: Memories of 'Difficult Pasts' in European Cultures*, ed. by Guido Bartolini and Joseph Ford (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), pp. 85-106 (p. 86).

From Complicity to Explicit Implication

Peccato mortale pins down De Luca's responsibility, showing that the Inspector was complicit in a very specific crime, as he had a supervisory role in the torture and death of the anti-fascist activist Andrea Luria. The recognition of the protagonist's complicity in wrongdoing leads to a more thorough representation of his broader implication. The novel captures in clear terms the detective's indirect involvement in other crimes of Fascism, showing that De Luca's co-responsibility is not only due to specific actions he committed but also to what he chose not to do. For instance, the Inspector does nothing to help Giovannino, one of Lorenza's bourgeois friends whom De Luca had met several times, who is arrested for anti-fascist conspiracy. From the last letter the detective receives from Lorenza, readers learn that the young man was executed by a firing squad.⁶³ Similarly, while focusing all his energies on his investigation, De Luca shows no interest in what his colleagues are preparing: a list of Jewish citizens that later in the story will be handed to the Germans.⁶⁴ De Luca's disinterest in the matter is particularly disconcerting given that among his acquaintances is Dr Ravenna, the original owner of the pharmacy where Lorenza works, who on several occasions provided useful information for his investigation. De Luca's complete lack of involvement in the Jewish question is directly linked to his narrow worldview. When a concerned Ravenna comes to speak to him, asking whether the arrest of Mussolini on 25 July would lead to an abrogation of the racial laws, the Inspector calmly replies that he has nothing to say, since the matter falls outside his duties: 'I don't know what to tell you. I don't deal with politics; I'm just a policeman'.⁶⁵ As *Peccato mortale* makes painfully clear, De Luca is so concerned with his investigation that he fails to recognise the injustices of his time, even those affecting people he personally knows and for whom, as a result of his role, he could have potentially done something to help.

Importantly, the series includes several secondary characters who are not as blind as the protagonist and have the moral strength to recognise the political dimensions of the events occurring around them. This is true not only of characters who play relatively substantial roles in the stories, such as the policemen Pugliese and Petrarca who collaborate with the anti-fascist Resistance — the latter paying for this

63 Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 244.

64 See *ibid.*, pp. 217, 219, 223.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

political commitment with his life—but also of very minor figures, such as the aforementioned Lenzi or Marshall Donati. The latter is an officer in charge of monitoring the phones of certain political suspects who, after the fall of Mussolini, admits to De Luca that he has not passed all information to the Fascist secret police. As the man proclaims: ‘We may be policemen, but we have our own ideas too, don’t we?’⁶⁶ These characters show readers that, despite the risks, certain individuals chose to act against the regime, proving that De Luca’s behaviour was not the only possible course of action.

The representation of De Luca’s complicity and broader involvement in Fascist injustices in *Peccato mortale* culminates, in *L’inverno più nero*, in the protagonist’s explicit recognition of his implication. At the beginning of the novel, the detective is responsible for creating lists of anti-fascist activists and misleading potential investigations that could target members of the political police. While examining a corpse at a crime scene, De Luca realises that the man must have been beaten, tortured, and killed by the Fascist militia, and he skilfully plants false clues, leading the other policemen to believe that the anti-fascist partisans are responsible for his death.⁶⁷ Contrary to the previous texts, in *L’inverno più nero* De Luca is fully aware of his co-responsibility. After the success of an operation that leads to the arrest of some partisans, he chooses not to join the celebration of his colleagues, leading to an exchange with Rassetto that removes any doubts about his involvement:

‘Look, even if you don’t celebrate with us, it’s not like you’re not involved.’

‘I know.’

‘Even if you don’t come to the interrogations, if you don’t touch anyone...’

‘I know it!’⁶⁸

The protagonist’s repeated answers show that he recognises his participation in injustice. This awareness reappears later in the story, when De Luca, who is collaborating with the Nazis on the investigation of the murder of a German deserter, admits to himself that many of the people whom the Germans have arrested, and whom they threaten to shoot as an act of revenge unless De Luca can solve the case in a few days, are likely to have ended up in prison because of him and the lists of activists he had compiled.⁶⁹

66 Lucarelli, *Peccato mortale*, p. 166.

67 Lucarelli, *L’inverno più nero*, pp. 12–13.

68 Ibid., p. 41.

69 Ibid., p. 151.

The conclusion of *L'inverno più nero* foregrounds De Luca's co-responsibility and his feeling of guilt, introducing the psychological mechanism of repression that links the last novel to the first of the series. The Inspector has been taken into custody by the Germans after he suspiciously went to look for information about Petrarca—the anti-fascist policeman that De Luca helped and who became his friend. Locked in a small room at the German headquarters, De Luca initially fears being tortured, but then another emotion takes over: shame. Being in the position of a political prisoner, the detective cannot help but think about the many men who have been tortured in his own headquarters. This results in an open acknowledgement of De Luca's co-responsibility, 'because even if he didn't go down, didn't watch, or plugged his ears when he heard screams, he knew what they were doing down there'.⁷⁰ It is at this point, after the most explicit admission of his own involvement, that De Luca flees, relying on the mantra that he would repeat to himself in the years to come, thinking that the Germans will do nothing to him, because he has done nothing wrong, since, after all, he is only a policeman.⁷¹

On the last page of the book, after Rassetto has released the protagonist from German custody, the feeling of shame reappears and forms the final note on which the book ends: De Luca moves to the north of Italy in the *Ettore Muti*, but brings with him 'That livid and rotten cold, that swollen air that suffocated him', the visible signs of his self-reproach and guilt for his implication, complicity, and involvement in Fascist criminal violence. *L'inverno più nero* closes the circle of De Luca's story, ending with a detective corroded by the negative emotions of fear, guilt, and shame for what he has done, which he has decided to bury inside himself, hanging on to self-justifications.⁷² However, the correspondence between the protagonist of the 2020 novel and the one of 1990 is merely apparent, since throughout the series the character has undergone the transformations that this article has traced. The protagonist of the first book is a man who denies his involvement in Fascist crimes, which is something that readers can only grasp implicitly. The protagonist of the last instalment has repressed his feelings of guilt and shame after his own co-responsibility has become explicit and manifest to both him and the readers.

70 Lucarelli, *L'inverno più nero*, p. 295.

71 Ibid., p. 296.

72 Ibid., p. 300.

By exposing De Luca's complicity in Fascist crimes, the final two novels of the series undertake an explicit exploration of the guilt that has haunted the protagonist, and they openly depict the ways in which De Luca has been implicated in the injustices perpetrated by the Fascist state, including the Holocaust. Through the examination of De Luca's complicity and broader implication, Lucarelli's novels perform an act of responsible testimony about the Fascist past, which simultaneously highlight the agency of historical actors and their entanglement in structural forms of violence. This depiction enables Lucarelli's series to play a significant role within Italian memory culture. Literary texts—like any other cultural products that contribute to negotiating memory narratives about the past—always risk becoming complicit with oppressive power structures by enacting what Ivan Stacy calls 'failures of witnessing'.⁷³ With this term, Stacy refers to texts that become complicit with power through 'condoning, connivance, and culpable ignorance' of the 'patterns of repeated social behaviour that enable or encourage wrongdoing'.⁷⁴ In contrast, Lucarelli's series constitutes an act of mnemonic care that exposes the repressive violence committed under Fascism and openly thematises the implication and complicity of its central protagonist. De Luca, an otherwise sympathetic hero, compels readers—who are inclined to align with him and support his investigations—to confront the uncomfortable reality of how ordinary individuals become involved in the injustices of a dictatorial system. Through this narrative approach, Lucarelli's crime fiction performs an act of responsible testimony that challenges uncritical and unethical memory narratives about Italy's past, urging readers to reflect on the widespread co-responsibilities for Fascism.

Conclusion

Inspector De Luca is a valuable figure within Italian cultural memory, as he embodies the progressive emergence over the last three decades of narratives on the Fascist past told from the point of views of individuals who are involved in Fascist crimes. De Luca is not an indifferent person who does not care about justice or is unable to feel empathy or solidarity toward the other. Nor is he a conformist who adheres to the dominant

⁷³ Stacy, *The Complicit Text*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

power to gain personal benefits. On the contrary, he is a man who seems to follow ethical principles, fighting for good causes in the name of justice, but whose moral compass is broken, as he is unable to reflect on the political dimension of his own actions. De Luca's main fault is that he fails to recognise what Mark Sanders has called the 'basic folded-together-ness of being', meaning the existential responsibility that connects every individual to one another and that constitutes the foundation of the political fabric that forms human society.⁷⁵ Deprived of this awareness, the Inspector cannot grasp the political dimension of the human condition, and he ends up contributing to numerous wrongdoings while believing that he is actually acting for good. The first three novels of the series develop this perspective in a rather unsystematic fashion, portraying a character who only has an implicit understanding of his implication in past injustices through feelings of fear, guilt, and uneasiness, which he tends to repress. The fact that the novels published in the 1990s developed this critical perspective on Italy's Fascist past only in implicit and partial ways suggests that Italian culture of that time was only beginning to open to ideas of co-responsibility for Fascism. The last three novels, published between 2017 and 2020, show a more mature engagement with these issues, proving that voices of complicity in contemporary Italian literature have evolved, becoming more articulated and explicit throughout the twenty-first century.

By narrating and reflecting on the indirect forms of participation that sustain the oppressive actions of an authoritarian dictatorship, Lucarelli's novels instil some important reflections on Fascism within Italian cultural memory. The texts show that responsibility for a dictatorship is something that exists in different degrees, and it is not only shared by perpetrators and ideologues but also by a plurality of individuals like De Luca who contribute to the repressive mechanism of the dictatorial system simply by carrying on with their social role. In this way, the series gives a narrative form to important ideas that have been central to international scholarship on the Holocaust and totalitarian regimes, epitomised by the now classic works of Zygmunt Bauman and Christopher Browning, which have foregrounded the role of ordinary individuals in historical crimes.⁷⁶ Through the figure

⁷⁵ Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 11.

⁷⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

of Inspector De Luca, Lucarelli's series makes a notable contribution to Italian cultural memory by looking at the past neither from the perspective of the opponents of the regime nor its supporters, but through the lens of an individual who enables the functioning of Fascism's repressive power and facilitates the injustices of his time. The thorough exploration of a figure of this kind, even through popular novels meant for mass consumption and written in rather simple language, makes a significant contribution towards the formation of a responsible memory culture. These novels illustrate the involvement of ordinary people in the crimes of their era and show that injustices are often the result of well-intentioned individuals who focus solely on performing their jobs well without reflecting on the broader political implications of their actions and inactions, and their impact on the lives of others.

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