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Roberto Savianos *culture wars*: notes on a literary quote

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Abstract

Roberto Saviano (b. 1979), the author of bestseller *Gomorrah* (2007; ed. orig. 2006), is arguably the most influential contemporary Italian writer and an icon of resistance to the perceived political and moral decline of the country.
This success can be understood against the background of the current state of affairs in Italy and as part of a wave of 'postmodern commitment' (Antonello & Mussgnug, 2009) among Italian artists and intellectuals. Interestingly, Saviano has earned the respect of people with different political views, which is a remarkable achievement in a country traditionally plagued by ideological division.
This paper investigates the connection of form and content in Saviano's public communication by focusing on one single example that we deem representative of his poetics and politics.
In a TV-show by title *Dall'inferno alla bellezza* [From hell to beauty], Saviano performed a two-hour long monologue focused on stories of resistance against evil. A number of the nearly three-million viewers recognized as an especially pregnant moment a story – based on Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma* tale 'Prosthetic Appliances' (1994:388-391) – about a prisoner who refused to give up his soul to a guard and, in Saviano's own addition to the original text, "nearly lost his life for something that he did not even know he had" (Saviano, 2009b).

Introduction: Saviano's engagement

During a public debate, organized by Italian magazine *Internazionale*, with USA journalist William Langewiesche, Roberto Saviano raised a polemical question: "Why do journalists write badly about important matters, while writers write well about irrelevant things?" (Saviano & Langewiesche 2008: 18). This remark contains a strong element of ethical commitment and implicitly reflects Saviano' disaffection with some literary practices of Postmodernism, at least as they developed in Italy in the 80's and 90's. Moreover, as noted by Palumbo Mosca (2009), this remark implies

a) that literature ought to deal with 'important matters', that is issues that are relevant to the life of a community;
b) that literature is an apt tool – maybe *better* than other forms of communication – for dealing with 'important matters'.

These assumptions are quite consistent with a notion of *impegno* – 'ethical and political commitment' – which has a glorious tradition in Italian literature (Antonello & Mussgnug, 2009). Indeed, in the last decade several Italian scholars have been advocating for new forms of investigative and critical literature as an antidote to the state of artistic and social life in Italy. In this search, major scholars as Carla Benedetti (1998) and Romano Luperini (2005) – others could be named – suggest to look at writer, journalist, film director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini and his "impure" literature as source of inspiration for developing *new* engaged writing forms.

It is therefore high symbolically, in *Gomorrah*, the scene in which Saviano goes on pilgrim journey at Pasolini's grave and recites his own version of Pasolini's famous *j'accuse* against the Italian political class:

> On the left, just past the entrance, there was an empty flowerbed. I went over to that square of earth, in the middle of which were two small, white marble slabs. I saw his tomb. 'Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975)'. […] I feel less alone. I began to mumble my rage, fists clenched so tight that my fingernails pierced my palms. I began to articulate my own "I know," the "I know" of my day. (Saviano: 2007: 212)

Saviano's words – written when he was a relatively unknown young writer – can be read today as a self-fulfilling prophecy, since Saviano has inherited several of the traits that made Pasolini into the most influential Italian intellectual of the past generation: a) their voices resonates through a plurality of genres and media (books, newspapers, television, film); b) it is difficult to frame both writers within traditional political categories; see Tricomi, 2010 for Pasolini as a 'left-wing reactionary'); c) for different reasons, both writers radiate an aura of total personal engagement and *sacrifice*, since Saviano must live in hiding for avoiding retaliation from the *camorra*, while many believe that Pasolini was victim of political murder.

In the above-mentioned scene of pilgrimage, Saviano rephrases Pasolini's "I know" with an interesting variation. Pasolini wrote:

> I know. But I do not have the proof. I don't even have clues.
> I know because I am a writer and an intellectual who tries to follow what goes on, to imagine what is known and what is kept quiet, who pieces together the disorganised fragments of a whole and coherent political picture, who restores logic where arbitrariness, mystery and madness seem to prevail (Pasolini, 1974, our translation).

Saviano adds some important, albeit slightly obscure reflections about the process of knowing and communicating:

> *I know and I can prove it*. I know how economies originate and where they get their odor. The odor of success and victory. I know what sweats of profit. I know. […] *The proofs are irrefutable because they are partial, recorded with my eyes, recounted with words, and tempered with emotions that have echoed off iron and wood*. I see, hear, look, talk, and in this way I testify, an ugly word that can still be useful when it whispers, "It's not true", in the ear of those who listen to the rhyming lullabies of power. *The truth is partial; after all, if it could be reduced to an objective formula, it would be chemistry. I know and I can prove it. And so I tell. About these truths*. (Saviano 2007a: 213; our italics)

As we see, Saviano's commitment to *truth* rests on two pillars: his role as a *witness* and his craft as a *writer of literature* (see also Saviano, 2007b). Moreover, Saviano is a witness that is ethically involved with the events he is writing about; he wants therefore not only to enlighten, but to create *emotional involvement* in the reader and induce her or him to take position on matters of life and death.

In addition, Saviano paradoxically affirms that *truth is irrefutable because it is partial*, since it is his personal involvement that vouches for the truth of his words. Knowing and communicating is mediated individual commitment and active participation. It is through the *body* of the writer – quite literally in the case of the TV-show – that the reader *experience*s the narration.

Saviano's dramatic personal situation amplified his credibility, but he really became an icon of resistance against political corruption and lie in the Italian public discourse thanks to a TV-show aired on the 11th of November 2009. In front of 2.8 million viewers (Repubblica online, 2009), Saviano performed a two-hour long monologue about stories of evil and resistance to evil

(Saviano, 2009b).[1] An especially pregnant moment in the show – one that was immediately posted on the web and commented by admired viewers – was Saviano's retelling of 'Prosthetic Appliances,' one story from *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov (1907-1982).

Shalamov's 'Prosthetic Appliances' – as retold by Saviano

In Shalamov's *Prosthetic Appliances*, a group of prisoners in a Siberian labour camp are sent to the punishment block. The guards don't give any explanation about the reasons for the punishment. The men are stripped to their underwear then, one by one, have their prosthetic appliances confiscated. The first man must take off his steel corset, the second one an artificial arm, a third one a hearing aid, another one an artificial leg. Finally Grisha, the senior brigade leader, gives up his porcelain eye. Than it is the turn of the narrator, Shalamov's *alter ego*.

> While Grisha's eye was being recorded, the chief guard couldn't control himself and started giggling. 'That one gives his arm; this one turns in his leg; another gives his back, and this one gives his eye. We'll have all the parts of the body at this rate. How about you?' He looked over my naked body carefully.
> 'What will you give up? Your soul?'
> 'No.' I said. 'You can't have my soul.' (Shalamov, 1994:388-391)

This answer ends a short story of ultimate evil and resistance.

In his monologue, Saviano adds at the beginning a little context to the story and describes the cold and the fatigue in Siberian labour camps, to help those among the viewers with little previous knowledge of the subject. Differently from Shalamov – who insists that the punishment is totally unmotivated, thereby drawing a connection with the absurdity that brought the prisoners to Siberia in the first place – Saviano explains that the group of prisoners was punished for failing to fulfil their quota, thereby emphasizing cruelty rather than absurdity. The scene in which the prisoners give up their prostheses is, again, close to the original text, but after the narrator declares 'No, you can't have my soul', Saviano lets another story of his invention begin, which takes as much space – in the monologue – as the original one.

In Saviano's monolog, the guard does not accept the refusal and threatens to punish Shalamov with two weeks in a pit, if he does not give up his soul. Shalamov refuses two more times and is sent to stay closed in the pit for four weeks. This implies almost certain death, but Shalamov is a strong man and eventually survives. Years later, Shalamov would remember: "I nearly lost my life for something that I did not even know I had. But the very moment they wanted to take it from me, I realized that it was my most valuable possession" (Saviano, 2009b).

We believe that this story – and the way Saviano appropriates Shalamov's own story – are highly representative of Saviano's idea of *truth*, his values and his practice as an author of literature. The following two paragraphs are devoted to discussion about these practices and values, which have been the object of some heated debate.

[1] Throughout this paper we attribute to Saviano the authorship of these TV-shows, in part for brevity's sake, in part because he is by far the most visible actor. However, co-authors Michele Serra (an intellectual in the Pasolini tradition), writer Francesco Piccolo , and TV-presenter Fabio Fazio must have played a role – and probably an important role – in choosing and constructing the stories on which the shows were based.

Is Saviano violating the pact with the reader or viewer?

Saviano's addition to the original story can be technically seen as a *graft*, that is as material drawn "from the writer's imagination, from his or her personal life, or from research in the field"– or often a mixture of the three – and inserted onto a narrative based on real events and characters (Chimenti 2010: 44); or also onto a pre-existing text, as in the case of Shalamov's tale. Dimitri Chimenti analyses the use of *grafts* in *Gomorrah* (even Saviano as first-person as narrator is a graft, according to Chimenti), and observes how the "literariness" of this procedure has escaped the attention even of educated readers who mistook the book as a simple "mirror of reality", not the least because of Saviano's "remarkable dissimulation of the process" (id.:44).

Although a close reading of the above mentioned "I know and I can prove it"-quote indeed suggests that not all the stories in *Gomorrah* ought to be understood *literally*, we recognize that Saviano's 'pact with the reader' contains en element of ambiguity, both in *Gomorrah* and in this modified version of 'Prosthetic Appliances.'
The question is, however, how far is it acceptable to be creative with the sources with the purpose of explaining complex real-world issues and mobilising the reader on 'important matters'.

Indeed, Saviano has not just been accused of *violating the pact with the reader* (Donadio, 2007), but even – according for example to left-wing culture sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago (2010: 37-57) – of spreading inaccurate or false information.
There are indeed two circumstances in which Saviano's words have been at least incautious.
In the opening pages of *Gomorrah* (2007: 3-4) the narrator reports, without taking distance, a hearsay story about a container that accidentally opens and vomits bodies of Chinese immigrants; this gory scene endorses the offensive belief that Chinese immigrants in Italy hide the bodies of their dead to reuse their identification papers. This story bears all the hallmarks of an urban legend (see Oriani & Staglianò, 2008), which Saviano has either swallowed or deliberately appropriated because it fit well with his portrait of the Chinese community.
In another occasion Saviano (2010: 6-7), while praising the power of art for making the world a better place, ascribes to a film (*I cento passi*, 2000) the merit for reopening the case of the death of anti-mafia militant Peppino Impastato. Impastato had been killed in 1978 by an explosion, which had been initially explained by the authorities as an incident occurred while he himself was preparing a bomb. The investigations were later reopened thanks to the effort of some judges and a grassroots movement devoted to Impastato's memory. The ensuing trial started in 1999, that is, before the release of the film. However, when representatives of the movement publicly lamented Saviano's inaccuracy, Saviano did not reply, while his publisher threatened the anti-mafia group with legal action.[2]
We quote these two unfortunate episodes not to discredit Saviano, but rather to show some risks and responsibilities involved in being a public figure whose credibility relies on an aura of *truth*.

But is Saviano really violating the pact with the viewer, when he modifies 'Prosthetic Appliances'? We believe not: Saviano just proposes in a narrative format an *interpretation* that is consistent – we believe – with the *intentio operis* of the original text. The viewer is not lied to nor mislead.

[2] See documentation in http://www.centroimpastato.it, seen 25-06-2011.

Heroism and the soul: is Saviano spreading a *regressive* ideology?

Saviano has been criticised for his emphasis on *heroic* narratives (Dal Lago, 2010: 73-116), of which 'Prosthetic Appliances' is a representative example.

According to Dal Lago, Saviano is permeated by a politically regressive ideal of heroism as the only possible opposition to Italy's woes; moreover, a focus on the individual hero, combined with a desire for bipartisan consensus, undermines – in Dal Lago's view – the space for effective political work against the current state of affairs.

It is true that a story like 'Prosthetic Appliances' has all the ingredients for commanding bipartisan consensus from an Italian viewer.

Shalamov is a victim of totalitarianism, in particular of Soviet communism; at the same time he was convicted 'for distributing Lenin's testament', as Saviano informs the viewers; after his release from labour camps, he spends the rest of his life to be a witness of the horror of Kolyma.

Shalamov's biography has therefore all the necessary credentials for earning the respect of people with a variety of political inclinations.

Another element that allows a bipartisan acceptance of the story is the way the concept of 'soul' is presented. People with different backgrounds may have different attitudes towards the notion of 'soul': while a practising Catholic may perceive her or his soul as something worth to die for, for someone with a more secular stance 'soul' is at best a metaphor and at worst a mystification. However, Saviano presents 'soul' as something that Shalamov 'did not even know he had', thereby leaving room for interpreting it as a germ of resistance, that is something that allows a person to remain human in the most dehumanizing situation.

As for Saviano's fascination for *heroes*, it is true that heroic figures abound in his writings (e.g. writers Anna Politkovskaya and Ken Saro-Wiwa, undercover FBI agent Joe Pistone, sport stars Lionel Messi or 'Tatanka' Clemente Russo, all mentioned in Saviano, 2011). And we do reserve the right to question the ideology behind each one of Saviano's *heroes* (for example, Spartan king Leonidas is not our favourite). However, a recurrent pattern in Saviano's narrative is the story of someone who makes the best of an unfortunate start, like Lionel Messi, who had been diagnosed a growth hormone deficiency as a boy, or Salvatore Russo, who was born in a camorra-plagued area. Other heroes are not world champions, but rather persons who worked for the common good, like anti-camorra priests don Peppino Diana or simple citizens – like Beppino Englaro (Saviano, 2011: 131-135) and Giorgio Welby (Saviano, 2010: 79-90) – who chose to act within the law for the right of dying with dignity, instead of seeking an easy individual solution. They are 'involuntary heroes' and people whose actions are inspired by an 'ethics of responsibility' (Todorov, 1991).

All these heroes are indeed 'bipartisan', in the sense that they are typically portrayed in such a way that 'all men of good will' would be expected to appreciate them, beyond political ideologies. Dal Lago sees in this attitude the risk of placing oneself *above* politics and minimizing differences that ought to be the basis of political confrontation (Dal Lago, 2010:91-94).

But is it really a lame political strategy to seek consensus around shared values in today's Italy? We can easily turn Dal Lago's criticism upside down. Italy is historically characterized by a high level of conflicts and divisions on which political forces capitalize to maintain their power: pointing at shared values rather than ideological, geographical or religious differences is indeed a form of

strong oppositional discourse, and maybe even an effective strategy for political communication (see e.g. Lakoff, 1996 and 2004).

Some concluding remarks and an open question

Although public success is not always a measure for quality, it is hard to deny that Saviano has today in Italy a remarkable impact on public opinion. A series of four TV-shows presented and co-authored by him and Fabio Fazio (Fazio & Saviano, 2010) was followed by between 7 and 9 million viewers and hailed as "an historical event that marks the death of TV-based Berlusconism" (Maltese, 2010; our translation).
In opposition to a habit of highly polarized political debate in Italy, Saviano seems respected and popular in large sectors of the Italian society across political attitudes. At the same time, his voice is now perceived as too dangerous for being aired on public television and a second series of TV-shows will no longer be hosted on parliament-controlled RAI (robertosaviano.it, 2011).

Yet, a well-argumented criticism against Saviano and the enthusiastic reception of his message hints at the risk of *reproducing* – instead of fighting – the prevailing mechanisms of public communication in the Berlusconi era, for example by constructing 'followers' rather than 'critical readers' (Dal Lago, 2010:39).
Is this really happening? And can we scholars of culture and literature help *preventing* it?
We believe it important to underline how Saviano's success rests not just on the sheer power of his words, but also on a phenomenon of *media convergence* (Jenkins, 2001 and 2006) organized around technology-mediated practices of public discourse that involve readers and viewers in forms that were unknown until few years ago. Are these practices fostering 'followers' rather than 'critical readers', at least in the case of Saviano? Or are these practices rather *antidotes* to hegemonic media systems?

We do not have an answer. Or at least we would like to leave this question as a starter for discussion at the conference.

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