

Just like in a library: A posthumous novel by Carlo Sgorlon

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Abstract

This contribution examines the latest novel by Carlo Sgorlon, completed on June 24, 2008, but published posthumously, ten years after the author's death: *L'isola di Brendano* (*Brendano's Island*). The book introduces character types dear to the Italian writer: Brendano Mac Finnegan, a hard-working and creative architect of Irish origin, who comes from abroad to Vallorsaria, an imaginary town in the Alps, where he falls in love with Antonia, a local woman; Antonia's young daughter, Jole, who gives birth to a boy endowed with extraordinary powers: Bindo; an Afghan baby sitter, called Fatma, who joins the three above mentioned characters, forming with them a strange but happy family; Brendano's friend, Amos, who represents a man incapable of positive attitude towards life and destined for a tragic end. With *L'isola di Brendano*, Sgorlon paid homage to a literary tradition he considered the most genuine, close and familiar to him. In the novel it is possible to identify many references, both explicit and implicit, to various writers, including Samuel Beckett, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elsa Morante. In this way, *L'isola di Brendano* resembles the mirror of a small but well-chosen library.

Parole chiave

contemporary Italian literature, novel, Carlo Sgorlon, Friuli, literary memory, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elsa Morante

Carlo Sgorlon passed away on December 24, 2009, in Udine (the city where he had always lived), at the end of a long and prolific career as a novelist and essayist, dotted with many and brilliant successes, including one Strega and two Campiello awards.¹

Despite his wide popularity, Sgorlon has sparked heated literary controversies, which were reinforced, in his later years, by the publication of an autobiography, *La penna d'oro* (*The Golden Pen*, Sgorlon, 2008), where he reconsiders his works, and expresses disappointment towards some literary criticism which he judges inadequate, or even hostile. According to the Friulian writer, many reviewers of

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his novels showed a biased cultural conception, inspired by the ideological persuasion that literature must always be politically committed, also concerned with the destinies of man and society.² Sgorlon felt, and was in fact, far from such a conception. Undoubtedly aware of modern society's problems and challenges, he was among one of the first Italian novelists to denounce the environmental issue, and to promote through his work a sober lifestyle, antithetical towards consumerism which prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century, in favor of an ecological conception of existence.³ However, he was never (and never wanted to be) an *intellectuel engagé*, on the model of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who remained faithful to a Marxist conception of literature, during his entire lifetime, in intense political struggles, and denouncing the corruption of the Italian ruling class during his life.⁴

Consciously, during his existence Sgorlon chose a different, secluded and customary conduct. Born in the little village of Cassacco in 1930, after studying at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and graduating there with a thesis on Franz Kafka, he returned to Friuli, and for many years was a respected teacher in several high schools of Udine, a small city in a marginal Italian province.

In a very different way from the experimentalism of narrators who have been part of the Neo-avant-garde (such as Giorgio Manganelli, Luigi Malerba, Massimo Ferretti), and contrary to the tendency of the Neo-avant-garde to deform, deconstruct, reshape the forms of classical storytelling in function of an unprecedented expressive research, Sgorlon expressed in his works an intact faith in the novel as a constant functional tool for investigating, knowing and expressing human reality (Marcheschi, 2020: 208-209). His artistic conception is almost always inspired by the archaic rural civilization's beliefs and values, which had characterized Friuli before the industrialization of the second post-war period. A feeling of religious respect for nature; the mysterious and unfathomable charm of the universe; extraordinary and unexpected manifestations of supernatural power – the power of magic, which, despite the intrusive scientific and technological progress, still survives and is still practiced by a community always maintaining deep roots in its archaic and ineradicable past with charming female figures, capable of hospitality, capable of giving themselves with spontaneous and uncorrupted sensuality; people who live with basic necessities, in an essential dimension, but in harmony with the earth and its cyclical transformation. All these are among the recurring themes in his novels, whose protagonists are often individuals without a family of origin, unaware of their roots, dissatisfied with their existence, looking for an identity: after having traveled extensively, they return to the childhood village, and in that rural and simple world, they find a sense and a dimension for their own life.

On these recurring themes and characters, the writer composed more than forty novels, which testify to a great ease of invention and undeniable naturalness in writing. His narrative universe is, in some respects, comparable to that of an Italian writer of the second half of the twentieth century, Elsa Morante. Sgorlon intentionally dedicated a conspicuous literary essay to her that was reprinted several times (Sgorlon, 1972). In fact, in Morante's work, Sgorlon noted the pleasure and,

indeed, the need to tell stories that he recognized in himself. Regarding Elsa Morante's narrative style, Cesare Garboli writes as follows:

Suono di grande estensione e di grande ampiezza, prodotto da un passo sicuro, spedito, potente, indaffarato, senza nervosismo, senza fretta, il passo di chi è occupato a narrare e non ha testa per pensare ad altro.

Sound of great extension and width, produced by a confident, forward, powerful, constant flow, without nervousness, without haste, the flow regarding those who are busy narrating and do not have time to think about anything else (Garboli, 2015: 6).

These words, which refer originally to Morante's narrative, *mutatis mutandis* can also define Sgorlon's narrative: his adventure, fantasy, coming-of-age novels, which I mentioned above, as well as his historical novels, are all characterized by the pleasure of storytelling.

L'isola di Brendano (Brendano's Island), a work completed a year before his death, testifies to the author's inexhaustible narrative vitality. At the age of seventy-eight, Sgorlon was still able to create his typical narrative plots, having as their setting a marginal and hidden region, easily identifiable with his beloved homeland: actually, both the names and the descriptions of the places continually recall and evoke Friuli. As in his other novels, the protagonists are original and anomalous personalities and narrative situations are curious and unusual. The work, on the whole, opens a confident and optimistic vision. Yet it also reflects and portrays the most severe problems and the most troubling difficulties of our time: climate change, wars that bleed the poorest regions of the earth, migratory events, and the problematic existence of political refugees.

Furthermore, in the latter novel there are (as we shall see) numerous quotations and references to both Italian and foreign prose writers and poets. This is something new compared to previous novels, especially compared to those of the sixties and seventies, in which the writer avoided exhibiting his readings, explaining the sources from which he drew inspiration; in which, in short, avoided expressing his own erudition (Marcheschi, 2020: 229). Explicit quotations and allusions constitute the landing of a partially different narrative mode: now the reflection on literature, on its role, on the creative processes that are at its origin, has an important space. Intertextual references can also be considered as a meditation by the author himself on his own culture, on the authors and the artists who have most decisively influenced his poetics and his vision of the world. At the end of his long career as a writer and his life experience, Sgorlon acted on *L'isola di Brendano* as in a selected library, sealing the titles of those books, which were the dearest to him and to his vision of the world.

The novel's plot is set in the city of "Vallorsaria" (literally meaning "the valley of the bears"), an invented name, which, however, has precise correspondences in the Friulian toponyms (e.g. "Orsaria" is a little village very close to Udine) and evidently alludes to the presence of the plantigrade in the surrounding places.⁵

The highest mountain in the valley where the city stands is the *Laredis*, another fantasy toponym, which, in turn, recalls various toponyms attested in Friuli, such as *Ledis* (a mountain above Gemona); *Lavardêt* (a mountain pass near Pesariis, in Carnia); *Curiedi* (a plateau above the town of Tolmezzo). More precisely, *Làvare*, in the Friulian language, is a slab of rock that crumbles and settles at the foot of a mountainous relief. Hence the toponym *Lavareit*, attested in Arta Terme; *Lavarêt*, in Paluzza; and, even more famous, *Lavaredo*, in the province of Belluno, very well known because of the peaks of Dolomite rock called Tre Cime.

In the city center of Vallorsaria there are “portici in stile veneziano” (Venetian-style porticos: Sgorlon, 2020: 32), a characteristic of many city centers in Friuli, like Gemona, Pordenone, Sacile and Udine. The region described by the author, just like Friuli, is located on the border with two countries, in fact, there are trains to Austria⁶ and bears have come from Slovenia to repopulate the forests.⁷ Finally, in the novel, words directly derived from the Friulian language are frequently quoted and inserted in the Italian sentences. Thus, for example:

Quand’era bambina a Jole piacevano i racconti paurosi della tradizione contadina, dove i protagonisti erano . . . *aganis*, . . . *salvàns*, . . . *macaròts*;

When she was a child Jole liked listening to peasant traditional scary tales, where the heroes were *aganis*... *salvàns*... *macaròts* (2020: 78).

The *aganis* (sing. *agane*) are mythological female creatures who live near the waters and in caves. They have different names and features, and are the protagonists of fairy tales and tales of many countries from the Italian Alps; the *salvans* and the *macaròts* are, in a very similar way, mythological creatures who live in the woods.⁸ Another passage in which the Italian phrase is enriched with a Friulian word:

Ogni volta che un cantiere finiva un lavoro, la troupe degli operai cominciava a organizzare la festa del *licôf*. Non poteva mancare. Si era sempre fatta. Era un’usanza arcaica, precristiana, probabilmente celtica.

Every time a construction site was completed, the crew of workers began to organize the *licôf* party. It could not be missed. It had always been done. It was an archaic, pre-Christian, probably Celtic custom (Sgorlon, 2020: 184).

In Friuli, since ancient times, as the narrator correctly points out, the *licôf* is the banquet offered to the workers at the completion of a job.⁹

Carlo Sgorlon places the novel’s characters and events in this geographical and cultural context, which is still linked to an ancient peasant tradition, despite modernity and technological progress. Brendano Mac Finnegan, an Irish origin architect, having left the United States because of an unhappy romantic relationship,

arrives in Vallorsaria to carry out some renovation works. There he meets Amos Venchiarutti, the Councillor for Public Works, with whom he starts a close friendship. Amos represents Brendano's opposite: the latter is a man full of life and with the strong will to make the reality that surrounds him better and more sustainable. Amos, on the contrary, is anchored to a pessimistic and fatalistic vision of life. Thus their relationship becomes a confrontation on the meaning of existence and on the role of man in contemporary reality. In Vallorsaria Brendano also finds a new partner, Antonia, a pretty woman, who already has a teenage daughter, Jole. This young girl is the protagonist of an unexpected and astonishing event: after hiding her pregnancy for nine months, she gives birth to a child in her school's bathroom where she studies. Helped by teachers, schoolmates and Brendano, who by chance is in the school building at that moment, Jole soon becomes a caring mother. Together with her little one, called Bindo, and her mother Antonia, she goes to live with Brendano.

Fatma, a young Afghan woman, also comes to live in the small town, to work as a babysitter, and to care for Bindo when Jole is attending classes at school. In this way, a large and original family is formed in the unique and charming house of Brendano, which is known as Bashkir's house, because its previous owner was a foreigner, Vladimir, who came from Russia from the Bashkir ethnic group.

Therefore, many characters revolve around Brendano and become themselves protagonists of different events, which inter-twine in a complex narrative structure. Here I will only report the story of Fatma, a refugee coming from a country tormented by war (Afghanistan). She reaches Vallorsaria, begins working as a loving babysitter, then manages to become a smart and successful entrepreneur. Thanks to Brendano and Amos's help, she starts a factory that produces lavender essence and thus employs many other young people from different countries. Fatma, who had already had to face terrible trials in her native land, suffered sexual violence in Vallorsaria. A young man (Ottavio) deliberately planned and eventually raped her after she had refused him on different occasions. The narration of the event is of great strength and expressive intensity: the author, while not indulging in describing the most brutal aspects, it nevertheless is able to arouse the horror of the rape and the humiliation suffered by the victim (2020: 268). The aggressor is found dead in a forest a few days later: killed by Amos, who wanted to avenge Fatma, with whom he is in love. Amos, however, has a deep sense of guilt for his deed. The murder torments his conscience. He then decides to face an impossible test, an *ordeal*, so that God himself would pronounce a sentence of absolution or final condemnation for the crime he committed. He decides to climb, alone, the most challenging rock face of the Laredis, the mountain overlooking Vallorsaria. In this foolish enterprise, halfway up the dangerous ascent, he can no longer proceed, nor turn back, and he dies alone, hanging on the rock.

In *L'Isola di Brendano*, Carlo Sgorlon has taken up and renewed some typical themes of his novels. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, the architect Brendano, has just left the country where he had lived for a long time (the USA),

the brilliant and well-paid job as a professor of urban planning at the University of Maryland, and his beautiful partner, Dorothy, to move to a remote place (Vallorsaria), to which particular family circumstances bond him. Due to an accident many years earlier, his father, Patricius, had died there, and his mother, Sophie, had decided to remain in the place, finding a job as an English teacher.

Therefore, Brendano's journey is a journey backwards, towards a place that is emotionally dear to him. In a very similar way to the protagonist of *Gli dèi torneranno* (*The Gods will return*), Simone: who at the beginning of the plot leaves Peru. He quits his wandering theatrical activity and his charming woman, Moira, to return to his place of origin, Jalmis, where he meets another woman, Margherita, and where he finds new meaning for his existence. This is a fairly conventional narrative stratagem, which, as observed by Carlo Bo many years ago, is reinterpreted here by Sgorlon, in that the Friulian writer describes a return which is never preceded by a departure. This provides the idea of a new kind of journey whose first leg is immaterial because it only takes place in the protagonist's mind and soul (Bo, 1977).

The large house, where Brendano goes to live, previously belonged (as already noted) to an enigmatic character, Vladimir, who had come from Russia many years earlier and whose nickname was Bashkir. Vladimir used to throw sumptuous and carefree parties, during which he gathered and welcomed many diverse people, so that the house acquired a unique charm:

Tra gli ospiti c'erano i personaggi più colti e bizzarri della città, ma anche persone venute da via, festaioli scapigliati, che arrivavano con automobili che oggi sarebbero parse antidiluviane; qualcuno persino con carrozza e cavalli.

Among the guests there were the most cultured and bizarre characters of the city, but also people who came from afar, unruly partygoers, who arrived with cars that today would seem antediluvian; some even came by carriage and horses (2020: 27).

The theme is the same of *Il trono di legno* (*The Wooden Throne*, perhaps Sgorlon's best-known novel), where the protagonist, Giuliano, lives in a house that once belonged to a mysterious and charming Danish guy, who like Vladimir, had a passion for parties and music. Then as the Dane disappeared, everything vanished as well.

L'isola di Brendano also features other and new themes through which Sgorlon portrays aspects of contemporary reality that he interprets as particularly important. The small town described in the novel, Vallorsaria, is inhabited by people of very different origins, which give life to an original environment, rich in new cultural potential. The mono-ethnicity characterizing the towns and cities described in the novels of his early narrative period (e.g. Jalmis in *Gli dèi torneranno* [*The Gods Will Return*]) no longer exists. The author demonstrates how in contemporary multi-ethnic societies, present now even in small geographically marginal city centers, the encounter between different people can be a vehicle for mutual growth.

Emblematic in this regard is the character of Fatma, who brings with herself a noble and ancient culture, and an extremely difficult life experience:

Ogni tanto la ragazza si lasciava sfuggire qualche parola sull'eterna guerriglia del suo Paese. Spesso in Afganistan i bambini non sapevano cosa fosse veramente la pace. Li tutti avevano il fucile e lo usavano in perpetuo. Quando non accadeva contro gli invasori (prima gli inglesi, poi i russi, adesso gli europei) lo facevano contro le tribù rivali, o il governo centrale.

Occasionally the girl spoke about the never ending guerrilla warfare in her country. Often, in Afghanistan, children did not know what peace really was. Everyone there had a gun and used it continually. When not used against invaders – first the British, then the Russians, now the Europeans – then it was used against the rival tribes or the central government (Sgorlon 2020, p. 77).

This tragic past has strengthened the young woman. In the small town where she is welcomed, she manages to start a successful, productive activity, and gives work to other young people. In this posthumous novel, the author provides a different and new type of woman compared to the ones in his early period novels. Female figures have always had remarkable narrative space in his works (e.g. Isabella in *Regina di Saba* [*Queen of Sheba*]; Flora and Lia in *Il trono di legno* [*The Wooden Throne*]; the Clautana in *Gli dèi torneranno* [*The Gods Will Return*]; Marta in *L'armata dei fiumi perduti* [*The Army of Lost Rivers*]): introducing the male protagonist to the discovery of existence, making the past take on meaning, they can also be the actualization or re-invention of a special ancient social figure, that is, the sacred prostitute, who alleviates loneliness and despair (Marcheschi, 2020). In his last novel, Sgorlon gave the most important female figure, Fatma, an extremely energetic, resolute, and enterprising personality. She is aware of the dramas that women experience in the contemporary world, being without doubt, a representative of modernity. She faces the most painful and difficult trials, but always is able to rise up and become the protagonist and creator of her own existence – in short, the Afghan woman contributes some tracts of relevant and original novelty to Sgorlon's previous female portraits, and demonstrates how in the author's work the role of woman is by no means conceived and understood only by reason of a male-dominated vision of society and history (as argued by Tore Barbina, 1981).

The Friulian writer's last work is also and perhaps above all interesting for its many literary and artistic quotations. These seem to be numerically superior to those found in other previous books. At the very beginning, we find a general reference to the *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot*. This text, which is very famous in Irish culture, is obviously well known to the protagonist. The culminating moment of the saint's journey is thus evoked and summarized:

Brendano aveva raggiunto con i suoi compagni un'isola incantata. Era avvenuto dopo aver attraversato un tratto di mare singolarmente tranquillo, ma invaso da una coltre di

nebbia azzurrina per decine di miglia. Quando la nebbia si era diradata, agli occhi dei navigatori era apparsa un'isola piena di alberi e di arbusti di ogni tipo, di ruscelli e minuscoli laghi, in cui nuotavano anatre e cigni. Il cielo era sempre sereno, attraversato soltanto da nuvole bianche come cotone appena raccolto. Se pioveva, si trattava di piogge che saziavano la sete degli alberi senza far loro alcuna violenza. San Brendano sviluppò con cautela il pensiero che quell'isola fosse l'Aldilà.

Brendano had reached an enchanted island with his companions. This had happened after crossing a stretch of sea, which was peculiarly tranquil but invaded for tens of miles by a blanket of blue fog. When the fog had vanished, an island appeared to the eyes of the navigators. It was full of trees and shrubs of all kinds; it was full of streams and tiny lakes. In them, ducks and swans swam. The sky was always clear, crossed only by clouds white like freshly picked cotton. If it rained, the rains quenched the thirst of the trees but did them no harm. San Brendano thought, cautiously, that that island was the afterworld (2020: 15).

The story of San Brendano, briefly summarized at the beginning of the book, should be understood as a prelude or anticipation of the more complex and articulated story of Brendano Mac Finnegan. In fact, the architect sets out on his journey also to discover a place – Vallorsaria – which is for him like an enchanted island, where he will be able to re-establish and rebuild his existence. Another literary reference connected to the protagonist's Irish nationality is *Fin de partie* by Samuel Beckett:

[Brendano] si era fatto da tempo l'idea che negli irlandesi ci fosse qualcosa di bizzarro e di tenace, che non si accordava in nessun modo con le forme di pensiero e di comportamento della gente di altre nazioni . . . Una riprova di questo l'aveva trovata per esempio in un testo teatrale intitolato *Fin de Partie*, che gli aveva messo dentro un'aspra sensazione di eclissi e di dissoluzione. In quel copione personaggi dai nomi mai sentiti, come Clov e Hamm, un cieco dagli occhi senza pupilla, tutti bianchi come uova sode, pronunciavano parole senza senso, o con un senso che lui non riusciva a capire. Non era stato capace nemmeno di stabilire se il testo raccontasse una storia. Ma restava la sensazione generale, forse ingiustificata, di una fine sterminata, irrimediabile, un sipario che si chiudeva sul mondo e sulla vita . . .

For a long time [Brendano] thought that something bizarre and tenacious was inherent to the character of the Irish. In them something did not agree, in any way, with the forms of thought and behavior of people of other nations . . . He had found evidence of this in a play entitled *Fin de Partie*, which had aroused in him a bitter feeling of eclipse and dissolution. In that script, characters names that had never been heard, such as Clov and Hamm, a blind man whose eyes without pupils were all white as hard-boiled eggs, uttered meaningless words, or with some sense that he could not understand. He was not even able to determine whether the text told a story. But there remained the

general feeling, perhaps unjustified, of an infinite irremediable end, a curtain closing on the world and life... (2020: 16).

The one-act play by Beckett, with all its explicit negativity, is quoted in contrast to the legend of San Brendano. *Fin de Partie* also represents the antithesis of the constructive and proactive spirit that animates the novel's protagonist, architect Brendano. However, the dark existential vision of *Fin de Partie* is also represented and testified in the novel by the figure of Amos, who, as observed, represents, in turn, Brendano's opposite. Therefore Sgorlon has evoked, one after the other, two literary works of very different character and meaning, as if to introduce the two opposite characters in the story – Brendano and Amos – which, though different from each other, nevertheless constitute a strange unity: “Erano molto diversi, ma insieme sembravano una strana unità, come la notte e il giorno, che paiono opposti, ma sono una di seguito all'altra”.¹⁰

So Amos represents the night, that is, the dark side of existence. In order to better outline his character, Sgorlon quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, *The Minister's Black Veil*:

La paura e la notte delle origini si concentravano in modi sacrali e potenti nella figura dell'Assessore ai lavori pubblici, che si era rivelato a lui. Aveva sollevato il velo nero del pastore Hooper di Hawthorne, per un momento, per poi rimmetterlo subito dov'era, e riassumere il suo aspetto quotidiano.

The fear and the night of the origins were concentrated in sacred and powerful ways in the figure of the Assessor [i.e. Amos], as he had shown himself to him. For just a moment, he had lifted the black veil of Hawthorne's pastor Hooper, but then he had immediately put it back where it was, and had resumed its daily appearance (Sgorlon, 2020: 53).

Through the enigmatic image of Hooper's veil as evoked by the author, the figure of the deuteragonist (Amos) takes on greater importance and is connoted in an even more disturbing way. In this, and other similar cases, the literary memory enriches and ennobles the story. It transfers suggestions and resonances coming from the quoted text. Other similar examples could be given. Among them is a significant the passage in which a character who appears only in the last part of the book – Bonifazio – investigates the meaning of existence within himself. He is a stray man, able to live with very little, a globetrotter, and a philosopher for pleasure, which recalls some aspects of Platon Karatayev, the famous character of *War and Peace*. Bonifazio raises a fundamental dilemma:

A volte si trovava di fronte a questioni che gli parevano assolutamente risoltrici. Bastava scegliere. Aut aut. Una di esse fu questa: “Non esser mai, non esser mai. Più nulla, ma meno morte che non esser più”. Aveva trovato questi versi in un poemetto

italiano dell'ultimo Ottocento e li aveva interpretati così: forse era meglio non essere mai esistito, essere sempre rimasto nel nulla, piuttosto che essere vissuto, essere appartenuto alla Realtà, e poi, a un certo punto, morire e tornare così nel Tutto. Era veramente così, o era da preferire l'appartenenza all'Essere eterno, anche se in modi temporanei?

Sometimes, [Bonifazio] was faced with questions that seemed to him absolutely fundamental. Pick your choice. One such question was the following: "Not to be! Not to be! More than nothing, / but less than dead, not ever to be again".¹¹ He had found these verses in an Italian poem of the late nineteenth century and had interpreted them like this: perhaps it would have been better never to have existed, to have always remained in nothingness, rather than to have lived, to have belonged to Reality, and then, at a certain point, to die and thus return to the Whole. Was it really so, or was it preferable to belong to the eternal Being, even if in temporary ways? (Sgorlon, 2020: 249).

The existential dilemma is raised here by the memory of some verses of a poem, whose author's name, Giovanni Pascoli, is omitted in the novel (as if Bonifazio had no memory of it). Pascoli, in *L'ultimo viaggio* (*The Last Voyage*), had imagined the end of Ulysses: the now old Greek hero, after having retraced the itinerary he had already taken when he was young, dies in the waves and is brought to the island of the goddess Calypso. She discovers the body of the man she had loved so much, and utters those tragic and conclusive verses. Again, literary memory is not merely ornamental. Indeed, it is at the origin of Bonifazio's meditation about the meaning of existence. His reflection starts from the recollection of those famous verses by the Italian poet, in which, through the mythological character of Calypso, Pascoli declares preferring not the temporary and finite existence, and the awareness and experience of death, which is proper to the human being, but the complete and total unawareness of existence.

In addition to these explicit quotations, I believe that in *L'isola di Brendano* some story traits convey implicit memories of works particularly dear to Carlo Sgorlon. I also think that, for this second and different case, we can rightly speak of allusive art, in a sense thus clarified by Giorgio Pasquali: "le allusioni non producono l'effetto voluto se non su un lettore che si ricordi chiaramente del testo cui le allusioni stesse si riferiscono".¹² In particular, the references to the work of Elsa Morante, who, as already observed, was among the most appreciated authors by the Friulian novelist, are especially significant. Let's consider the title, *L'isola di Brendano*: it surely recalls (explicitly, as we have seen) the legend of Saint Brendan, but it can also implicitly recall Morante's *L'isola di Arturo* (*Arturo's Island*), a novel that profoundly influenced Sgorlon's narrative approach (especially his most famous novel, *Il trono di legno* [*The Wooden Throne*]). In addition, some fundamental themes of *L'isola di Brendano* are modeled on corresponding themes in the novel *La Storia* (*History: A Novel*), perhaps the most challenging and well-known work by

Elsa Morante.¹³ The violence suffered by Fatma has a counterpart in the violence suffered by Ida, the protagonist of *La Storia*: an event of essential importance in Morante's narrative mechanism, since, as a result of that violence, Ida becomes pregnant (Morante, 2015: 92-93). Therefore, she gives birth to Useppe under anomalous circumstances: as a mature widow and already a mother of a young boy, she would never have expected to become a mother again. Consequently, she keeps her pregnancy hidden from everyone, and the birth of little Useppe is an almost prodigious event:

Il parto non fu lungo, né difficile. Pareva che quella sconosciuta creatura si adoperasse a venire alla luce con le proprie forze, senza costare troppo dolore agli altri. E quando, dato l'ultimo urlo, la partoriente giacque finalmente libera, sommersa dal proprio sudore come da un mare salato, la levatrice annunciò: "un maschillo!"

The birth was not long nor difficult. It seemed that this unknown creature was trying to be born on its own, without causing too much pain to others. And when, with the last scream, the woman in labor finally lay free, submerged in her own sweat like by a salty sea, the midwife announced: "It's a little boy!" (Morante, 2015: 117).

Also in *L'isola di Brendano* the theme of the unexpected and almost prodigious birth constitutes a fundamental point in the narration. In fact, Bindo too is born under extraordinary circumstances: his mother Jole, as a young student, one morning leaves his class to give birth to the child in the school's bathroom:

L'insegnante entrò, seguita da molte ragazze. Jole (...) era seduta sul pavimento e guardava con ansia un bambinello, legato ancora a lei dal cordone ombelicale, collocato su un mucchio di asciugamani, coperto alla buona con un giubbotto di lana.

The teacher entered, followed by many girls. Jole (...) was sitting on the floor, anxiously staring at a baby, still tied to her by the umbilical cord, placed on a pile of towels, covered with a woolen jacket (Sgorlon, 2020: 59).

We can also note that Useppe and Bindo, the children described in the two novels, have a very similar personality. Useppe, as portrayed by Morante in *La Storia*, is so physically fragile, so spiritually gifted: witty and intuitive, he manifests his intelligence greater than his age.¹⁴ In Sgorlon's novel, the little Bindo is endowed with equally special qualities, showing great autonomy and critical ability from an early age (Sgorlon, 2020: 111-113).

There is a third and fundamental theme in Morante's *La Storia* that Sgorlon echoed and reworked in *L'isola di Brendano*: namely the theme of the ordeal. In *La Storia*, the character of Davide Segre, ends his life by taking a lethal dose of drugs as a consequence of an irremediably dark and pessimistic vision of the world, resulting from many and painful personal vicissitudes.¹⁵ This extreme gesture is conceived

by Davide, in the midst of a growing delirium, as a test to be imposed on himself, and from which to emerge either winner, or ultimately defeated:

Nel suo cervello, unica, chi sa perché, ritorna a battere come da un orologio, la parola ORDALIA. Lui si sforza di rammentarne il significato: e si tratta, a quanto gli sembra, di una specie di giudizio divino, rivelato attraverso una prova.

In his brain, who knows why, the single word ORDEAL keeps beating, as coming from a clock. He [Davide] strives to recall its meaning: that word, it seems to him, means a kind of divine judgment, revealed through a trial (Morante, 2015: 581).

In *L'isola di Brendano*, the character of Amos Venchiarutti corresponds to the complex and obscure Davide Segre. Both represent the negative and nihilistic side of the story. And like Davide Segre engages, in the conclusion of Morante's novel, in that extreme and insane solitary trial; so Amos too, at the very end of Sgorlon's book, undertakes one last fatal test. Assailed by guilt for having killed the man who had raped Fatma, he challenges himself to climb a rock face of extremely dangerous difficulty:

La scalata solitaria e pericolosa dell'Assessore era, doveva essere, una forma di espiazione che lo strano individuo aveva inventato per se stesso. Non un suicidio vero e proprio, perché avrebbe anche potuto cavarsela, era invece una specie di giudizio di Dio, un'ordalia, come si diceva nel Medioevo.

The Councilor's solitary and dangerous climb was (supposed to be) a form of atonement that the strange individual had invented for himself. Not a real suicide, because he could have also succeeded; instead that climb was a kind of judgment of God, an ordeal, as it was called in the Middle Ages (Sgorlon, 2020: 280-281).

I believe that the term 'ordeal' used at this point is a fairly open reference to the vicissitude of Davide Segre as narrated in *La Storia*. Carlo Sgorlon therefore seals his artistic career with a direct memory of Elsa Morante's work: a tribute to the Roman writer, but also the recognition of a significant affinity in the ways of conceiving literature and understanding its function in human life.

Notes

1. He won the Campiello award in 1973 with the novel *Il trono di legno* (Sgorlon, 1973; English translation: *The Wooden Throne*. Sgorlon, 1988); he won the Campiello again in 1983 with the novel *La conchiglia di Anataj* (*Anataj's Shell*. Sgorlon, 1983). He won the Strega award in 1985 with the novel *L'armata dei fiumi perduti* (Sgorlon, 1985; English translation: *The Army of the lost Rivers*. Sgorlon, 1998).
2. Beginning (at least) with the twentieth century, a large part of Italian culture favorably accepted and promoted the critical conception that only a socially and politically engaged literature is worthy of consideration. This (as noted by Quondam, 2002: LXXXI) has

equally often prevented the appreciation of works (such as *Il Cortigiano* by Baldassarre Castiglione, or *L'Orlando furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto), which were born from a different sensitivity, and have a “*tocco leggero*” (a ‘light touch’, according to the definition of the same Quondam, 2002: LXXXI). Sgorlon’s narrative also belongs to an artistic conception which has pleasure, not the criticism of social iniquity or political struggle, as its main purpose. For this reason too, in the confrontation with Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sgorlon has been subject to restrictive, if not downright malicious judgments.

3. On this aspect Ghidina (2020) and Marcheschi (2020: 225).
4. About the complex relationship between Sgorlon and Pasolini, see Borghello (2012).
5. Sgorlon (2020: 29): aveva sentito dire che l’orso era tornato in quei boschi spontaneamente, venuto dalla Slovenia. (he had heard that the bear had returned spontaneously to those woods, coming from Slovenia).
6. Sgorlon (2020: 41): alcuni scesero dai treni che andavano in Austria. (some got off the trains going to Austria).
7. Sgorlon (2020: 29 - already mentioned above).
8. Gri (2015: 91): ... The annual invasion of the streets and homes by the monstrous masks was a positive thing, as were the stories about water creatures, *aganis* (sing. *agane*) and wood people, *salvans* (sing. *salvan*). These were borderline creatures, threatening and unsettling, but also masters of important skills like the curdling of the milk, the use of lye and the fermenting of grape must.
9. On toponymy and the use of Friulian words in Sgorlon’s novels, see Ghidina (2006). Now, recently, with particularly attention to the novel *Gli dèi torneranno*, see Marcato (2020).
10. Sgorlon (2020: 55): They were very different, but together they seemed a strange unity, like night and day, which seem opposite, but are one after the other.
11. The English translation of the two lines of Giovanni Pascoli’s poem is taken from Pascoli (2010).
12. Pasquali (1994: 275): allusions do not produce the desired effect except on a reader who clearly remembers the text to which they refer.
13. See, respectively, Morante (2015) and Morante (1977).
14. Morante (2015: 128-129).
15. Davide Segre is perhaps the richest and most complex character, from a human point of view, in Morante’s novel. The multiple meanings of his tormented story have been the subject of a specific research: see Puggioni (2006).

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