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Skeletons in the Closet:
Historical Amnesia and Counter-Remembrance in
Umberto Eco’s The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana

—Manpreet Kaur Soodan

The last three decades have witnessed, what Andreas Hyussen calls, a “boom of unprecedented proportion” (5) in the investigation of the political and ideological ramifications of memory. Many far-reaching political changes in the recent history of the world—the independence of the former colonies of European nations, the enfranchisement of ethnic and minority groups, the two World Wars and the end of Cold War—have been followed by the emergence of suppressed histories, stories and memories. At the same time, memory is now viewed as a structure or discourse of power. It is the space where the struggle for truth, representation and power is enacted. The selective nature of memory, its malleability and unreliability is insidiously utilized governing polities in the discursive formation of national identity and history. The dialectic of remembering and forgetting or amnesia and nostalgia, as advanced by state ideologies and totalitarian regimes, plays a crucial role deciding who a people are.

The present article aims to analyze the politics of remembering and forgetting in Italy as envisioned by Umberto Eco’s novel The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana. Eco’s novels are considered seminal philosophical and semiotic works by the literary intelligentsia. Renowned as a literary critic and semiotician, he rose to fame as a novelist with the success of The Name of the Rose and Foucault’s Pendulum. In MFQL, published in 2004, Eco has written a detailed treatise meditating on the philosophical, neurological, social and cultural aspects of memory. Despite reminiscent of Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past and Jorge Luis Borges’ Funes the Memorious, there is a discernible political dimension in the book that cannot be overlooked.

Eco’s underlying concern in this novel is the retrieval and reconstruction of the forgotten past. As with all his novels, which invite multiple interpretations by the model reader, MFQL can be doubly decoded as a revisionist account of Italian historiography and a parable of contemporary Italian politics. The main character’s amnesia is an exercise in instruction. It is symbolic of the amnesia of modern day, torpid Italy, where public memory is “built on structured forgetting” (Favero 140).
What starts as a recovery of the forgotten past metamorphoses into a revisionist reading of the past, memory and history. The protagonist's reconstruction of the World War II era is an exposition of lies and fascist propaganda, and more significantly it demystifies the monolithic, popular image of common Italians as victims during the war. Instead, the reconstructed memories deconstruct this generalizing icon of an innocent spectator and present alternate views on the involvement of the Italian populace during Mussolini's reign. Though the novel re-historicizes the past through cognitive frameworks such as flashbacks, it addresses an incumbent issue for modern day Italy—the control of truth and reality by a nexus of state-corporate machinery, the hegemonizing of national memory. Through a retrospection of their collective past in which the masses were seduced by fascist rhetoric and propaganda, Eco portends the establishment of a totalitarian system, in the guise of liberalism/right-conservative, which encapsulates the public and the private and adjudicates what counts as veritable truth and information.

Fascism and Italian Historiography

At the end of World War II and the culmination of Fascist and Nazi era, a period of rehabilitation and reinstation began, which included economic stability and massive projects in nation-building. This restitution process also included a painful yet essential confrontation with the nation's own incriminating past. However, Italy skirted the issue state-academia-media engineered deflection and forgetting. Italy's involvement in the colonial invasion of Africa and the Balkans, its alliance with Nazi Germany and its promotion of racial laws against Jews was systematically neutralized, erased or forgotten.

In 1943 when the allied forces entered Italy, an armistice was signed with the Americans. The country was divided into two regions—one occupied by the partisans and allied forces in the South and the other by Mussolini's Social Republic and German troops in the North. What followed was one of the bloodiest battles in Italian history between the Resistance movement and the Nazi-Fascist commune, with huge losses on both sides. The victory of the partisans marked the eventual demise of Fascism and is considered a turning point in Italian history. The struggle of the resistance movement against the regime towards the end of the war transformed Italy's image from the victimizer to a victim and then to the resister of Nazism. An ideological conspiracy of forgetfulness was sanctioned as the fascist reign and its atrocities were self-absolved by
placing them adjacent to the larger and more horrific dimensions of Nazi crimes. As Gianni Olivia notes:

From June 1940 to September 1943 Italians have fought the same war of aggression as Nazi Germany but, immediately after that, wanted to forget it and have it removed from national consciousness . . . a political manoeuvre shaped by the whole antifascist class to exculpate the country from any responsibilities and to give back to the nation a soul of moral virginity. (qtd. in Favero 147)

Official historical accounts drew on the conventional image “Italiana Brava Gente” (Good Italian People), coined in the nineteenth century to justify Italy’s colonial mission in Africa. This self-founding myth harpooned on the innate benevolence, innocence and jocundity of Italian people and has been over-employed by Italian historiography as an “ideological laundry for reformulating and then setting aside disquieting moments of national shame” (Favero 140). While Nazism and Fascism were unanimously condemned as an abomination, the role of the common people as supporters during the regime was suppressed or condoned.

In the 1990s another wave of revisionism of Italian history began with many academicians and historians claiming that the anti-fascist rhetoric and mythology after the Second World War was an ideological and political ploy by the communist-left. This revisionist view of Italian history was used by the Right to discredit the Left and validate their position as a legitimate partner in the new centre-Right governing coalition. While pro-Fascist sympathies at one stage were regarded as unpatriotic and the word “fascist” itself was considered pejorative, this stance has radically been reversed in recent times, contributed by Silvio Berlusconi-led government’s and historian’s insistence on the “progressive aspects” and “benign nature of Italian Fascism” (Fleischer 86). In this project, they have been aided and abetted by the fact that an extensive proportion of media and press falls under the domain of political parties, making the veracity of received information highly unreliable and compromised.

In all this sparring between political parties, public memory of the fascist period has constantly being written according to varying political agendas. What has emerged from the historiographical debate over the past, according to Michael Kelly is, a “series of competing political memories” (68); and consequently fascism has been relegated by historians like Benedetto Croce only to a “parenthesis in Italian history, 67
an anomaly . . . a movement outside the “normal,” healthy historical
development of the nation” (59).

Ghosts from the Past

The central character of the novel is Giambattista Bodoni, more
familiarly known as Yambo, a sixty-year old bibliophile and an antiquarian
book dealer. The novel begins with Yambo waking up in a hospital, after
having had a major stroke, and discovering that he is suffering from
“retrograde amnesia” (7), a form of amnesia in which his semantic memory
and calculative faculties are in working shape but his autobiographical or
episodic memory has been lost. Like Borges’ Ireneo Funes, he can recite
with great accuracy a stock of excerpts from art and literature, but cannot
answer his name, identify his family and friends or relate who he was in
the past. He loses his sense of self and finds his mind “walking through
fog” (7), a central metaphor for the protagonist’s amnesiatic state.

In an attempt to recover his past, he visits his ancestral home in
Solara, where he spent a considerable part of his childhood during the
Second World War. Left alone at the house, along with the faithful elderly
servant Amalia, Yambo comes across a rich wealth of old school texts,
notebooks, newspapers, magazines, posters, comics, diaries and records
in the attic. Making use of his and his grandfather’s memorabilia, Yambo
begins to remember a partial picture of his forgotten past. Interestingly,
the memories that the protagonist evokes date the fascist era only,
specifically the 1936-45 period, and not the post-war era which he had
equally forgotten. These memories, as the text shows, had been suppressed
by Yambo even before he suffered the stroke. His wife and family claim
that Yambo was very reticent about his life in Solara. From this the reader
can gather that Yambo’s amnesia epitomizes the structured and ideological
forgetfulness of the Italian nation of its incriminating past. Concomitantly,
the attic at Solara serves as a metaphor for the collective unconscious.
This literal “memory palace,” an allusion to ancient “theatres of memory”
spoken about by St. Augustine and other medieval memory scholars, is
the repository of the nation’s repressed, uncomfortable past. The recovery
of Yambo’s personal history therefore transforms into a disinterment of
the historical memory of the “schizophrenic Italy” (205), whose past has
been fractured, obfuscated and forgotten by pro-Fascist agenda and
post-war historiography. The protagonist realizes that he is not narrating
an autobiography, but “rather the biography of a nation” (Eco,
“Interview”).

68
Yambo’s remembrance of the past produces the “quintessence of a montage” (178), composed of, as Rocco Capozzi says, “elliptic, heterogeneous and fragmented” (467) memories that are highly revisionist and reconstructive. Not only does he piece together his past like a detective “intent on retracing and reconstructing remote events” (152), but also re-analyses and rewrites his personal and national past in light of the knowledge gained over the years. As he moves from one box of memorabilia to another, he selects, rejects, and revises a gamut of images, texts, notes, sounds and smells into a narrative of counter-memory. As the narrator says:

Other days (five, seven, ten?) have blurred together in my memory . . . what that left me was . . . the quintessence of a montage. I put disparate pieces of evidence together, cutting and joining, sometimes according to a natural progression of ideas and emotions, sometimes to create contrast. What resulted was no longer what I had seen and heard in the course of those days, nor what I might have seen and heard as a child: it was a figment, a hypothesis formed at the age of sixty about what I could have thought then (178).

When he evokes his childhood memories through the memorabilia, the adult protagonist finds internal contradictions and ambiguities in the historical accounts and popular culture of the fascist and post-war era. As an adult, Yambo rereads and rewrites his own memories by realizing that his schoolbooks were based on an engineered forgetting and silence, containing no references to the Second World War. They “avoided the present” and celebrated “the glories of the past”—colonial conquest of Africa, the Spanish Civil War and World War One—with pictures that showed Italian soldiers standing like “Roman gladiators” (186). Paolo Favero notes that nationalistic and historical education has not much changed since the war eras. Recalling his own formative years in education, Favero asserts that Italians are still being instructed that they were not real colonizers, that the imperial project was not based on the use of violence and subjugation, and that the people of former colonies are thankful to them for bringing civilization to their countries. Furthermore, official history declares that Italy never believed in the racial laws and Jews were never really persecuted on its soil (140-41). This ideological nullification and forgetting of the past is debunked by Yambo’s counter-memory. His memory revised by the memorabilia relates how schoolbooks, magazines, newspapers, comics and other art forms contained meditations
on racial differences, with entire sections on Jews and the “attention that should be paid to this untrustworthy breed, who ‘having shrewdly infiltrated Aryan regions . . . introduced among the Nordic peoples a new spirit made up of mercantilism and profit hunger’” (187).

The flagrant errors, fabrications, omissions in historical accounts, educational texts and popular culture lead him to conclude that as a child there “must have been serious questions and official culture offered no answers” (112). All manner of information and incidents were screened and tempered by the fascist machinery and censorship prior to circulation through official and unofficial channels. The reality that was constructed for them was highly mediated and textualized. As Makel Berezin says:

The regime that controlled the Italian state from 1922 to 1943 was a political project that aimed to recreate the Italian self or to create new identities as citizens of Fascist Italy. The “fascist project,” the actions and programs that the regime undertook to accomplish its desired cultural ends, was an exercise in “hyper” nationalization and “hyper” state-building (357).

While rummaging through the memorabilia, Yambo comes across his children’s library composed of books by English and foreign writers. As an adult, the narrator realizes how official censorship and nationalistic education had brought about the “Italinization” and “naturalization” of books by rewriting them as exemplum of Fascist ideals. The heroes of comics and children’s books were changed to Italian nationals and the enemies were typecast as grotesque caricatures of Fascist-resisters. *Buffalo Bill, the Hero of the Plains* was changed into *Buffalo Bill, the Italian Hero of the Plains*. Mickey Mouse was changed into Topolino, and once war was declared against America, the famous mouse was killed and replaced by an Italian human imitation, Tofflino (234). Books like *Italian Boys in the World*, about a group of young boys who emigrate to Spain and save the fascist headquarters during an anti-republic rebellion, the narrator now comprehends, were paradigmatic texts of nationalistic education instructing the ideals of fascism to blossoming citizens.

This resurgence of historical artefacts impels Yambo to interrogate his past, specifically the memories he once must have had before the amnesia. The gaps and spaces in the official memory manifest themselves as questions about political-social consciousness and responsibility, truth and lies, remembering and forgetting, which the
narrator puts to himself and his fellow Italians. What was society's ideological stand during Mussolini's reign? Did the people corroborate with the regime by supporting its ideals and laws? Did he identify with the symbols of fascist pride? These questions raised by his precarious memory are answered in the affirmative as he gradually begins to reconstruct his past. The narrator now understands, as he revisits and revises his past, that he along with his family and the larger Italian society had to a great extent subscribed to the fascist ideological injunctions. While post-war official historiography has cleansed its culpable past, Yambo's counter-remembrance discredits the popular image of "Italiani Brava Gente," an innocent bystander and victim who was helpless in the face of such incomprehensible barbarity. His highly iconoclastic reconstructed memory opens up blanks and reveals indeterminacies in the official historical narratives by showing that the masses to a great extent were collaborators and instruments of pro-Fascist agenda.

The collusion of the people with Fascist ideology is exemplified in the novel by the unquestioned support and promotion of cultural ideology of the regime in the public space. Fascist songs and anthems like "Youth of Italy" and "Balilla Boys" were cultural staples at home and other communal spaces. Yambo recalls that, on the one hand, the schizophrenic nation used to listen with great enthusiasm to the radio for war time news and songs composed of "heroic phrases, incitements to attack and kill, and oaths of obedience to Il duce even to the point of ultimate sacrifice" (171); at the same time, they were bombarded with popular songs, many a times sung to foreign tunes, which were "endless lessons in optimism and gaiety" as if "life were running on two different tracks" (201).

As young students and balilla boys (future aspirants of the regime), Yambo and his classmates were motivated by their school authorities and families to inculcate fascist beliefs. In one of the key moments of the novel, Yambo finds an old school notebook containing a composition written by him on the topic "faithful and incorruptible guardians of Italy and its civilization," (205) a phrase used by Mussolini in one of his speeches. The prize-winning essay written Yambo evinces that as a young citizen he wanted to fight for "Italy's new will, die for the new, heroic, holy civilization, which will bring well-being to the world and which God desired should be built by Italy" (206). His counter-memory reconstructs the "cult of horror" (207) during the regime when noble death for the nation was the ultimate virtue and when lies were as believable as truth. He
discovers his school notebooks whose covers are pasted with fascist symbols and slogans, with “images of Il Duce on horseback, of heroic combatants in black shirts lobbing hand grenades at the enemy” (193). The narrator wonders how his elders had reacted to his pro-fascist indoctrination. He comes to the realization that they perhaps had absorbed such ideas even before the commencement of fascism since they had “been born and grown up in a nationalistic climate in which the First World War was celebrated as a purifying bath” and had been declared by the futurists as “the world’s only hygiene” (206). Society had learned to conceive the love for their country as a “blood tribute, and to feel not horror but excitement when faced with a landscape flooded with blood” (207). It is not surprising then, as the narrator recollects, that the partisans had to hide not only from SS and black brigade soldiers, but also from Italian families and towns which overtly supported the regime. In a highly amusing scene, Amalia refuses to divulge a story, even after more than fifty years of the end of the war, fearing a former black brigade soldier, Pautasso, who lived nearby and flourished as the owner of a brick factory, and could “make a person talk even after . . . cut[ting] his tongue out” (219).

In the din of the war, society’s political allegiance was very fluid and confusing. The elderly servant recalls that Yambo’s grandfather, even though most likely ant-fascist, had provided refuge to both partisan and black brigade soldiers. The narrator recounts that those were “months when people were doing all sorts of things, like Gino, who had been in the black brigades, and one of its more fanatical members, then ran off to join the partisans” (363). Gaps and contradictions are further revealed in the official memory of fascism when Yambo recounts that criminal, horrific acts were committed not only by the fascists and Nazis, but also by partisans. The central incident of the novel involves Yambo leading a group of local townsmen, supporters of the Resistance, through a deep gorge, which only he and his schoolmates had learned to climb, to rescue a group of Cossacks, who after having seen enough Nazi-brutality had decided to change sides. Although Yambo recognizes his mentor Gragnola’s heroic actions which saved the Cossacks and the entire town from the German soldiers, he emerges from the tragedy with love, fear, guilt and spite. In the rescue mission, Yambo witnesses the dirty business of war. The two captured German soldiers, who were a risk to the entire group as they were slowing them down while descending the gorge and hence increasing their chances of being caught, were killed by Gragnola.
Yambo, who was acting as their guide, is left with a troubled conscience as he realizes that nobody is innocent in the war, not the Nazis and Fascists, nor the partisans.

While Yambo’s reconstructed memories reveal the hegemony of the Italian mind by Fascist propaganda and architecture, they also highlight that this hegemony was not a unilateral process. The masses too corroborated with the regime if at times not directly committing atrocious acts, but as “people who emotionally supported Mussolini and were seduced by his version of a heroic Italy that would compel lesser peoples to submission” (Danyte 39). This explains the forgetting of its fascist past by official historiography, which hides these incriminating aspects by a complete denial, vindication or by indicting a single person for being responsible for it. Yet Nazi–Fascist era was made possible not simply by the will of a single person but by an entire military, administrative, scientific and cultural machinery.

Eco’s novel was written during the Berlusconi era, when media was used to camouflage or suppress an array of pressing political and issues; to further individual political agendas and shape public opinion; and to withhold, distort and regulate information, thereby controlling a nation’s sense of self. The scenario has not changed even after the end of Berlusconi’s term since the political stronghold on media and press is not a recent phenomenon in Italian history. The novel therefore has double implications. It not only highlights the complicity of Italians political with fascist rhetoric and the forgetting of its culpable past, but also as serves as a critique of state forces and systems in contemporary Italy which may not be fascist in the traditional sense but are equally authoritative and antidemocratic in their politicizing of truth and the past. Through the revisionist reading of the past Eco intends to galvanize his fellow countrymen into rising from a state of political and social apathy.

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