

Lucamante, Stefania, *Righteous Anger in Contemporary Italian Literary and Cinematic Narratives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2020, 333 pp.

Was Achilles's feeling one of anger or of ire, that latter being the Italian translation of Homer's, cited by Stefania Lucamante (p. 11)? While ire moves in the direction of destructiveness, anger leads to a feeling that can move a reaction to right an injustice. This reflection is fundamental in the author's excellent latest book *Righteous Anger in Contemporary Italian Literary and Cinematic Narratives*.

With *Righteous Anger*, Lucamante adds another crucial element to her methodical, diligent, and fruitful investigations on contemporary Italian literature and thought. After her *Italian Pulp Fiction. The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (2001) and the rich sustained attention to contemporary writings shown by her numerous essays, with *Righteous Anger* Lucamante focuses her attention into the presence and role of anger in contemporary narrative works (novels and films), and the indignation anger can trigger. Is it possible that the violence that characterized the literary production of the so-called *cannibali* is only terrifying gratuitous violence? Can readers see in the depiction of seemingly erratic acts of violence critiques and incitement to ethical stances? To make sure we keep distinct different works and styles, *Righteous Anger* is not about the writers that were lumped under the label of *cannibali*. *Righteous Anger* looks at other artists, to explore the affective power of passions as movers of societal changes.

Lucamante problematizes the landscape by dissecting the role of anger as a passion, an ethical tool, that has the power, in turn, to trigger a positive reaction in human beings/readers by activating the social passion called indignation. Often, we associate anger with feelings of negativity. *Righteous Anger* elucidates that it is risky to do away with such a quick judgment. In societies, anger, triggered by what is perceived as an unjust act, can in fact move witnesses of the injustice to empathize with the victim(s) and act to redress it. Passion engenders compassion and, especially in her study of literature and cinema, the process is more manifest. Right away, Lucamante clarifies that her study is not about the idea that literature is the remedy to societal ills (as Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière had warned), but it can raise awareness and concern. Literature sides with the vulnerable, it resists and denounces injustices. It is a political act, ever more important in times of «fluctuating system of ethics» (p. 4).

Rooted in the reflections of classical and modern philosophy (i.e.: Stoics and Hume) and contemporary thinkers (among many: Bauman, Butler, Esposito, Foucault, Nussbaum, Pasolini, Westphal), I will point out Lucamante's skillful reading of Rancière's thought as central, for his attention to corporeality as the "thing" that senses experience. *Righteous Anger* makes the case for the centrality of the body in the understating of the complex relationship between ethics and aesthetics. As Patrizia Cavalli writes, it's in the body where human beings experience conquests and

losses, joy and pain. This corporeality is central to the narrators Lucamante investigates. For example, Tiziano Scarpa's attention to corporeality testifies of the «performativity of emotions as a physical reaction to the external and the political» (p. 39): performance is made visible to readers thanks to words that Scarpa employs to destabilize the power that, in turn, oppresses the vulnerable. The association between words and body is defined by Lucamante as «logo-corporeality» (p. 73).

Lucamante brought together, into a volume carefully divided into three sections, a wealth of scholarly investigations on several contemporary Italian authors: Tiziano Scarpa (section 1), Melania Mazzucco and Monica Stambirini (section 2), Simona Vinci, Paolo Sorrentino and Veronica Tomassini (section 3). Their works are studied under the lenses of how passions elicit reactions that might generate discernible outcomes. Lucamante expands on this idea by elucidating affect theory and its catalyst role in forming artistic acts. For the artists, continues Lucamante, are the ones who are positively influenced by what Hume calls «good passions» (i.e.: reason) so to, in turn, they/we react to injustices (p. 6).

In section one, readers find out how the essence of the artists' subverting power resides in the links literature-world Scarpa creates in the many books considered by Lucamante (especially *Le cose fondamentali* and *Kamikaze d'Occidente*): it is the scandal of literature revealed as such (p. 74). Artistic acts are, perforce, conscious political acts, understood in the new, contemporary mode of explanation of commitment even in the permanent flux of the liquid society. If we think about the story Scarpa tells us, Lucamante seems to indicate power as the contaminant, the ruler against which Scarpa fights, for a literature that cannot submit itself to the lessons of history.

In section two, Lucamante identifies vulnerability as the lode star for her inquiry on Melania Mazzucco's novel *Un giorno perfetto* and Monica Stambirini's film *Benzina* (released with the English title *Gasoline* and adapted from the homonymous book by Elena Stancanelli). Both artists narrate the stories of vulnerable women bullied, attacked and ultimately killed. Lucamante sees in the two works the authors' drive to reframe the notion of vulnerability. No longer possible to accept the status quo of victims of violence, it is necessary to eliminate vulnerability. However, Lucamante theorizes, it is paradoxical but imperative, to solve the obstacle to recognize vulnerability at the legislative and cultural levels. Recognizing vulnerability is essential to be recognized as human (p. 172). Specifically, in Mazzucco's case, literature creates awareness and ability to act upon the image of «women supposed vulnerability as [...] an act of resistance to that very threat that would restrict their movement» (p. 116). As a matter of fact, Lucamante describes *Un giorno perfetto* as an urban epic, a choral novel, where eventually Rome becomes the stand-in for the verbal and physical abuse suffered by women.

Likewise, the analysis of Stambirini's *Benzina* (often compared to Stancanelli's novel) shares the goal of bringing attention to the power of resistance in a position of vulnerability. In this case, moral indignation is fueled by discrimination and violence against lesbian and queer people in general. For Lucamante, Stambirini's work is a call to action, action that righteous anger sustains with combustible substances, to culminate in violence because «social inscriptions do not disappear just because we are aware of them» (p. 153). Lucamante sees in Stambirini's film a step to liberate lesbian love from binary structures that permeated previous instances of narrating (p. 153).

In section three, Lucamante investigates anger triggered by love, by selecting three works that share love as overarching theme: Sorrentino's film *Le conseguenze*

dell'amore; Vinci's novel *Stanza 411*, and Tomassini's novel *Sangue di cane*. Three stories about love, revealed in three different modes, that discuss the vulnerability that stems from love, instead of that from hatred and fear (as in section 2). The novels share enclosed spaces as the setting for its development: a hotel for Sorrentino, a hotel room for Vinci, the city of Syracuse (Sicily), as isolated space in Tomassini's writing. The deconstructed reality observed in the enclosed spaces of the narratives highlights the notion of estrangement that Lucamante observes as key to move from love and erotic passion to concerns about social and political issues. In an apparent contradiction to happiness as the obvious outcome of love, Lucamante dissects the not less powerful feelings of anguish and troubles love triggers. Love alters lives in the three authors' works as their characters change their relations with society at large. For this reason, it is quite appropriate to discuss Foucault's idea of heterotopia, as Lucamante does in the opening of this third section. Heterotopias are set in opposition to Marc Augé's non-places, as the former spaces are characterized by specific actions (love in this case) that affects characters' awareness of their surroundings, and therefore, in Lucamante's reading of Rancière, a site for ethical value (p. 177).

Lucamante identifies a homosocial quality in Sorrentino's film that supports an apotropaic look at women's role in cinema. Lucamante's analysis of Vinci's novel is a journey into the writer's meditation on love, bodies, self-effacement, desire, and sex. All these subjects of meditations are discussed around the exploration of the body, vessel of all physical, intellectual and passional experiences. Lucamante's reading of Tomassini's *Sangue di cane* identifies the indignation and compassion that arise from a love story alive against all the odds of a city that rejects immigration policies. In this novel, «a social passion sparks the aesthetic act that shapes the reality in the characters' fictional depiction» (p. 232). Lucamante elucidates the role of autofiction in Tomassini's novel («[...] it is my falsity that I am subjecting you to. And since it is mine, it is authentic nevertheless», p. 234). The awareness of the social superimposition of the author over the narrator becomes a tool to appreciate the interweaving of the love story as one with the story (and social issues) of the denied hospitality to the community of refugees.

As it happens with all the best intellectual investigations, *Righteous Anger* makes clear to everybody the powerful and long reach of literary studies: an inspirational journey into the power of arts, solidly grounded in philosophical reflections. Lucamante reclaims Rancière's reflection on the necessity for the real to be fictionalized in order to be thought (p. 172), as well as corroborates Bertrand Westphal's explanation of the active power of fiction that does not mimic reality but one that «actualizes new virtualities hitherto unexpressed» that interact in novel ways with reality (p. 178). In this specific case, the righteous anger that artists feel when facing injustices has the power to create empathy that will foster measurable action. *Righteous Anger* is a brilliant book that, while analyzing contemporary Italian literature, traces the secure path for a new direction to look at literary studies in the broadest sense. Theoretical as much as a call to action, *Righteous Anger* gives readers the precise intellectual and emotional coordinates to believe in the potential of positive change by understanding how indignation is necessary for achieving it.

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