

***Canale Mussolini* by Antonio Pennacchi – a lively view into a dark period which every nation goes through**

Every historical period has a novel that best tells its story, every state has a history that establishes and fixes its story as narrated from the perspective of its dominant ideology. The losing ideology on that given social and political scene finds itself on the losing side of the narrative process of the inscription of the official history, the story which is to be told to future generations. At the same time, the story of this losing ideology is almost always portrayed one-dimensionally, through a point of view limited to only the barest minimum of favorable facts which support the prescribed history. Victims of this approach are the historical facts, various sequences of events, as well as historical personages which are lost or pushed back into apocryphal texts and histories. Most often, they end up a part of the repressed collective memory that lurks under the surface, waiting for its moment to burst out with all its suppressed might.

One of these defeated ideologies in the 20th century is of course fascism, the story of which is mostly told and perceived through the viewpoint of the victorious post-war ideologies: western liberalism and communism. The general public mostly perceives it through movies about the era, where fascism more often than not is portrayed as a caricature or as the embodiment of ultimate evil which cinematic heroes (Indiana Jones, Walter when he defends Sarajevo, Brad Pitt in *Inglorious Basterds*) always defeat it in the end and send it into the dark recesses of history. Yet, it only on the rare occasion that we are presented with the actual story about how this ideology was born, how it spread among the common folk and managed to take its place in history. This is a quite sensitive issue for all countries and nations where fascism played a significant role in the development of their collective history, but also their existing social reality, such as Italy, the birthplace of fascism. Italian society is still divided along the historical fault lines that were set as early as the creation of its modern state in the 19th century, and intensified with the tectonic events of the 20th century which lead to division of the societal fabric into the right and the left, a process very similar to the events that have shaped modern Macedonian history.

Consequently, it is always fascinating and instructive to learn about new aspects of the history of this Mediterranean nation that is so similar to us. In more recent times, we had the chance to get better acquainted with this part of Italian history through the works of art of primarily left-leaning authors such as Umberto Eco, Federico Fellini (*Amarcord*), Roberto Benigni (*La Vita e Bella*). Antonio Pennacchi's novel *Canale Mussolini* (translated and published in Macedonian by ILI-ILI) provides us with an opportunity to get a look at this history from the other side. The novel serves as an insight into the origin of fascism and the environment in which it was born and thrived. We shouldn't rush to conclusions that this work is a pamphlet for fascism or that it is a mere romanticized version of a historical period. Quite the contrary. Pennacchi deftly depicts a rich and complex portrait of the economic and political situation in the country at the time, but also gives us insight into the psyche, mentality and the tradition of the community which gave birth to fascism. Thus, he successfully casts a light on a not as well known, at least for us, side of Italian history. The secret of the success of this novel lies in Pennacchi's mastery to tell the whole story in a rather simple, even colloquial and folksy language infused with great doses of humor and

subversion, in the same way history is told and seen by the common man witnessing the events unfolding on the great historical stage.

Canale Mussolini, first of all, is a novel describing the history of one of the most ambitious projects of the fascist regime, the bonification of the Pontine Marshes, the construction of the Agro Pontino project and the settlement of the region with arrivals from the whole territory of Italy. This project dates from the time of the Roman Empire, never being fully finished, with every new regime in power failing to tame the power of nature until the fascist regime completed it in the 20th century. All of this points to the conclusion that Pennacchi took upon this topic because it represents a fruitful metaphor for the history and the process of the formation of the modern Italian state and nation. This impression is only intensified by the knowledge that the canal was almost destroyed at the end of the war, yet it managed to rise from the ashes, be restored and continue function, though it needs constant tending, care and mending to avoid a new apocalypse, just like the latest reincarnation of the state of Italy.

The novel, second of all, is also a depiction of the history of a family, the Peruzzi. It serves as a picturesque tableau of the life, suffering and challenges faced by three generations of this family. The events in the novel take place over a long historical period spanning almost a century during which Italy shakes off the last remnants of feudalism, enters a rapid process of industrialization and attempts to become an imperialistic force, an undertaking which infamously fails in the course of World War II. The premise of telling the history of a nation and era through the story of a fictional family is a well-known and practiced literary device, especially in the tradition of realism and modernism from which Pennacchi draws. However, what breathes freshness into this trusted recipe is the narrative perspective of the subjective narrator who with a deft and light skill leads us through the story and plot. Though it seems he always randomly skips from period to period, from topic to topic, from character to character, but never loses the thread like a popular common storyteller, rather than a professional historian. When you think better of it, that is the most common manner in which we initially receive and perceive our personal and family history, but also the history of our community and nation. We learn and remember by listening to the stories told by our elders, sitting at the dinner table, during family celebrations or when visiting a relative, those are the theaters where all apocryphal histories are played out, the stage where events are told which have been hidden and suppressed from the official history, the fire around which myths and legends are born, such as the yarn that Mussolini had the hots for their grandmother, the matriarch of the Peruzzi.

Still, it is this rather informal and dialogic narrative structure which allows the Peruzzi story to be interspersed with all the most important structural elements which comprise the body of Italian identity and narrative: events and persons starting from the time of Garibaldi and ranging in a broad sweep all the way to the time of Berlusconi. The spiral movement of the narrator through the narrative of history just illustrates the repetitive nature of living in a certain region and the immutability of the mentality of its community, but also the gradual progress taking place and the adaptability of the common folks to the changes brought on by the new age. What lends the credence of truth to this textual historical panorama is the common sense thinking that shines through the contemplations of the narrator which helps lift the veil of illusion which official history pulls over our eyes. It is this approach that allows us not to be surprised by the neglected fact that Mussolini and his whole fascist movement were

socialist and left-wing in the beginning, only for the degradation of old social and political traditions and institutions to lead it along another path which inevitably ends in racism and dictatorship. This makes it easier to accept the fact that the common people only looks at ideology through the point of view of their bare survival and existence, just as means of being afforded protection, thus it is only normal when they are exploited by the local landowners to seek protection from a well-organized movement such as the Fascists. Ultimately, for the common man all totalitarian systems look the same when he has to do his farm chores, but the common man also remembers that even Roosevelt and Stalin watched and learned as Mussolini managed to successfully take a backward agrarian society such as Italy and modernize it in flurry of activities and projects.

Canale Mussolini, at the same time, is also a novel about the building of a nation. It tells the story of the migrants who flowed into the newly opened region, the necessary human resource for the success of the project. It is this disparate and diverse amalgam of humanity that will create the nucleus of a new ethnicity, a new regional identity. Pennachi paints with a vivid brush all the struggles between the locals and the settlers, the constant efforts to preserve their old identity, but also the attempts to adjust to their new surroundings and reality, all the facets which are still present and alive in the divisions between the Cispadanos and the Moravis. All through the pages of the book, we can see the unfolding of the process of the integration of all of this disparate elements into a new mosaic by the constant mixing, marrying and friendship and the unavoidable fact of having to live side by side, a process which is a living argument against all the claims about the purity of nations or their ancient origins which are so often the kernel of official histories and ideologies.

Despite all that was underlined above, *Canale Mussolini* would hardly be a living and breathing work of art without the pulse provided by all the characters from the Peruzzi family. The Peruzzi embody the spirit, tradition, energy, perseverance, wisdom, but also the cunning, superstition and delusions of the common folk, all the qualities and faults which have helped them survive through the centuries while empires and states rise and fall around them. The names of the male characters show the interminable link of the people and the history, starting with names of classical heroes such as Themistocles, Pericles and Paris and ending with the names of the modern heroes, the Italian politicians such as Turrati and Modigliani. The Peruzzi family lives on and from their ancestral land until they are forced out by the local Counts Zorzi Vila and have no other choice but to participate in the bonification project and the construction of Canale Mussolini, their whole story illustrating the continuity between the old and the new history. Furthermore, every Peruzzi male offspring takes part in every war which the state undertakes, but are also constitute the brute force and fist which brings fascism to power. The various conflicts in the broader family illustrate the division between the left and the right I society, something very similar to our Macedonian history. The secret behind the survival of the Peruzzi through all these trials and tribulations lies in the primary importance of family to them, loyalty which trumps all. This is why it's not a problem to accept into the fold of the family strangers and ideological adversaries if they are ready to marry the Peruzzi women, even if they come with excess baggage in the form of bastard children.

The main ideology accepted and ingrained in their genes is patriarchy and its strict moral principles, regardless of the countless times they have been comically inconsistent in their application in their everyday life, a philosophy of life not uncommon to the common

man. Yet, these principles are strictly adhered to when the family is in peril, which is the case when one of the Peruzzi wives Armida loses her husband Pericles, only to commit the unforgivable sin of adultery with her nephew Paris, making her a tragic Helen that causes the fall of the family Troy. She is banished from the family, sent into exile stripped of her children and a taboo is established for the disgraceful act to never be mentioned and to be buried deep in the family history. However, like all secrets, it is ultimately revealed to the readers when at the end of the novel we realize that this child of the passion between Armida and Paris is in fact the narrator, Don Pericles Peruzzi, who has become in the meantime a priest and a respectable member of society. He is the product of the overall history of the family, but also symbolizes the façade and veneer of respectability and the compromise belying post-war Italy who had swept under the rug all its secrets, taboos and contradictions which are just waiting for a favorable moment in history to appear and lead to new divisions.

Yet, all the wealth, verve and complexity woven into the tapestry of the novel would never have been properly experienced if not for the successful translation by Irina Talevska. She has found a winning formula for conveying the spirit of the work in a flowing, playful and vibrant language, making it easy for the reader to imagine that the whole plot takes place in a nearby Macedonian region.

Canale Mussolini is a novel from which we can learn quite a lot about Italian history, but we can also learn how to approach the delicate and contentious topics and issues of history, a lesson which is necessary to improve the public debate in society and among historians. Still, if you have no particular interest in history, I am certain that you'll be won over by the spirit of the times depicted in the novel, the spirit of a patriarchal community and people which are so much like us in experience, mentality, humor and stubbornness. Antonio Pennacchi's *Canale Mussolini* deserves all the awards and plaudits it has received, but it also deserves your attention and time.