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Intellectual Engagement in Andrea Camilleri's Montalbano Fiction

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Because of its narrative structure, based on a formulaic passage from ignorance to knowledge, detective fiction is never without an epistemological subtext. By the same token, the heroes of the genre, whose main *raison d'être* is precisely an incessant quest for knowledge motivated by a desire to benefit society, can be interpreted as intellectuals *par excellence*. This article interprets police inspector Salvo Montalbano—the hero of a best-selling series of detective novels and short stories by Italian author Andrea Camilleri and a TV series—as an epitome of the conditions and limitations of intellectual engagement in present-day society.

Disenchanted with social reality but not apathetic, Montalbano is a witness and at times a protagonist of Italy's key sociopolitical events and developments. In fighting international crime—from people smuggling and the new mafia to building speculation and trade in human organs—Camilleri's hero remains firmly rooted in the local environment of his imaginary Sicilian hometown, Vigàta. An extraordinarily erudite man, he is widely read and appreciative of music and the fine arts. He often resolves his cases by drawing parallels with themes and perceived "patterns" from a vast and rather eclectic range of cultural texts with which he is thoroughly familiar, ranging from conventional peasant wisdom, popular literature, film, cartoons, and comic strips to canonical "high" literature, theater, philosophy, and literary theory. Most important, all of his actions are driven by a strong sense of justice and compassion for the disempowered.

Originally a literary hero, Montalbano has, since his first appearance in 1994, transcended the boundaries of the printed text and become a veritable cult phenomenon with consistently popular renditions in a range of other media, from radio and television to comic strips, the Internet, and computer games. He has thus evolved into an almost mythical hero with a strong grip on the Italian national imagination. I would like to suggest that, as a hero primarily concerned with the major challenges of globalization and their effects

on the local communities still remembering, and in some ways living, their premodern past, Montalbano is an equally interesting and highly plausible character outside Italy's borders.

Although aware of the inevitable adaptations of the Montalbano character to the exigencies of the different media in which he appears, as well as of the impossibility to extract "a purely literary Montalbano," or a "purely televisual Montalbano," I have based my article on Camilleri's novels and short stories. The reason for this choice is that, as television is a primarily visual medium, the televisual Montalbano had to be aestheticized and flattened. His most interesting characteristics, those salient to my claim that he can, in fact, be interpreted as an analytical tool for understanding the new social spaces of the globalized world, have been lost. For instance, for my argument in this article, it is significant that Montalbano relies on the help of other characters, namely Catarella (for computers and technology) and Fazio (for pieces of factual information). In the TV series, however, Montalbano "becomes a man of action, he knows how to hold a gun and use it, he breaks down doors, he knows how to act in any situation, to the point that his men, in so far as they are Helpers, often perform the role of simple spectators of his heroic deeds" (Marrone 35).¹ More important, he never reads, and thus we cannot see how his familiarity with a wide range of literature helps him in the process of cognition.

Within Todorov's typology of detective fiction, Camilleri's Montalbano cycle is most accurately categorized as whodunit: that is, the reader is confronted with two parallel yet distinct stories—the crime and the investigation. By the time the second story—the one of Montalbano's investigation—begins, the first story—the one of the crime—has already ended. According to Todorov, the precise rules governing this type of detective fiction demand that not much happen in the second story. Its characters "don't act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity" (44). Camilleri, in fact, often transgresses this rule to allow elements of suspense. The reader thus remains interested in what will happen next in the story of investigation. Although the reader may rest reasonably assured that Montalbano, being a serial character, is not going to die, his actions often are perceived as risky—for example, when he goes unarmed to meetings with top mafiosi in *Il Cane di Terracotta* (hereinafter CT) or *La Gita a Tindari* (hereinafter GT)—and he may indeed get badly hurt, as seen in CT.

Until recently, mystery fiction had a second-rate status in the country of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. Genre literature in general was considered to be purely escapist, commercial, and therefore of scarce value. Stefano Tani has attributed this disparaging attitude toward mystery fiction to a certain "snobbish and elitist concept of literature descended from the Italian classical tradition," adding that the "serious literary artist might write [a mystery novel], but only to amuse his audience, and very likely with a falsely modest preface explaining the writer's lapse of taste and slyly encouraging the reader to notice the writer's versatility" (28).

Over the last two decades, mystery has been embraced by Italian authors as the most suitable outlet for coming to terms with the nation's recent sociopolitical past and its volatile present, and for exploring identity discourses more in tune with today's reality. The inherent intertextuality and seriality of mystery fiction and its Manichaean blueprint, capable of expressing resistance to dominant culture, have made it suitable for articulating alternative national myths. The recent breakthrough of the genre, which can finally be said to have stepped out of the shadow of high literature, roughly coincides with the renewed public confidence in the judiciary, following the sweeping anti-mafia trials in the late 1980s and the *mani pulite* (clean hands) campaign in the early 1990s. In a manner without precedent in Italian history, the judiciary took on a popular mandate to "clean" the corrupt and inefficient government system. The credibility of the judges, soon to surpass by far the credibility of the Italian State, was reinforced through their pervasive presence in the media. Soon, magistrates at the forefront of the "cleaning" operation, such as the indefatigable Antonio Di Pietro, or the two martyrs of the anti-mafia cause, Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone, became national heroes. By the same token, local hero-investigators in the mold of the fictional Montalbano became more credible.

A significant trend, accompanying the overall reevaluation of popular culture, is the espousal of the idea of literary production as "artisanship," which goes hand in hand with a questioning of the traditionally privileged status of the literary author.² In proclaiming himself an artisan of writing, "albeit a classy one" (see Spinazzola), Camilleri aligns himself with Gramsci's belief that "[t]he intellectual function cannot be separated from productive work in general, not even in the case of artists unless they have effectively proved to be 'artistically' productive" (455–56).

Camilleri paints his hero as an antithesis of the typically detached, "abstract" and "bookish" intellectuals of the Italian past, criticized by Gramsci as "without foundation, a caste and not an articulation with organic functions of the people themselves" (350). Despite his declared aversion to the very word "intellectual" (Lodato 367), Camilleri constructs Montalbano as a possible model for a Gramscian organic intellectual of the postmodern world, the one who comes from the people, is one with the people,³ and has the capacity to make sense of a world in swift transition.

A representative of the state, yet also its critic and moral arbiter, Montalbano operates in an idealized space where the border separating the individual, society, and the state appears as extremely permeable. In this idealized space, the authority of the state shrinks, yet—in a gesture of explicit criticism of contemporary reality—instead of giving way to the dictate of global capital, it gives way to justice and compassion, filtered through the rose-colored glasses of Montalbano's constructed morality.

In Montalbano fiction, an imaginary Sicily is the microcosm where elements of a supposedly premodern, modern, and postmodern culture overlap and continuously interact in a variety of ways. A typically postmodern rhetoric of the

nostalgia—that is, the ideological premises and narrative paradigms underlying an apologetic view of the past—is a constant, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. Above all, the very topography of Camilleri's entire opus (his historical novels also are set in the imaginary Vigàta) is one where memories of the times past become one with the daily experience of the present.

Along with a number of other characters, Montalbano speaks a regional variant of the Italian language, "a simple Italian, [. . .] bathed in Sicilian when it is not Sicilian tout court, though sometimes softened into Italian, to make it more accessible to the reader" (Mauri 177). This choice of a nonstandard register performs a dual function in the text: preserving for posterity a form of speech that might otherwise be forgotten and forcing the reader to continuously "interpret" the meaning of the text. Moreover, the reader unfamiliar with this register, whether or not a native speaker of Italian, may indeed "misinterpret" parts of the text and thus construct a new meaning for them without jeopardizing the communicative effectiveness of the narrative. The reader's interest is thus doubly ensured, because he or she has to decipher both the enigma presented in the narrative (a task shared with the detective-protagonist) and the language itself.

The most exploited nostalgic topos in the Montalbano cycle is, somewhat ironically, the representation of a fracture between the old and the new mafia. Within Sicily, the mafia—with its roots in the feudal past on the one hand, and its transformations over the past fifty years, such as urbanization, internationalization, corporatization, and involvement in cybercrime, on the other—can be read as the quintessential intersection of the past and the present. A series of other nostalgic topoi permeate Camilleri's fiction: for example, Montalbano's preference for elaborate homemade dishes, his resistance to change, and his aversion to technology.

More than a century ago, the British writer and literary critic G. K. Chesterton⁴ wrote an apologia in which he glorified the detective novel as the "epic poem" of the modern metropolis (12). In an interesting postmodern twist, the social space that Montalbano has to decipher is no longer the chaos of a big city. Milan, Turin, Rome, or Naples would certainly offer more crime scenarios than the picturesque Vigàta, an idealized, by now almost mythical, version of Porto Empedocle, a town with some eighteen thousand inhabitants. However, Camilleri's Vigàtese microcosm seems to be the epicenter where the routes of international organized crime, in its most disturbing guises—from smuggling and organ trafficking to the drug trade, arms trade, and prostitution—intersect with the paths of the local mafiosi, petty criminals, and corrupt officials.

When Leonardo Sciascia wrote *Il Giorno della Civetta*, he gave his hero-investigator of the Sicilian underworld, Captain Bellodi, a non-Sicilian, non-Southern identity. Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, Bellodi is thus an observer and never part of the crowd under his scrutiny. Toward the conclusion of the novel, he asks for permission to spend a month of leave in his native northern Italian city of Parma. In his absence, the results of his investigation are subverted through false testimonials. For him personally, however, this temporary

separation from Sicily has a somewhat salutary effect, in that it reinforces his detachment from his object of investigation. Thus, the positioning of the investigator outside the world that he observes is reasserted, but the truth has been sacrificed in the process.

In contrast, Camilleri's hero is not allowed to retreat. Like the magnificent native olive tree in the shade of which he likes to contemplate, Montalbano is deeply rooted in his local environment and will find any excuse to stay when invited to leave Vigàta. His bond with his immediate environment, repeatedly emphasized by Camilleri, performs an important narrative function. By circumscribing his hero's operating space to what is realistically knowable, Camilleri offers an "organic" epistemological model—based on immediacy and engagement—as a way of understanding the increasingly unknowable globalized world.

Montalbano's path to knowledge is through an incessant reading of signals and codes—even the most veiled and subtle ones—and establishing possible connections, combining them like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which reveals its true meaning only once it is fully assembled. With his skills of detection, or the "police logic" enabling him to read meaning into a wide variety of signals and codes, Montalbano represents knowledge in a society dominated by information. This paradigm is further reinforced through characters representing precisely the opposite end of the spectrum, that is, Catarella, with his commendable computer skills in a sharp contrast with his oceanic stupidity, and Fazio, with his capacity to amass factual information.

Commenting recently on the present-day gulf between knowledge and information, Eduardo Portella has lamented "a worrying paucity of thought" and an increase in social exclusion, inequality, and violence (6). His suggestion that "[o]ne might hope that knowledge may be an antidote to violence" (6) resonates with Camilleri's paradigm. Representing knowledge in a society of information and by definition acting as an "antidote to violence," Montalbano feels deeply for those at the margins of society. The examples of this inherent morality abound, and, if in conflict with his official duty as a police inspector, it is the moral side that prevails.

Most modernist critics (see, for example, Palmer; Knight) concur in assuming that the detective novel—the very function of which is to make sense of social reality—has to be inherently ideological and "reflect the dominant social values and anxieties of its time" (Docker 220). An example of a typically modern(ist) detective is Sherlock Holmes, who relied in his investigations on his "scientific knowledge," that is, his knowledge of chemistry, anatomy, and botany. In contrast, Montalbano's knowledge is primarily of a cultural nature. The active knowledge he draws on to solve a case comes from a wide variety of cultural texts.⁵

From the myriad of sources referenced throughout Camilleri's novels and short stories, it is evident that Montalbano does not discriminate among the so-called "popular fiction" (including literature for children, comic strips

“from Mandrake to the Secret Agent X-0, from Flash Gordon to Jim of the Jungle” [*Un Mese con Montalbano*, hereinafter MM]), and more canonical texts. Sometimes simply remembering a local proverb will put him on the right track in his thinking. Significantly, in *Il Giro di Boa* (hereinafter GB), the same conclusions concerning a cadaver found by Montalbano in front of his villa are reached by an elderly local fisherman and cigarette smuggler, Ciccio Albanese, personifying popular wisdom; by the forensic specialist Dr. Pasquano, representing scientific knowledge; and by Montalbano, representing the “police logic,” that is, a capacity to read a variety of clues and combine them into a meaningful whole (50).

Raffaele Simone uses the term *encyclopedia*, borrowed from artificial intelligence jargon, to refer to the totality of experiential knowledge that each individual has at his or her disposal. The amount of knowledge that we need to be able to move and operate in the present-day complex, technologically advanced, and media-saturated world has become so enormous that it cannot be contained in any person’s encyclopedia but must be stored in knowledge banks that can be used when needed. Montalbano’s eclectic encyclopedia provides another instance of bonding among the author, the hero, and the reader: The author puts his extensive cultural knowledge at the hero’s disposal, and the reader, identifying with the hero, accepts it to move in the same vast textual universe.⁶

In numerous instances, the reader is told that Montalbano is reading, or has read, a particular novel, short story, poem, or critical essay. If the reading is happening in the present, the episode tends to have no impact on the development of the plot but serves purely to reinforce the referential code of the narrative. However, if it is implied that a particular text has been read by Montalbano and thus already belongs to his personal encyclopedia, it is always to signal that a theme or narrative pattern from the text he has read would help him find a solution for the enigma that he is working on. The meanings uncovered by Montalbano through intertextual references thus underscore the definition of popular culture offered by Fiske: “The meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation, not in their texts; the texts, which are crucial in this process, need to be understood not for and by themselves, but in their interrelationships—with other texts—and with social life, for that is how their circulation is ensured” (4).

In the Montalbano cycle, there are numerous examples of this strategy. Some of the stories may replicate an entire story pattern, at a “deep” level, of a text from the hero’s (and, thus, the author’s and potentially the reader’s) encyclopedia. In addition to literary clues, Montalbano’s pointers can come from a character’s behavior, gestures, or tone of voice, or from details in a particular locale or scenery. People and spaces thus become texts, which, together with literary and popular culture sources, help Montalbano—a social anthropologist and semiologist par excellence—to put the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together and uncover their true meaning.

At a level where Camilleri’s fiction invites a mythical reading, Montalbano can be interpreted as the literary incarnation of Porto Empedocle’s black patron

saint, San Calogero. San Calogero is traditionally represented with a book in his hand, a protector of the poor and the disinherited, a conflation of diverging ideologies in the name of humanity and compassion. In *La Linea della Palma*, Camilleri tells Saverio Lodato that the dock laborers from Porto Empedocle used to keep the saint's statue in their union headquarters instead of in the local church (Lodato 49). Thus, the symbolism of this saint resonates with Camilleri's paradigm of discovery through a "reading" of codes, with a mandate for immediacy and engagement, and a clear moral underpinning.

Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, whose movement through the arcades of Paris in the early decades of the twentieth century was interpreted as movement through the social space of modernity, Camilleri's Montalbano lends himself as an analytical tool for movement through the present-day, postmodern universe. Montalbano's world is one where the old distinctions between society and culture and between high and popular culture do not hold any more, where perceptions of time and space have drastically changed and where we no longer find consolation in the possibility of metanarratives or clear-cut identities.

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NOTES

1. All translations in this article are mine.
2. Writers' collectives such as Wu Ming (formerly Luther Blissett) and tandems such as (Carlo) Fruttero & (Franco) Lucentini are a case in point.
3. In Camilleri's own words, the intellectual is one who "votes, is a citizen who pays his taxes, struggles, has a family, thinks about the future of his children and sees it grey [. . .] only after all that does he become an intellectual" (Lodato 367).
4. Chesterton is famous, among other things, for his series of socially engaged novels featuring the priest-sleuth Father Brown.
5. Of course, Montalbano is thoroughly familiar with the Italian literary tradition. Some of the Italian authors informing his personal encyclopedia are Dante (CT 128; *La Voce del Violino* [VV] 195; GT 97), Boiardo (VV 97; GT 54), Ariosto (*L'Odore della Notte* [ON] 56), Foscolo (MM 164; *Gli Anancini di Montalbano* [AM] 171), Leopardi (AM 161), Manzoni (VV 34; MM 32; AM 292; GT 121), Verga (CT 230), Pirandello (*La Forma dell'Acqua* [FA] 30; CT 244; MM 14, 32–33, 165–66; AM 18; GT 204), Saba (MM 122), Montale (GT 97–98), Tomasi di Lampedusa (FA 79c), Quasimodo (GT 54; GB 149); De Filippo (CT 34–35), Malaparte (CT 83), Sbarbaro (*Il Ladro di Merendine* [LM] 203), Pasolini (GT 11), Pavese (CT 106), Gadda (MM 166), Eco (CT 166, 170), Bufalino (LM 115), Consolo (CT 146–47, 171), Sciascia (FA 158; CT 244; LM 213; MM 121; AM 181), Tabucchi (AM 71–72; ON 93), and, as a representative of the new generation of mystery authors, Lucarelli (*La Paura di Montalbano* [PM] 10). Among the references to American authors, we find, for example, Herman Melville (MM 196), Edgar Allan Poe (MM 36), Edgar Rice Burroughs (VV 185; GT 102), William Faulkner (CT 234–35), Isaac Asimov (GT 273), and Dashiell Hammett (LM 125; MM 121). References to British authors include the inevitable William Shakespeare (CT 35, 128; AM 51; GT 154; PM 277), Daniel Defoe (LM 66; MM 297), Sir Walter Scott (VV 116), Robert Louis Stevenson (CT 270), Joseph Conrad (GT 276–77, 286; PM 206), Ian Fleming (GT 52), Lewis Carroll (AM 235), Dylan Thomas (CT 273; LM 9; MM 298), and John le Carré (LM 80). The French authors mentioned include Nerval (MM 25), Dumas père (MM 259), Baudelaire (FA 106), Maupassant (MM 32),

Proust (MM 196), Malraux (FA 106), Ionesco (LM 85), and Simenon (CT 41–42; MM 121, 334; AM 180; ON 193). References to Spanish authors include Cervantes (LM 217) and Vázquez Montalbán (CT 10, 41–42; MM 121; GT 45, 70). References to Russian authors include Gogol (GT 126–27; AM 233) and Dostoevsky (VV 114; PM 238; MM 32). Furthermore, there are references to Homer (MM 42–43), Sophocles (VV 47), Gregory of Tours (CT 232), Marco Polo (MM 257), medieval and Renaissance religious plays (CT 236), Goethe (CT 273; MM 32), the Grimm brothers (MM 293), Kafka (GT 127), Pessoa (AM 71–72), and Borges (CT 263). Among the religious texts, there are the Bible (AM 154–55), Koran (CT 224, 231, 236), Kabbalah (PM 48), and Talmud (CT 231). We also find references to philosophers and thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne (AM 250–01), Benedetto Croce (LM 228–30), Immanuel Kant (LM 228; MM 270–01), Georg Hegel (LM 228), Karl Marx (CT 127; ON 67), Sigmund Freud (CT 259), Roland Barthes (AM 50), and Julia Kristeva (CT 166).

6. The Camilleri fan club (<http://www.vigata.org>) gives a comprehensive list of Camilleri's sources as an aid to the reader.

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