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Years of Lead in Giuseppe Genna's Novel "*Italia De Profundis*"

The period between the late 60s and the mid-80s of the twentieth century in Italy is known as the Years of Lead (*anni di piombo*). The bloody events of those years became the pain point of the Italian nation and were reflected in works of many contemporary Italian writers. This article examines the references to the events of the 1970-1980s in Giuseppe Genna's *Italia De Profundis* (2008). But before we move on to the creative work of our contemporaries, we need to outline the historical context inherited by the authors of contemporary Italian literature.

Already after World War II, fascist and chauvinistic attitudes, as well as acute dissatisfaction with the Italian state policy started to rise in the Italian society again. As a result, right radical parties and movements appeared in the post-war Italian republic one by one. These were inspired and supported by military men, policemen, carabinieri, as well as individual representatives of urban citizens and peasantry. Some of the most prominent movements are The New Order, *Ordine Nuovo* (1969-1973, 1973-1981), The National Vanguard, *Avanguardia Nazionale* (1960-1965, 1970-1976), The National Front, *Fronte Nazionale* (1968-1970), and many others.

These movements were primarily neo-fascist in nature. While destabilizing the situation in the country, the groups discredited the democratic government. Neo-fascists were convinced that the wave of violence they had provoked would result in a population's protest reaction. Already in 1969 neo-fascist groups produced more than fifty terrorist attacks in different Italian cities; the explosion at Piazza Fontana is the largest among these: on 12 December 1969, a bomb exploded at the headquarters of the National Agrarian Bank (*Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura*) in Milan, killing 17 people and wounding more than a hundred.

In 1973, the activities of the New Order were officially prohibited; however, the movement continued acting under a different name and organizing terrorist attacks. Those actions were first of all aimed at weakening political opponents. On 28 May 1974, the members of The Black Order blasted the social demonstration in Brescia, and on 4 August 1974, they blasted the *Italicus* international express.

Left radical movements grew along with neo-fascists. The Italian communist party did not meet the electors' expectations and gradually got to be perceived as a conciliating one, and this is why after the disturbances in 1968, the youth with extremist attitudes actively joined most radical groups. In the late 1960s, such groups as Worker's Power (*Potere operaio*), Continuous Struggle (*Lotta continua*), Workers' Vanguard (*Avanguardia operaia*), Capital Political Committee (Milan), and others appear in Turin. The latter was

one of the most radical groups, it propagandized armed struggle. It was exactly the nucleus of the future Red Brigades – the group that had started consistent terroristic attacks already in 1970. Terrorists were engaged in arsons, blasts, assassination attempts and kidnapping of functionaries and entrepreneurs; the most well-known are the kidnapping of the judge Mario Sossi (1974) and the former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro (1978).

Another national injury was the bombing at the railway station of Bologna on 2 August 1980, also carried out by neo-fascist terrorists. So far, this remains the largest terrorist attack committed in Italy after World War II (85 people killed, more than 200 injured).

Along with numerous terrorist attacks performed by neo-fascist groups, a real war broke out in the south of Italy between Mafia clans and law enforcement agencies: in the 1970-1990s, there are numerous murders of investigative journalists, judges and prosecutors, as well as carabinieri and other representatives of the fight against the Mafia.

A significant part of the tragic events described took place during the life of the famous writer and film director – Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was found brutally murdered on 2 November 1975. This murder has not yet been solved and, most likely, is also related to with the activities of one of neo-fascist or Mafia organizations. Pasolini is an author with an explicit political position, whose work is highly critical of the Italian society and political life, and it exposes a number of the terrorist provocations mentioned above. For example, on 14 November, 1974, he published an article in the leading Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*, known as *Io so – I Know*, where he claims to know the names of those responsible for the bloody events in Milan in December 1969, as well as in Brescia and Bologna, he knows those who were both behind ‘‘the tragedy of young people who chose suicidal fascist cruelty, and ordinary bandits’’ (Pasolini 2015: 353).

The bloody events of the Years of Lead – the brutal murder of Pasolini is one of them – were the reason for an internal trauma throughout the country, which modern Italian writers are still trying to comprehend on their pages.

So, Pier Paolo Pasolini becomes one of literary fathers for Giuseppe Genna (born in 1969), which was especially clearly reflected in the novel *Italia De Profundis*, where a quote from *Petrolio* is an epigraph. *Petrolio*, Pasolini’s unfinished novel, was completely published in Italy only in 1992. This was the reason why this text became a part of the cultural heritage and a subject of comprehension of the writers belonging to the literary generation that followed Pasolini.

Roberto Bui, writer and literary critic, better known as Wu Ming 1, mentions *Petrolio* among the texts preceding New Italian Epic that Genna’s works belong to, too. He is echoed by Dario Olivero: ‘‘New Italian Epic is a direct descendant of such Pasolini’s works as *Io so* and *Petrolio*, the journalist notes, although Pasolini had no intention of becoming a literary father of a generation of writers who were raised on pop culture, in which he himself only saw a wave carrying garbage heaps’’ (Olivero 2009) (Hereinafter the translation from Italian is by the author).

Genna himself mentions Pasolini among the forerunners of the modern European novel and ranks him together with other authors who are significant to him: "Forerunners of the future narrative canon, they do exist. Incomprehensible texts of the past: from Leopardi's *Zibaldone* to Pasolini's *Petrolio*, from Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*, from Celan and Miller to Burroughs" (Genna 2008: 67).

The tragic past of Italy and the present of the protagonist of Genna's novel *Italia De Profundis* blend into a single whole – in this work the writer, giving the protagonist his own name, tries to understand the dark places of the history of his own country and the depths of his own self. The events from protagonist's life are incorporated in the context of Italian culture and turn out to be only weak echoes of the history of all Italian people, right up to the point that the character finds his double in one of the chapters in the image of a crying woman, in whom Italy from Leopardi's poem (*All'Italia*, 1817) can be easily recognized.

The history of the communist past of the country for the character is personified by his father, an ardent communist whose ideals were brutally frustrated after the collapse of the Italian Communist Party. He belongs to the "deceived generation" that includes Pasolini. Although the writer and film director did not live to see the final fall of the communist movement in Italy, he already anticipated it. So, Pasolini becomes not only a father in terms of creative writing guidelines for Genna, but also a possible prototype of the communist father represented in the novel.

In the chapter with the same name as that of the novel, Genna draws a picture of the history of humanity filled with many symbols and hidden quotes (Genna 2008: 68-85). The writer emphasizes the "Italian scene", warning the reader that it would be better to turn immediately to the next chapter, since this episode was too boring and stylized in a too complicated way. The "Italian scene" is a long associative flow of concise images embodied in the art of literature. Through these images and hidden quotes, the reader is absorbed in the context of Italian culture, experiences significant moments in the development of the country's history, moves both to the past, observing the execution of Giordano Bruno, and the future, witnessing the planet's death: "O young shadows, your eyes are pale white, You hope for Glory, for War, You babble strange sounds, the extinct ancient sun burns the waste land" (Genna 2008: 68).

It is in this key scene of the novel that Genna refers to the figure of Pasolini, forcing the reader to live the moment of his tragic death again: "The roaring ghost machine is taken to the stage and knocks down the ghost of Pier Paolo Pasolini, a homosexual poet, but he keeps standing where he stood, athletic and cheerful, he sends his greetings to his overseas friend Allen Ginsberg, he writes a letter by hand – Pasolini is the only one who can yet write" (Genna 2008: 72). The poet and film director, however, remains safe and sound, because, according to Genna, the fact of physical murder cannot erase his presence and significance in the history of the country.

The terrorist acts of the Years of Lead, as well as the murder of Pasolini are those painful wounds for Genna that every Italian still finds hurting when touching. Thus, the

Piazza Fontana bombing, as Genna's character confesses, becomes a point of no return that entailed a huge "civil fracture" and deprived him of his sense of homeland: "I don't have a homeland, I have none. There is only a civil fracture after the Piazza Fontana bombing on 12 December 1969" (Genna 2008: 239).

The Years of Lead fall on Genna's childhood and adolescence, but the hero of the novel named as the writer develops his attitude towards the tragic events and government's responsibility for what had happened already as a teenager. For example, when he stayed on vacation with his parents in Spain, he learnt about the murder of the general Dalla Chiesa, after which he felt disgust and hatred in relation to the country that had not prevented these murders: "I was a bit absent-minded and was just beginning to understand something. A few days later, the general Dalla Chiesa and his wife were murdered. Going down the ladders of Iberia's airplane that delivered us to Milan, I said the words I have remembered for all my life and that could only be removed through lobotomy, 'I feel disgust at this country. It is a shame to step on this land.' My father, an old communist, might have objected, <...> but he was silent" (Genna 2008: 293).

An image of another victim of the Years of Lead, Aldo Moro, is also reflected in the novel and appears as a ghost in the "Italian scene": "The ghost of Aldo Moro is trembling on a black and white screen, he addresses with a speech that lasts seventy long minutes" (Genna 2008: 75). The image of Moro becomes an emblematic indicator of the Times of Troubles in the country's history, but is not given an in-depth description.

Special attention in the "Italian scene" is given to the image of the terrorist. Genna's terrorists are a collective image of the world's evil: "Gangs of difficult to catch terrorists dressed in tight black polo-necks invade the country firing machine guns – their bullets are woven from pictures that no one can stand <...> – lifted clenched fists, blue overalls for workers toiling at old factories, sheaves of ears rising in the fields where tired and happy children are running around" (Genna 2008: 70).

As mentioned before, one of the most painful episodes in the history of the Italian Republic was the attack at the railway station of Bologna on 2 August, 1980. Many Italian texts and films contain episodes where the events of that terrible day appear like a flashback. The station square of the city itself inevitably reminds Italians of what had happened, the dead watch hands always showing the time of the explosion.

It is worth emphasizing that the motif of the explosion is one of cross-cutting issues in Genna's novel. A persistent repetition of the lexeme *esplosione*, *esplosione* in the novel is intentional. This author's particular attention to the vocabulary and his affection for a stylistic play with the language have already been noted by us (Bystrova 2015). Wu Ming 1 in the Memorandum about New Italian Epic also draws attention to the fact that a persistent repetition of some lexemes is observed in Genna's texts, which helps the author arrest the reader's consciousness and connect the selected linguistic units with specific visual images: "At first glance, the stylistics (of the authors of New Italian Epic – T.B.) seems plain, no rises and falls; if you read more slowly, however, you can notice something extraordinary, kind of a call-over and reflection creating an accumulative

effect. <...> In particular, in the novel *Hitler*, Genna emphatically uses the word *esorbire*, <...> achieving the effect that once we finish reading, we cannot imagine *esorbire* without Hitler, involuntarily thinking about him every time we come across this word" (Wu Ming 2009: 37-39).

A similar effect is also achieved in *Italia De Profundis* through repeating an image of explosion, the use of lexemes *esposizione*, *esplodere* both literally and figuratively. An explosion characterizes the relations between the main character and his beloved: the father's death "explodes her from within", she "bursts out crying like an animal", and their relations with the hero end with an "explosion": "An explosion takes place in Bagno Vignoni, in Tuscany, not far from Siena. In the center of SPA, where we are wandering like silent ghosts. Both of us are nurturing something huge. When I say 'father', she bursts out" (Genna 2008: 106). After the painful breakup, the hero bursts into lots of scenes and reminiscences.

Figural explosions inside both characters take the reader to the bombing at the railway station of Bologna: the circle of images closes and meets at the place of the tragedy. The woman he loves proposes the character to part and makes him get out of the car at the square by the railway station. Here, the character sinks into reminiscences about August 2 1980, drawing an associative parallel with the collapse of his own love story and the event that had happened at this place many years ago: "I remembered very well both the square where the bombing had taken place, and the trip to Lido Adriano with parents, and the news bulletin, the clock with the dead watch hands at the minute of the explosion being constantly shown, and the house we rented that summer, and the TV set from which the frightful news arrived immediately followed by a hot musical TOP 10, Rockets and Kraftwerk" (Genna 2019: 177).

It is worth mentioning that the motif of an explosion is not over with the character's unfortunate love story, it goes through the entire text of the novel: in one of the chapters, Genna reproduces the images of the photograph "Watching nuclear explosion in sunglasses": observer's faces are lit with the flash of an explosion, but the explosion itself is not in the shot. Music "explodes" around the character, his interlocutors "burst out laughing", "rhythmical explosions sweep off" (Genna 2008: 252-253) the character's nervous system, the buffet of a tourist village, where the character dives into the reality of a lack of culture and immorality of his fellow countrymen, "bursts" like a horn of plenty.

The lexemes "explode" and "explosion", no matter the context and selected meaning, are persistently used by Genna in negative terms, immerse the reader into the character's inner life and are the connecting link between the inner and outer worlds. With this technique, the author generates the feeling of a catastrophe in the reader, creates an associative connection between the linguistic fabric of Genna's work and the tragedy of the Years of Lead, which the Italian nation is still going through.

Giuseppe Genna's *Italia De Profundis* raises very acute social problems of the modern Italian society, one of which, according to the author, is a lack of a healthy political climate. After the collapse of the communist party, a third of the population

were left behind the political life, nothing appeared instead of the communist ideology, the party of Christian democrats discredited itself by inactivity and helplessness during terrorist attacks in the Years of Lead. According to Genna's character, modern Italy is going through the "Ice Age" that is not followed by anything. Instead of the communist ideology, "the Italians get religious education, a strait-jacket of inaction and remorse" (Genna 2019: 50).

Many allusions to the events of the Years of Lead in the work of modern Italian writers is an evidence that so far, the Italian nation is not through the trauma it got as a result of the fight between left radical organizations and the government of Christian democrats. Today, the lack of a remarkable political life and any ideology demanded by the society, as well as numerous unsolved social problems caused a crisis of national identity in the representatives of the national intelligent elite which it strives to overcome by means of repeated re-thinking of the tragic events of the 70-80s. Giuseppe Genna is one of the most prominent representatives of Italians of keen intellect who sought after passing the tragedy of the Years of Lead in his works and giving a new stimulus to the development of modern Italian auto-fiction novel. This is exactly the reason why the events of the protagonist's life turn out to be tightly connected with the author's personal experience and are incorporated in the context of Italy's history as well as in the fabric of Genna's work itself.

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ტატიანა ა. ბისტროვა
(რუსეთი)

ლიდერობის წლები, ე.წ. „ტყვიის სამოცდაათიანი“
ჯუზეპე ჯენას რომანში „Italia De Profundis“

რეზიუმე

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ლიდერობის წლები; ტერორიზმი; იტალია; თანამედროვე იტალიური ლიტერატურა; ჯუზეპე ჯენა; პიერ პაოლო პაზოლინი.

ლიდერობის წლების საშინელმა მოვლენებმა იტალიელ ერს დიდი ტრამვა მიაყენა, რომლის დაძლევაც დღეს ხდება სხვადასხვა დონეზე, მათ შორის, თანამედროვე იტალიური ლიტერატურის საშუალებითაც. მწერლები, რომლებმაც ბავშვობისა თუ მოზარდობისას გადაიტანეს აფეთქებები ფონტანას მოედანსა და ბოლივიაში, თავს ვალდებულად თვლიან, გაარკვიონ, რა მოხდა და უპასუხონ შეკითხვებს, რომლებიც მთელი ცხოვრების განმავლობაში აწუხებთ 1970-1980-იანი წლების სისხლიან მოვლენებთან დაკავშირებულ იტალიელებს. ჯუზეპე ჯენანის რომანის „Italia de Profundis“ მოზარდი მთავარი გმირი განიცდის სირცხვილსა და სიძულვილს ქვეყნისადმი, რომელმაც საკუთარი მოქალაქეების დაცვა ვერ მოახერხა. თუმცა ამ გრძობას თან ერთვის ავადმყოფური მიჯაჭვულობა და მზადყოფნა უმკურნალოს ჯერ კიდევ ღია ჭრილობებს.