

The idea of epic and New Italian Epic

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Abstract

This article attempts to describe some characteristics of New Italian Epic (NIE), especially in relation to the epic mode itself. It aims to liberate the term 'epic' from the perception inherited from twentieth-century literary theory, and to reassess it as a component of NIE. The article shows how NIE interprets 'epic' as a way of rereading history critically by engendering new myths (mythopoesis), and how it conveys a desire for stories that encompass a search for historical truth. NIE is described as a corpus of new metahistorical romances for the contemporary moment, a tool that enables readers to take an active part in the construction of meaning within a society that seems to have progressively forgotten how to interpret data, to the detriment of historical truth. This is achieved through the recalling of events in the form of allegorical narratives, which, while they do not recount Italian historical facts as such, evoke real events by referring to what has been left unsaid in Italian history. This perspective involves the problematic question of realism, which leads, in this frame, to a search for truth and knowledge. Realism emerges as a pure textual fact, and thus parataxis no longer represents a rhetorical strategy to obtain mimesis. In NIE parataxis works as a basic element of epic narration, whose aim is to evoke. A number of examples from NIE novels are discussed in illustrating how this narrative strategy is created.

Keywords: epic; parataxis; oblique gaze; connotation; desire; sublime

The evolution of the epic genre has been a cumulative process. Its roots are infinitely old, for they are the roots of narrative speech itself. Any kind of narrative, including the ubiquitous modes of myth and folktale, will develop the arts of storytelling.
(Hainsworth 1991: 10)

This article aims to liberate the term 'epic' from perceptions inherited from twentieth-century literary theory and to reassess it as a component of New Italian Epic (NIE), as I have defined it in the Editor's introduction to this special issue. I question the term 'epic' by showing how NIE interprets it as a way to reread history critically by engendering new myths (mythopoesis). This approach involves the problematic question of realism, which, in this frame, represents a search for truth and knowledge. My conclusion is that NIE can be considered as a tool which enables the contemporary Italian reader to take an active part in the construction of meaning within a society that has progressively forgotten how to interpret its own history.

What is epic in New Italian Epic?

When Wu Ming 1's essay *New Italian Epic* appeared online in April 2008, there was general surprise about the use of the term 'epic'.¹ In twentieth-century literary theory, epic was commonly associated with an outdated mode of representation of society (Bakhtin 1982), and, as a genre, was completely surpassed by the establishment of the novel in the late eighteenth century, as more representative of bourgeois society and its development over the following two centuries. Thus contemporary literary theory has primarily focused on the novel and its subgenres. Even though 'epic' was used to describe twentieth-century works such as T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1923) or Berthold Brecht's 'epic theatre',² it remains difficult for critics in Italy to accept its use in relation to the work of the contemporary writers who match Wu Ming 1's criteria. The reason for this, I would suggest, is that the return to an epic narrative mode is tantamount to admitting that Italian society urgently needs to recover the capacity for self-representation, to provide an accurate reflection of itself, in the wake of its dark history and recent political scandals.³

The role of fiction in this process arises from the sense that the Italian mass media have failed to fulfil their duty of providing transparent information on Italian politics and social issues. Indeed, the need for an accurate portrait of Italian society by recovering historical truth or reopening unsolved cases has generated a stream of fiction, which started with *noir* fiction, offering an insight into recent Italian history.⁴ The need for self-representation, then, can be understood as a reaction to the current state of Italian society and a response to that need as a characteristic in the work of a number of Italian authors. But what is meant by self-representation? Self-representation, as I use it here, is the result of the work of the poet-performer (or here, writer) who speaks on behalf of the community, which finds reflected in the narrative 'an image of itself that it likes to see, and in seeing it the community is encouraged' (Hainsworth 1991: 6). The majority of authors included in NIE regularly participate in public readings and performances. Their writing is characterized by internal prosody, bearing the features of orality, an element of epic mode, and this turns readings into collective experiences. In the epic mode, self-representation is effected through the construction of myths, a process common to societies that have developed a communitarian kind of culture:

Narrative is the formal root of the epic, but not just any narrative. The primitive phases of most cultures provide examples of myths and folktales, stories by which men and women have sought to explain the world or escape from its miseries. [...] The seed of the epic is sown when these are blended, given metrical form, and cast into the narrative mode of heroic poetry. (Hainsworth 1991: 5)

Thus the development of mythopoesis, which already existed in Italian mystery fiction, into the new epic mode was a logical process.

It is generally believed that epic derives from myth.⁵ The techniques of ancient oral compositions linger in the literary age, and are embraced within literary genres when the need for self-representation becomes inescapable. But is it still possible, then, to view 'epic' in the way Mikhail Bakhtin defined it? The Russian critic maintained

that, while the novel is the only literary genre that is constantly developing, *epos* is older than the act of writing itself, and preserves its oral nature and resonance in the representation of a society that no longer exists (Bakhtin 1982). However, it may be that, as part of its development, the novel precisely embraces orality and the art of storytelling as a human activity at a point in time when humanity is once again trying to explain the world it lives in through myth.⁶ J. B. Hainsworth (1991: 10) claimed that what requires representation is ‘a certain idea’, the idea of heroic action, and today heroic action corresponds to mass action against those who are held responsible for acts, which although buried in history, have serious consequences on the present, as is the case in Italian politics. The masses are turned into the collective hero.⁷ That certain idea – the concept that we need heroes today – began to permeate the works of several Italian writers from the early 1990s, and grew into the compelling sense that Italian history contains open wounds, which are not only difficult to heal but which also continue to have a negative impact on both Italian politics and society. Wu Ming 1’s essay responds to this.

The Hegelian idea that the protagonists of epic poems are caught up in larger enterprises – that their actions are determined by the situation in which they find themselves, and that heroic action is independent of the will of the hero, who is viewed as static and at the mercy of circumstances – has become a cultural given and affects how the epic mode can be deployed. It has also influenced reactions to *New Italian Epic*. For example, the writer Antonio Scurati (2009) views epic as a way to establish a distance from an absolute past. Borrowing the concept of *teichoskopia* from classical epic, in the sense of an absolute distance (both aesthetic and literary) from the events that are made the object of storytelling, Scurati maintains that a return to the epic mode, on both thematic (great enterprises, wars, anabases) and formal levels (great breadth, the search for a stylistic *grandeur*), represents the reaction of a group of writers who feel imprisoned in an age when historical events are experienced as mediatic events and reduced to a night in front of the TV screen. To embrace the absolute distance of epic, according to Scurati, is to recuperate the sense of struggle and to refuse the dictatorship of irony and detachment. From this viewpoint, Scurati aligns himself with the idea expressed in *New Italian Epic* that a reaction to the loss of emotional participation and empathy in the contemporary world is necessary. However, this vision of epic as an all-encompassing gaze of the *aidos*/viewer/reader on an absolute past deforms the meaning of ‘epic’ in NIE and establishes a distance that highlights the impossibility of changing the present, consequently inviting readers to regain their courage from the telling of the past: ‘da questo momento, ogni grandezza apparterrà al passato’ (Scurati 2009) [‘from this moment on, all greatness will belong to the past’]. He implies that history is a monument that ensures distance, and this distance guarantees perseverance and firmness of intention.

To my mind, this is a distortion of the primary aim of Wu Ming 1’s essay. The novels included in his definition make use of epic features to ensure that traumatic historical facts – that is, unarticulated events that exert a negative influence on the present – are retold so that their memory is recovered. By retelling them from the viewpoint of the victims, through the technique of *uchronia* (what if),⁸ readers

are invited to revisit this past as an allegory. The use of uchronia ensures that the distance between historical facts and contemporary readers is reduced, by presenting an alternative version of history – such as in Wu Ming's *54* (2002) and *Manituana* (2007).⁹ The focal point (the gaze), which in classical epic is located on the city walls (*teichoskopia*), in NIE is dragged down into the crowd and mixed up with the masses – the collective hero. Furthermore, '[h]eroic poetry has no author in the literal sense. The oral poet-performer of traditional songs and his audience, which is effectively the whole community, are one' (Hainsworth 1991: 6). This is also the case in both collective writing (Luther Blissett, Wu Ming) and autofiction, where the protagonist's and author's names coincide, a device that ensures that the autoptic witness shares semi-fictional events, presented as personal experiences, with readers, turning these events into collective knowledge, as do, for example, Giuseppe Genna in *Dies irae* (2006) [*Day of Wrath*] and *Italia De Profundis* (2008) or Babsi Jones in *Sappiano le mie parole di sangue* (2007) [*My Words be Bloody*]. Scurati maintains that Roberto Saviano in *Gomorra* (2006) [*Gomorrhah*] narrates events he did not witness as if he experienced them personally, and in doing so he 'assume una postura epica quando si fa testimone autoptico di tutte garantendo per esse in prima persona' (Scurati 2009) ['assumes an epic demeanour when he turns himself into an autoptic witness and vouches for them']. However, the idea of the all seeing *oidos*, who shares his experience with readers, reduces the distance between the events narrated and the readers, in that the latter are drawn into the story. The collective hero of NIE is the protagonist of an uchronia, where action taken potentially determines the overturning of historical events. Thus, the possibility is created for a collective hero to become the utopian protagonist of history, in spite of ultimate defeat. This is the case in Luther Blissett's *Q* (1999), where sixteenth-century German peasantry intensively experienced the idea of Apocalypse viewed as the coming of a new world which inspired their revolt,¹⁰ and Wu Ming's *Manituana*, where the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy are the collective hero that fights against the coming of the free-traders. In order to become the protagonist of the story, the reader needs to be drawn in by the cognitive effort required to decode both allegory and the connotations implied in language. Thus, in these texts, neither the collective nor the autoptic witness places any distance between itself and the events narrated by taking a view from outside the scene.

The novel as a literary genre is in constant development,¹¹ and, as a vehicle for society to express self-criticism, incorporates parody as one of its essential elements, the function of which was always precisely to express self-criticism. However, postmodernism turned what was parody/self-criticism into irony and detachment, on the one hand, allowing writers to avoid becoming involved in their stories and ultimately tethered by their own sarcasm and irony, so much so that they were no longer able to recognize they have a responsibility to deal with social and political issues. On the other hand, since specific political responsibilities have come to the fore, contemporary Italian writers are no longer aiming for self-criticism. It seems, then, that self-criticism and parody have exhausted their role in literature as its contemporary readership displays its desire to understand the social and political context it lives in.

David Foster Wallace, one of the most popular American postmodernist writers, declared in an interview with Larry McCaffery for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993):

Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving. (McCaffery 1993: 147)

Foster Wallace's suicide in 2008 had an enormous impact on both Wu Ming 1, who gave a lecture inspired by this event,¹² and on Giuseppe Genna, who wrote:

Delle motivazioni al suicidio di DFW, a oggi, io non posso dire nulla. [...] Io credo sinceramente che la morte di questo autore corrisponda, con modalità globali, a quando accadde alla comunità letteraria al momento di quella datasi da Cesare Pavese. È uno choc, non soltanto per me. Tuttavia non si tratta di una tragedia. Si tratta di un gesto fondativo – probabilmente il più fondativo della mia generazione letteraria, e Foster Wallace l'aveva enunciato un'intervista del 1993, che Wu Ming 1 ha ripreso in un intervento sul *New Italian Epic*, tenuto all'Università di Londra e intitolato 'We're going to have to be the parents'. (Genna 2008: 324)

[Of the motives for DFW's suicide, to date, I can't say anything. (...) I sincerely believe that the death of this author corresponds, on a global scale, to what happened to the literary community at the time of Cesare Pavese's suicide. It is such a shock, not only for me. However, it is not a tragedy. It is a groundbreaking act – possibly the most groundbreaking of my literary generation, and Foster Wallace had enunciated it in a 1993 interview, which Wu Ming 1 reprised in a lecture on *New Italian Epic*, held at the University of London and entitled 'We're going to have to be the parents'.]

On the following page, Genna maintains that Wallace, who claimed his difference from the masses he described in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), 'communa a chiunque una lezione di amore e di dolore' (Genna 2008: 324) ['provides everyone with a lesson of love and pain']. Genna is incapable of explaining why Foster Wallace committed suicide, but implicitly suggests that the pain that led him to do so derived from the awareness that he was no longer able to distinguish between himself and the masses he described with irony and detachment.

Thus, when Bakhtin claimed that the defining characteristics of the novel genre in the eighteenth century were that the protagonist should be neither 'poetic' nor 'heroic', either in the sense of epic or tragedy, but that he should be represented as mutable, in constant development, and that the novel should replace epic in the modern world, he was referring to a society that no longer needed epic or tragedy as forms of self-representation, in that the bourgeois society in which the novel took shape was not directly affected by traumatic events. This is changing in the contemporary world, however, where there is an increasing sense of individual and national responsibility for trauma – conflicts on a global scale and environmental disasters. In turn, literature, if understood as a mode of self-representation, has to be affected. Irony and detachment are, therefore, no longer acceptable means of

representing society, in that everyone, including authors and narrators, is part of the society that is depicted. The chosen few who can look down on the behaviour of the masses no longer exist. Since the role of literature as a mass phenomenon is arguably to represent society, it has been transformed into a collective phenomenon, where the narrative subject speaks for the mass and represents its trauma. Thus, according to Wu Ming 1, the new Italian novel has a responsibility for drawing its readers into a narration, in which they feel represented: 'È lo spettro del poema epico che appare a noi, torna a noi attraverso le lande del romanzo, nascosto nel romanzo. Il romanzo è posseduto dallo spettro' (Wu Ming 2009: 85) ['It is the ghost of the epic poem that appears to us, returns to us through the lands of the novel, hidden inside the novel. The novel is possessed by the ghost'].

Reassessing epic as a component of the novel

New Italian Epic contains a speculative listing of features Wu Ming 1 considered to be common to Italian fiction from the early 1990s on. He did not draw up criteria for classifying contemporary fiction from one exemplar only, neither did he invent from scratch a criteria on which to base a literary movement. The essay is, rather, a tentative morphology of Italian contemporary fiction that tries to answer the questions: what has united Italian narrative production since the early 1990s? And is there a concept of narrative, an archetype to which recent Italian fiction refers by means of its choice of style and content and through the treatment of topics converging on the sense that Italians should participate in the reconstruction of their own society differently? Wu Ming 1's essay foregrounded the sense of a new turn in Italian literature from the early 1990s:

Nelle lettere italiane sta accadendo qualcosa. Parlo del convergere in un'unica – ancorché vasta – nebulosa narrativa di parecchi scrittori, molti dei quali sono in viaggio almeno dai primi anni Novanta. In genere scrivono romanzi, ma non disdegnano puntate nella saggistica e altri reami, e a volte producono 'oggetti narrativi non-identificati'. Diversi loro libri sono divenuti best seller e/o long seller in Italia e altri paesi. [...] [C]ondividono segmenti di poetiche, brandelli di mappe mentali e un *desiderio* feroce che ogni volta li porta agli archivi, o per strada, o dove archivi e strada coincidono. (Wu Ming 2009, 10–11; my italics)

[In Italian literature something is happening. I refer to the convergence into a single – though vast – nebulous narrative of many writers, plenty of whom have been travelling this road since at least the early 1990s. In general they write novels, but they do not turn their noses up at the occasional essay and other forms of writing, and at times they produce 'unidentified narrative objects'.¹³ Several of their books have become best- or long sellers in Italy and abroad. (...) They share segments of poetics, shreds of cognitive maps and a ferocious *desire* that takes them each time to the archives, or out on the streets, or to where archives and streets coincide.]

In this passage Wu Ming 1 highlights desire for historical truth as the primary impulse of the creation of a narrative corpus whose ultimate aim is to allow readers to trace Italy's current state of impasse back to its point of origin.

Is there a relationship between the reuse of epic in contemporary Italian fiction and the metahistorical romances studied with reference to contemporary American fiction, by, for example, Amy J. Elias in *Sublime Desire* (2001)?¹⁴ Elias closely examines works by Don DeLillo (*Libra* [1988], *Underworld* [1997]), Thomas Pynchon (*Mason & Dixon* [1997]), John Maxwell Coetzee (*Foe* [1986]) and Madison Smartt Bell (*All Souls' Rising* [1995]). Her argument differs from Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction', which focused on the metanarrative element in the postmodernist historical novel and codified the genre as an offshoot of postmodernism.¹⁵ While Hutcheon acknowledged a subversive potential in the blending of literature and history and the influence that historiography exerted on the contemporary novel, Elias sets it in a cultural context in which ethical values are strongly present.

To include novels such as Luther Blissett's *Q* or Wu Ming's *Manituana* in the corpus of postmodernist historiographic metafiction (which they are not, since they lack the element of metadiscourse) or to reduce them to historical novels (with reference to a return to modernism as a natural consequence of the end of postmodernism)¹⁶ is to avoid confronting the social premiss of metahistorical fiction and the context in which this literary production has been conceived: '[c]hi chiede di tornare al moderno non è meno ridicolo e velleitario di chi, come niente fosse, vorrebbe perpetuare il postmoderno' (Wu Ming 2009: 67) ['anyone who wants to return to modernism is no less ridiculous or unrealistic than someone who would like to perpetuate postmodernism, just as though nothing was happening']. This is a context in which issues related to postcolonialism, otherness, and history as trauma ('history that hurts' [see Elias 2001: 187–8]) are at the centre of the narrators' activity.

Referring to post-WWII Italian fiction based on the experience of the Resistance, Scurati maintains that the contemporary writer is unable to produce literature based on experience as it happened in the past; authors should, therefore, turn distance to their advantage and write any novel as a historical novel.¹⁷ However, what determines the difference between classic Italian historical novels and NIE is the style and – even in recent Italian historical novels – the permanence of an interest in developing a 'scrittura intertestuale, fitta di citazioni e di criptocitazioni' (Ganeri 1999: 107) ['intertextual writing, crowded with citations and cryptocitations']. The fusion between historical facts and psychological or hyper-literary fiction keeps the text anchored in the present, to suggest a bleak vision of the future and refuge in a nostalgic gaze on the past. Ganeri (1999: 105–7) provides the examples of Luigi Malerba, *Il fuoco Greco* (1991) [*The Greek Fire*], *Le maschere* (1995) [*The Masks*], *Itaca per sempre* (1997) [*Ithaca Forever*] and Vincenzo Consolo, *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* (1976) [*The Smile of the Unknown Mariner*], *Lo spasimo di Palermo* (1998) [*The Spasm of Palermo*]. NIE proposes instead a 'radicale istanza di rifondazione dello statuto cognitivo e antropologico del pensiero storico' (Ganeri 1999: 123–4) ['radical plea for the refounding of the cognitive and anthropological statute of historical thought'].

After an *excursus* to the debate on historical fiction, Elias (2001: 96) resituates postmodernist metahistorical fiction in literary history as an evolutionary form of the

classical historical romance. She accepts that postmodernist novels are preoccupied with processes, effects and the construction of history, in that ontological enquiry is the central defining feature of postmodernist narrative, and this preoccupation emerges in the form of metanarrative discourse (268). Furthermore, as we have seen (see note 15), she suggests that the treatment of history in metahistorical fiction is also linked to a classical tradition in Western aesthetics, the Sublime (89).¹⁸ NIE fiction bears similarities with Elias's approach but, in its engagement with the Italian variant of metahistorical fiction, it does not display the postmodernist traces Elias identifies; rather, it develops the discourse on the Sublime, by conveying the contingent necessity of confronting the past through both content and style. It exerts social critique by including fragmented and textualized reality, freed from a metafictional discourse. The common denominator in NIE and the metahistorical romance is desire. Describing the language of New Italian Epic Wu Ming 1 writes:

L'epica invece è legata alla *connotazione*; è il risultato di un lavoro sul tono, sui sensi figurati, sugli attributi affettivi delle parole, sul vasto e multiforme riverberare dei significati, *tutti* i significati del racconto. Al lettore sto gettando un altro ponte, qui mi rivolgo al suo *desiderio*, desiderio di spazio, di scarti e differenze, di scontro, sorpresa, avventura. (Wu Ming 2009: 68)

[Epic instead is linked to *connotation*; it is the result of a work on tone, on figural senses, on emotional attributes of words, on the broad and multiform reverberation of meanings, *all* meanings of the story. I am building another bridge with readers, I am addressing their *desire*, desire of space, of gaps and differences, of clash, surprise, adventure.]

Desire for imagination characterizes the majority of NIE works. It emerges in its stylistic features and syntactic constructions, and more importantly it translates into a search for historical truth, the attempt to build tension through the making of myths, and bringing this tension to a final resolution. As Elias (2001: 117) notes, metahistorical fiction appears premodern in that history is conveyed by myth and legends. The same can be said for much contemporary Italian fiction, where the desire for stories that encompass a search for truth finds a narrative form in the creation of myths.

While Elias (2001: 97) focuses on how metahistorical fiction represents an evolution of the historical romance, Wu Ming 1's essay investigates how such evolution goes one step further when themes and motifs of the metahistorical romance are expressed with a language of desire based on connotation. An emphasis on connotation in the language of NIE includes alliteration (for example, 'cominciano calando una torcia appesa a una corda' [Genna 2006: 11] ['they start by dropping a torch hanging from a rope']).¹⁹ Wu Ming 1 analyses prosodic rhythm in a number of novels in the section entitled 'Sulla lingua del New Italian Epic' (Wu Ming 2009: 84–90) ['On the language of New Italian Epic']. In this part, he surveys how the widespread use of hendecasyllables, octonaries, and anaphors are functional to the question of memorability in these types of narratives.²⁰ The main rhetorical device employed in

NIE, however, is parataxis, whereby clauses or phrases are placed one after another, without indication of coordination or subordination. In many of the NIE works that can be analysed from the perspective of textualization of the real,²¹ realism emerges as a pure textual fact, and thus parataxis no longer represents a rhetorical strategy to obtain mimesis in the way that Auerbach (1956: 121–35) established. Parataxis is a basic element of epic narration and it emerged as a narrative strategy prior to the birth of the novel. The aim is to ‘evoke’, or ‘not to say’, equivalent at a syntactic level to connotation at a lexical level; parataxis evokes rather than says (or denotes). This enables the allegorical effect, which relies on evocation or connotation, because when the prosodic rhythm is broken abruptly, silence emerges and allusion is conveyed.

Elias configures parataxis as a model of narrative spatialization (structural parataxis), where spatialization is a quest for a Platonic Absolute. She shows how the juxtaposition of different frames of time within the same story disrupts history as a linear movement and ‘the past and the present seesaw on a precipice that overlooks sublime chaos’ (Elias 2001: 125–7). The juxtaposition of flashes of different times of history, either moving from past to present or sliding through different time periods without any metadiscourse on the sliding itself, is a characteristic of NIE. Genna’s *Dies irae* is one example, where the juxtaposition of different sections is not commented upon and is left entirely to the reader to interpret. From an ontological perspective, in epic parataxis, circumscribed narrative fragments (clauses) are each filled with their own meaning, each fragment is equivalent to a frame, but together they form a narration. The effect of replacing the syntactic link with punctuation and reducing syntagms is a condensation of mimesis and an emphasis on connotation. Each fragment is a vehicle for allegory and functions as a mise en abyme of the overall story. This results in a desire for more knowledge on the part of the reader and compensates by inviting a cognitive effort to make sense of what is unsaid. For Elias, parataxis thus conveys a conception of history that is by definition ‘sublime’.

The reduction of characters to icons, by way of limited characterization (lack of physical traits and appearance), which is a common feature of NIE, relates to parataxis, in that it represents a syntactic strategy that produces a figural effect. In other words, reduced characterization rendered by means of paratactic structures transforms characters into *figurae*, which contain a broader meaning beyond the story told. At a figurative level, the overall effect is that of a reduction in the degree of mimesis in the representation. One example of this is in the final part of Alessandro Bertante’s *Al diavol* (2008) [*To Hell*], which tells the story of a young man, Errico, who is forced to flee from Italy at the start of the Fascist dictatorship and to take refuge in Barcelona. The end of the story includes a description of a fierce retaliation perpetrated by the hero against the Spanish Fascists, who murdered Marisol, his fiancée. In the narrative, the death of Marisol is reduced to a hole in the forehead, the *figura* of a universal pain that casts the hero into a state of despair, which is narrated elliptically:

Subito dopo il colpo secco. Unico. Definitivo. La sua smorfia stupita, impreparata al dolore. Il foro in mezzo alla fronte. Piccolo, quasi inoffensivo. Tutta la sua infinita

dolcezza che fuoriesce da quel pertugio. La testa di Marisol che si adagia piano sul mio busto. Inerte, priva di vita. (Bertante 2008: 219)

[Immediately after, the sharp shot. One. Final. Her astonished grimace, unprepared for pain. The hole in the middle of her forehead. Small, almost harmless. All her infinite sweetness that oozes from that opening. Marisol's head that lies down on my chest. Inert, devoid of life.]

Parataxis and elliptical constructions are profuse in NIE works, and they not only serve to render the narration dynamic, they also condense meaning into compact descriptions, demanding from the reader a cognitive effort to make sense of the message the text conveys.

In order to understand the revival of the epic mode in Italian contemporary fiction, it is helpful to refer to the primary function of narration, that of memory or reminiscence (*anamnesis*).²² As we have seen, the current state of Italian politics is inextricably linked to the repression of traumatic events, and there is a need to recover the memories of those events, to re-examine them, in order to clarify where the responsibilities lie. In NIE fiction, this is achieved through the creation of myths and the recalling of events in the form of allegorical narratives, which, while they do not recount Italian historical facts as such, evoke real events by referring to what has been left unsaid in Italian history.²³

An example of this is the story of the dwarfs in Girolamo de Michele's *La visione del cieco* (2008) [*The Vision of the Blind Man*]. Here, Snow White's Seven Dwarfs are used to recreate the killing of anti-globalization activist Carlo Giuliani during a protest against the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001 (historical fact). Each dwarf is assigned a role in the dynamic of the incident (De Michele 2008: 244–8). Particularly interesting is the use of a grotesque element as allegory: allegorical figures are usually of a certain stature, while here the dwarfs, as symbols of a lesser degree of credibility, reduce the status of the allegorized object, alluding to the fact that the whole case became a farce and was eventually closed, whereas the culprits should have been punished at the time. The dwarf chosen to represent the victim is Dopey, whose extreme gentleness serves to emphasize the brutality with which life was taken away from Giuliani at a very young age.²⁴

In this way, parataxis and lyricism on a stylistic level and the recovery of memory on a thematic level can be considered as the main characteristics of NIE.

Mimesis as a search for truth and knowledge in Genna's work

Reminiscence (*anamnesis*) in NIE, however, is not limited to the goal of rediscovering collective history to overcome trauma. Genna's work represents a unique case, in that it is not tied to a conception of time and history. It contains features that connect it to Wu Ming 1's 'Memorandum'; for example, in *Dies irae* and in *Italia De Profundis*, Genna employs both autofiction and the oblique gaze technique.²⁵ However, he breaks through the fundamental premises of NIE to develop a more universal type of investigation, while taking Italy as an *exemplum* of an ego-centred society that needs to be overcome. The word 'epic' applied to Genna's fiction refers to both the style and

structure of his narratives: on one hand, his prose is endowed with lyricism through the use of archaisms blended with parataxis; on the other hand, his novels contain various interwoven subplots and a teaching of the type one can find in Vedic epic poems, which are often cited by Genna himself in the body of the text.²⁶ The ultimate aim of Genna's non-mystery fiction – *Dies irae, Italia De Profundis, Medium* (2008) – is not to investigate the past to recover meaning for the present, but to go beyond the past and the present, and recover awareness.

In *Dies irae*, the opening episode of the artesian well in Vermicino where the six-year-old child Alfredo Rampi fell on 10 June 1981 (historical fact) is transformed into an allegory of the place where the Self is hidden and needs to be brought back to the surface.²⁷ The novel starts with an overview of the hilly and picturesque Lazio landscape one mild early summer evening, when the boy fell into the well. Intertwined with the description of the countryside is a list of crimes and political scandals that took place in the same area, around Rome. The narrator's gaze frames the landscape, which takes on a sinister atmosphere, and then zooms into the well where the boy has turned into a little mummy. The well and the child are initially described respectively as a physical place and a living human being: 'il corpicino di un bimbo [...] sepolto vivo 36 metri sotto il terreno in un foro di centimetri 30' (Genna 2006: 3–4) ['the small body of a child (...) buried alive 36 metres below ground in a hole 30 centimetres wide']; 'e la piccola mummia di fango fresco oleoso ancora viva incastrata nei 30 centimetri di diametro del pozzo leva il suo flebile lamento' (7) ['and the small mummy of fresh and oily mud, still alive, stuck in the well's 30-centimetre diameter, raises a feeble moan']. The operations involved in the extraction of the boy from the well are described in minute detail (10–28). As the story proceeds, however, the well develops into a *figura*²⁸ of the metaphysical *locus* where humanity is buried: 'L'umanità è serrata nel fango di un pozzo artesiano e fatica ad uscirne' (684) ['humanity is locked in the mud of an artesian well and has great difficulty in freeing itself']. From this well, awareness of what is beyond the human should emerge. At the end of the novel, a golden child is removed by extra-terrestrial beings formed of the substance of consciousness and who are able to communicate with him. Thus, the well can be interpreted on three levels: it is historical, in that it is the retelling of a historical event; it is symbolic, in that it alludes to the events happening in another of the various subplots (Paola's story); finally, it is a *figura*, in that it contains within itself the meaning of a broader idea that it foreshadows (and in this sense it differs from both a symbol and an allegory, as described in Auerbach [1963]).

The incipit of Genna's *Italia De Profundis* is a particularly good example of how the epic mode results from the blending of lyrical prose with parataxis, and how the tension created by this narrative rhythm can only be resolved with a final cathartic resolving action. Genna seems to return to the idea that tragedy and epic, which were fused at the origin of Greek literature,²⁹ can once more be incorporated in the novel:³⁰

È alle mie spalle fosforescente il mare incontenibile del Capo, nella punta più tempestuosa della Sicilia. Qui il re Federico II si salvò ammarando. Il sole scotta l'epitelio dell'acqua, il sole immaturo del primo mattino che sono qui. La furia delle

acque implode, io digrigno i denti. [...] La cala larga vuota, umida la spiaggia, fastidiosa la sabbia raggrumata fredda, davanti a me è la barriera del sopramonte di Cefalù. Posso distinguere nitidi i lati erosi dell'Abbazia di Satana detta Théléma. Il mio capo resta fissato al di sopra del cielo. Non smetto di scolpire la mia propria statua. Vedo l'Italia. Vedo me. Non sono io. (Genna 2008: 11)

[At my back is the glowing, irrepressible sea of the Cape, in the stormiest corner of Sicily. Here king Frederick II saved himself, landing on the sea. The sun burns the water's epithelium, the immature sun of the morning that I am here. The fury of the waters implodes, I grind my teeth (...) The bay is wide and empty, the sand wet, the curdled cold sand bothersome, before me is the barrier of Cefalù rock. I can see the clear eroded sides of Satan's Abbey called Théléma. My head gazes upon the sky above. I do not stop carving my own statue. I see Italy. I see me. It's not me.]

During the novel, the reader learns that this is the area of Sicily where the protagonist spent his holidays in a tourist village trying to escape summer in the city. However, the holiday becomes nightmarish when he is confronted by a crowd suffering from the consequences of the barren cultural politics of Italy in the 1980s, from which the present state of impasse originates. Towards the ending of *Italia De Profundis*, the same landscape described in the incipit is seen burning:

Dalla sommità del monte lo sguardo è di fuoco e vede il fuoco. A un chilometro di distanza in linea d'aria, lo sguardo di fuoco vede tremule le casette del villaggio turistico, fatte di fuoco. Vede le sagome fragili degli umani, fatti di fuoco condensato, più pesante e plumbeo e grossolano del fuoco che anima lo sguardo. Io sono fuoco, tutto è fuoco. (Genna 2008: 325)

[From the top of the hill the fiery gaze sees fire. One kilometre in the distance as the crow flies, the fiery gaze sees the flickering cottages of the tourist village, made of fire. It sees the fragile human shapes, made of condensed fire, heavier and more leaden and coarse than the fire that enlivens the gaze. I am fire, all is fire.]

Desire is what holds the whole plot together: 'la tragedia incombe ed esige nemesi' (340) ['tragedy is incumbent and demands nemesi']. This desire for nemesis is sustained through the whole narration and resolved only at the end, when Genna-character learns that a fire that devastated the valley also destroyed the village. In this way the tragedy is resolved, and the story can be concluded. Both novels go beyond the recovery of historical memory and aim at forgetting – and resolving – memory itself, once it has been placed before the reader.

Moreover, by preserving what looks like a literary metadiscourse within narrative as a vestige of the postmodernist metahistorical romance, Genna creates the opportunity to describe the type of literature he would like to write, by leaving the novel form behind: 'La verità è che il romanzo non coincide più con il veicolo della narrazione' (Genna 2008: 71) ['The truth is that the novel no longer coincides with the vehicle of narration']. This is a development of Genna's claims in *Dies irae*, where he explains his desire to stop writing crime fiction and move on to another type of narration:

Ci vorrebbe una letteratura che spacca ogni genere, ogni gabbia stilistica, ogni poetica con il fantastico. Un letteratura mitologica, delusiva a un primo livello e sapienziale a un secondo, mitologia per questa immane popolazione che fatica a mettersi in movimento perché privata della narrazione di storie mitologiche. (Genna 2006: 685)

[We need a literature that, based on the fantastic, cuts clean through every genre, every stylistic cage, every poetics. A mythological literature, delusive on a first level and knowledgeable on a second, a mythology for this immense population which struggles to get itself in motion because it's deprived of the narration of mythological stories.]

This passage alludes to the fact that the poverty of our imagination is the result of media overexposure, and it calls for mythology to come to our rescue so that the 'immense population' (not only Italian, but viewed on a universal scale) can once more be given the opportunity to achieve true knowledge through wisdom. A mythological literature is by necessity epic, in that the epic mode is the narrative format of myth.

It also suggests that the type of literature Genna desires corresponds to what *New Italian Epic* defines as 'unidentified narrative objects', viewed as an evolution of the novel (Wu Ming 2009: 41–4). What appear to be fragments of literary metadiscourse in both *Dies irae* and *Italia De Profundis* are in fact excerpts from essays on mainly sociological and literary topics. These are juxtaposed with the various subplots in the same way that the subplots are to each other, thus giving shape to a narrative object whose main characteristic is the convergence of several genres in the novel, the purpose of which is to impress considerable change on the novel genre itself.

Conclusion

History viewed as trauma leaves us with the unanswered question: how can trauma be represented? Is realism a sufficient mode of representation for a society that needs urgently to exhibit these wounds to obtain a reaction? NIE viewed in relation to a corpus of new metahistorical romances for the contemporary moment can be considered as a tool with which the contemporary Italian reader is able to take an active part in the construction of meaning within a society that seems to have progressively forgotten how to interpret data, to the detriment of historical truth. NIE is in an ongoing phase of definition. This article has attempted to unpack some of the features Wu Ming 1 identified as characteristics of NIE, especially in relation to the epic mode itself, and to show how they make NIE different from what went before. Yet any conclusions on the renewed use and reassessment of the epic mode in Italian contemporary fiction can only, for the moment, be provisional.

Notes

1. For an example of book reviews expressing this kind of criticism, see Di Stefano (2008); Belpoliti (2008): 'i Wu Ming s'incensavano parlando di sé e dei propri colleghi usando la definizione *new italian epic*, coniata in Usa. Una bella formula che però non vuol dire niente' ['Wu Ming praised themselves talking about their own work and that of their colleagues using the definition *new Italian epic*, coined in the USA. A nice formula which means nothing']. All translations from Italian into English are mine.

2. In *New Italian Epic* there is a very brief reference to epic theatre as theorized by Walter Benjamin. Wu Ming 1, however, specifies that the notion of epic in New Italian Epic is completely different from the idea of epic in Brecht (Wu Ming 2009: 76–7).
3. For a general overview of Italian politics and society since WWII, see Ginsborg (2003a and 2003b); Foot (2009). A detailed study of the circumstances of the explosion that took place in Milan on 12 December 1969 and that marked the end of 1968 students' and workers' revolts and the beginning of terrorism in Italy, see Boatti (2009). A thorough study, which examines the backdrop to the age of terrorism and bloodshed throughout the 1970s and evaluates the extent of permeation of Italian intelligence in the social fabric, is Cipriani (2002). See also Evangelisti, Genna and Wu Ming (2004), a collection of texts on terrorism in Italy in the 1970s.
4. On *noir*, see Rambelli (1979: 207): 'Il romanzo poliziesco tende a qualificarsi come "giallo sociale" con un impianto di racconto realistico che, sottraendo il delitto al salotto borghese [...] lo trasporta in un ambiente di massa: sequestri, scioperi, rapimenti, traffici di droga, mafia traendo spunto dai fatti di cronaca nera' ['Detective fiction tends to qualify as social thriller with a structure that, with the removal of murder from the bourgeois literary salon (...), takes it into the environment of the masses, drawing on crime news: kidnappings, strikes, abductions, drug smuggling, mafia']. See also Oliva (2003). Titles that can be considered as representative of this type of fiction are: Giorgio Scerbanenco, *Venere privata* (1966) [*Private Venus*]; Lorian Macchiavelli, *Le piste dell'attentato* (1974) [*The Tracks of the Bombing*]; Carlo Lucarelli, *Falange armata* (1993) [*Armed Phalanx*]; and Marcello Fois, *Meglio morti* (1993) [*Better Dead*]. I would like to thank Marco Amici for his advice on crime fiction.
5. On this point see Levy (1953). The principle of transposition from myth to epic was described by Dumézil (1973). See also Von Hendy (2002: 264): 'Dumézil's attention to the structure of the "collective representations" embodied in early texts has made him an inspiration not only to Lévi-Strauss but to the "Paris school" of French classicists as well'.
6. On orality in NIE, see also Fulginiti (2009).
7. A similar idea is found in James (1952), in which the crew is depicted as the collective hero.
8. See Editor's introduction for the origin of this term.
9. This point is extensively treated by Emanuela Piga and Rosalba Biasini in this issue.
10. The question of utopia relating to the Peasants' Revolt in sixteenth-century Germany is explored by Bloch (1921).
11. In this issue, the articles by Dimitri Chimenti and Emanuela Patti treat Wu Ming 1's unidentified narrative objects from the perspective of the most recent development of the novel as a literary genre.
12. Opening speech at the conference 'The Italian Perspective on Metahistorical Fiction: the New Italian Epic', Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London, 2 October 2008 (see Editor's introduction). Now published as 'Noi dobbiamo essere genitori' ['We must be the parents'], in Wu Ming (2009: 101–26).
13. See Editor's introduction for a definition.
14. Elias (2001: 46–8) defines as metahistorical romances those novels in which 'techniques such as metafictionality, achronology, use of popular cultural genres, and carnivalization are used consistently to defamiliarize history and the process of historical writing. Often, these novels' avant-gardist styles force readers to think about history in new ways. [...] I claim that in the metahistorical romance, as in post-*Annales* historiography and postmodern theory, serious poststructuralist play is linked to the invocation of the historical sublime as both a gesture of interrogation and a gesture of assertion. The metahistorical romance tries to resuscitate the sublime (in the form of the *historical sublime*) precisely in the context that the Kantian sublime and aesthetics traditionally have avoided, subsumed, or repressed – that is, the in context of the political.'

15. Elias (2001: xix) maintains that 'Linda Hutcheon's *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) coined the term *historiographic metafiction* as a descriptor of late-twentieth-century avant-gardist literature and argued that post-modernists play with history and create a potentially subversive form of cultural critique'. On this point, see also Emanuela Piga's article in this issue (especially 51–3).
16. See Luperini (2005).
17. On this point, see Marco Amici's article in this issue.
18. The concept of the sublime has been in the history of Western thought since the rediscovery of Pseudo-Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* in 1554. In Western aesthetics it is treated variously by a number of authors and philosophers, especially Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Victor Hugo, Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich W. Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. A description of the sublime relevant to this article is found in Auerbach (1956: 133–5), who describes it in terms of the astonishment and admiration aroused by texts, which only partially represent reality, leaving the rest to be imagined by the reader.
19. Alliteration does not work in translation here, of course. This passage is quoted exclusively to provide an example of the language of NIE in the original texts.
20. A brief analysis of the language of NIE is found in Poroli (2009).
21. See Dimitri Chimenti's article in this issue.
22. I refer to Ricoeur (2004).
23. See also Emanuela Piga's article in this issue for a discussion of the mythopoeic process as a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.
24. Information on the killing of Carlo Giuliani can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Carlo_Giuliani.
25. Oblique gaze is defined by Wu Ming 1 in the 'Memorandum': 'Nel *corpus* del New Italian Epic si riscontra un'intensa esplorazione di punti di vista inattesi e inconsueti, compresi quelli di animali, oggetti, luoghi e addirittura flussi immateriali. Si può dire che vengano presi a riferimento – in contesti differenti e con diverse scelte espressive – esperimenti già tentati da Italo Calvino nei racconti cosmicomici o in *Palomar*' (Wu Ming 2009: 26) ['In the *corpus* of New Italian Epic there is an exploration of unexpected and unusual points of view, including those of animals, objects, places and immaterial fluxes. One could say that the reference points are the experiments made by Italo Calvino in *Cosmicomics* and *Palomar*, with a different approach and in different contexts'].
26. For an introduction to the non-dualistic approach of Advaita Vedānta, see Guénon (2002 and 2004).
27. An analysis of the well episode is also found in Dimitri Chimenti's article in this issue (41).
28. See Auerbach (1963: 176–226).
29. A useful treatment of the evolution of tragedy from epic, of the presence of tragedy and the anticipation of Aeschylean themes in the *Iliad* is found in Tait (1943).
30. Genna (2009) explains his own vision of tragedy and the novel.

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