

Marco Malvestio. The Conflict Revisited. The Second World War in Post-Postmodern Fiction

Guido Bartolini

Volume 42, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094650ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v42i2.39703>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bartolini, G. (2021). Review of [Marco Malvestio. The Conflict Revisited. The Second World War in Post-Postmodern Fiction]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 42(2), 306–309. <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v42i2.39703>

Le vie dorate già nel suo titolo – tratto da *A Silvia* di Leopardi e relativo al borgo di Recanati – racchiude la chiave di lettura metaforica del libro: infatti, i 45 profili delineati sono altrettante *vie* di un'Italia letteraria tutta da scoprire, con l'ausilio di una guida d'eccezione come quella ideata da Bertolio, che, in uno stile chiaro, scorrevole e accattivante, coniuga spessore filologico e critico (non disgiunto da originalità interpretativa), solidità dell'impianto didattico e felice creatività grafica.

VERONICA ANDREANI

Independent scholar

Marco Malvestio. *The Conflict Revisited. The Second World War in Post-Postmodern Fiction*. London; New York: Peter Lang, 2021. Pp. 218. ISBN 9781789972092.

Reality is a complex thing. This old idea has, perhaps, never been truer than in the twenty-first century, when technological developments and the global expansion of capitalism have accelerated the pace of human existence and transformed humanity's relationship with the world in an increasingly mediated experience. Far from having seen the end of history, our interconnected world has been galloping towards ever-changing landscapes, which today are also menaced by threats of pandemics and climate disasters. It is not a coincidence that in our contemporary fast-evolving historical context, the Second World War has continued to exercise a mesmerizing attraction to present-day writers, who have found in it an exemplary symbolic space to reflect on the complexities and moral conundrums that are part of the human condition. In *The Conflict Revisited*, Marco Malvestio explores the relevance that the Second World War has in contemporary culture investigating a personal canon of classics of global literature centred on Roberto Bolaño, William T. Vollmann, and Jonathan Littell. The result is an exceptionally fine work of literary criticism that combines tremendously detailed knowledge of the studied texts—navigating with authority across thousands of pages of contemporary masterpieces—with a superb understanding of literary theory, which Malvestio uses to untangle with rare clarity the distinction between postmodern and post-postmodern literature.

The book is structured around three main chapters, a preface, and an introduction. The preface discusses the corpus of texts that the book examines against

the backdrop of global literature. The introduction addresses two broad cultural issues: the relevance that the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust obtained in contemporary culture and the development of avant-garde literature from postmodernism to what Jeffrey T. Nealon has called post-postmodernism. Each of the three chapters deals with one of the main authors that Malvestio selected (Bolaño, Vollmann, and Littell) while also including incursions into the literary production of Ian McEwan (*Atonement*, 2001), Sarah Waters (*The Night Watch*, 2006), Rachel Seiffert (*The Dark Room*, 2001), Laurent Binet (*HHhH*, 2010), and Giorgio Falco (*La gemella H*, 2014). Readers interested in the works of any of these writers will find plenty of insightful reflections on their works, which in the case of Bolaño, Vollmann, and Littell stem from Malvestio's encyclopedic knowledge of their oeuvre, which the scholar maps out with the acumen of a talented cartographer.

Yet the main achievement and strength of the book does not lie in its meticulous and elegant close-readings, but in the overarching idea that keeps the analyses together. In *The Conflict Revisited*, Malvestio shows that, in some of the most important novels of the twenty-first century, the Second World War has been represented in accordance with post-postmodern poetics and that the development of such poetics has been directly linked to the necessity of addressing some of the epistemological, ethical, and historical issues that the Second World War continues to raise. If one can have some reservations about the fecundity of Nealon's terminology—which adds a “post-” to a label that already was the “post” of something else—Malvestio's argument about the fruitfulness of the term post-postmodernism is convincing. In our epoch, in which postmodernism penetrated into pop and mainstream culture (26), avant-garde writers are now resorting to a system of artistic expression that transcends postmodernism by retrieving features of both modernist and nineteenth-century sensibility—towards both literature and reality—while employing numerous literary devices that are typically post-modern. The result is a form of literature that resorts to metafiction without disputing “the knowability of history” (79), challenges realism through fantasy and bricolage without renouncing the “mimetic effort” (148), and gives a renewed consistence to “plot, characters, causality and narratorial authorship” (191). This is, as Malvestio clearly points out throughout the book, a kind of literature that does not limit its message to a playful and ironic deconstruction of the epistemological and hermeneutical categories through which reality can be known, but that, on the contrary, believes in the power of mimesis and uses it to communicate

messages—no matter how ambiguous and confusing these can be—about the human condition. Hence, by examining exquisitely literary matters in the works by Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell, and other contemporary authors, Malvestio sheds light into some of the most important issues that the representation of the Second World War brings about, such as the non-metaphysical essence of history, the social mechanisms that made the Holocaust possible, and the limits of a rigid, binary, and too schematic division between victims and perpetrators that does not leave space for those nuanced ethical complexities that are part of historical reality.

The Conflict Revisited offers interesting perspectives to scholars of Italian Studies as well. First of all, the book presents a brief but rich excursus on recent literature about the Second World War (1944–45), explaining how national specificities keep Italian literature outside the global post-postmodern trend; moreover, it carries out an in-depth analysis of Giorgio Falco's *The H Twin* (1977–87). Yet the significance of Malvestio's contribution to the field of Italian Studies does not lie so much in the reflections about contemporary writers that the book develops, but in the pivotal role that it ascribes to Italian scholars and critics. In both his close readings of contemporary masterpieces and discussions of literary theory, Malvestio largely relies on secondary scholarship produced by Italian scholars, bringing the works by Stefano Calabrese, Stefano Ercolino, Raffaello Palumbo Mosca, Filippo Pennacchio, and others into conversation with the international scholarship devoted to post-postmodernism and the studied authors. Paradoxically, the significant space assigned to Italian criticism results in one of the few weaknesses that can be identified in the book, which does not engage with some of the notions that have characterized recent criticism on Second World War literature—this is the case, for instance, of the idea of perpetrator fiction that, after studies by Erin McGlothlin, Richard Crownshaw, and Robert Eaglestone, has become an important category of recent debates, especially in relation to Littell. This remains, however, a minor shortfall in a work that will impress his readers for the extent of its breath and readings.

The Conflict Revisited shows that, to be understood in depth, contemporary literature about the Second World War requires critics who, following Malvestio's analysis, can be called post-postmodern. These scholars would know how to master the literary devices of postmodernism and would use them to extract from literary texts important reflections about both the past and the present. Above all, these scholars—in the same manner of Bolaño, Vollmann, and Littell—would be characterized by a strong faith in the capacity of literature to represent and

understand reality. This is the faith that has informed Malvestio's research and that the book will pass onto all its readers.

GUIDO BARTOLINI
University College Cork

Judith Roumani. *Jews in Southern Tuscany during the Holocaust: Ambiguous Refuge*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. 203. ISBN 9781793629791.

Con l'occhio rivolto al centenario dell'ascesa al potere di Mussolini nel 2022, al già lungo elenco di opere che esaminano il periodo fascista in Italia si sono recentemente andati ad aggiungere alcuni notevoli studi sul Ventennio. Il recente volume di Judith Roumani sulla città toscana di Pitigliano (spesso chiamata "piccola Gerusalemme") è un'aggiunta eccezionale a questo elenco e si distingue sia per la finezza dell'analisi sia per l'originalità e la ricchezza delle fonti. Questo lavoro rappresenta, infatti, il culmine di un lungo progetto di ricerca dedicato a quello che fu certamente il periodo più difficile nella storia della piccola città toscana, in cui l'autrice prende in esame il destino degli ebrei di Pitigliano – colti da un lato nel sentimento di appartenenza alla città che era stata, per molti, la loro casa per secoli, e dall'altro dalle leggi razziali del 1938 e dalla Seconda guerra mondiale – con un notevole senso di sfumatura, e una grande attenzione al contesto formato da diverse dinamiche regionali, nazionali e internazionali in competizione fra di loro.

Jews in Southern Tuscany during the Holocaust è il volume inaugurale della nuova collana della *Lexington Books* intitolata *Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies*, di cui la nostra autrice è anche, insieme a Jane Gerber, co-editrice. La parte centrale del libro è suddivisa in otto capitoli, con il primo dedicato alla definizione di un quadro complessivo della presenza ebraica nella Toscana meridionale e i restanti sette al periodo tra le leggi razziali del 1938 e il dopoguerra. Il periodo contemporaneo vi è definito da un lato come il tempo del desiderio di ritornare alla normalità, ma dall'altro come tragicamente ridotto al giudaismo virtuale: il momento nella storia di Pitigliano in cui i discendenti degli ebrei locali sono sparsi per l'Italia e per il mondo, con la cittadina trasformata in una meta turistica per ebrei italiani e stranieri che acquistano immobili per le vacanze oppure per le giovane coppie israeliane che attraversano il Mediterraneo per celebrare il loro matrimonio.