

Guido Bartolini. The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self- Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility

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Volume 43, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1100498ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i..v43i2.41160>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (imprimé)

2293-7382 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Passante, R. (2022). Compte rendu de [Guido Bartolini. The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self- Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 43(2), 225–227. <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i..v43i2.41160>

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Guido Bartolini. *The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021. Pp. 263. ISBN 9783030631802.

Guido Bartolini's volume aims to investigate the Italian collective memory of the Axis War, which Italy fought as an ally of Nazi Germany and Japan. This investigation is conducted from a literary point of view, analyzing a very rich *corpus* of novels and short stories.

This study is supported by a systematic and gradual methodological structure. Chapter 1 provides a clear introduction to the subject matter, emphasizing the need not only literary but also historical for a study that focuses on the reasons and methods of a *damnatio memoriae* of a page of dark and difficult history. In fact, the author repeatedly highlights the fact that the Italian collective memory has never really faced the historical responsibilities of war crimes committed by Italians. Bartolini immediately frames the problem from a scientific perspective and in the following chapters he clarifies his methodological approach, which makes use not only of the analysis of the text intended as a rigorous *close reading* but also, and before that, of a solid narratological basis for the choice and subdivision of the texts to be analyzed and a framework of concepts regarding the definitions of collective memory, public memory, and memory vectors.

The texts chosen are not necessarily personal memories or biographical accounts. Some are, some are not. This is explained by the author, based on the studies of Astrid Erll, with the fact that fiction, having the power to reinvent the past and in a certain way reread it, can be a powerful vehicle for collective memory.

Bartolini divides the works chosen into six groups, according to the different degree of proximity to the autobiographical genre, on the basis of the codification of this genre that Philippe Gasparini makes. They range from stories of a mixed genre between historical narration set during the Second World War and pure fiction, to military chronicles, passing through texts "based on strategy of ambiguity" (6). That is, texts in which the events narrated are to a certain extent rooted in the real experience of the narrator. Up to a fourth and fifth group whose stories are getting closer and closer to the concept of autobiography as understood by Gasparini. The analysis of the texts takes place through the recognition of the

figures of repetition: *topoi*, themes, recurring in the corpus taken into consideration. According to Bartolini's thesis, these figures demonstrate how literature has been the vehicle of a collective memory aimed at self-absolution in the process of historical elaboration of the events of the Axis War in Italy.

In chapter 3, having concluded the theoretical-methodological premise, the author begins the analysis of the recurring *topoi* in the corpus under examination. The chapter bears the explanatory title of "Topoi of Innocence." After a theoretical *excursus* on the concept of *topos*, Bartolini analyzes the recurrences in the corpus of those *topoi* that exalt the inability of Italian soldiers to commit cruel actions. Stereotypes such as that of the "Italians good people" who fall in love with Greek prostitutes during the occupation, as in *L'armata s'agapò*, are for Bartolini the vehicle through which the idea of the Italian forced to war is transmitted: the Italian as a victim of Fascism, which is another figure of repetition. Bartolini also analyzes the political causes of this reading of the Axis War; in fact, he underline the socialist interpretation of this historical moment, which in the postwar period, also thanks to the atonement function attributed to the Resistenza, sees soldiers as a "working class" oppressed by the regime.

Another figure of repetition that contributes to the construction of the *topos* of the Italians' innocence is the difference in behaviour between Germans and Italians. The most reprehensible actions in the texts examined are attributed to the German army, while the suffering of the Italian protagonists in the face of the brutality of the ally is often emphasized. But the difference between the two armies also concerns the military organization. The inefficiency with which the Italian army is often portrayed serves the purpose of describing Italians as fundamentally peaceful.

Innocence, victimization of Italian soldiers, the suffering and horror they experienced during the Axis War, are the themes analyzed in chapter 4. The author specifies, through rigorous textual references, how suffering and horror see Italians more often in the role of victims rather than executioners. The pain experienced often generates conversion to pacifism, another frequent theme, or acts of heroism. These themes are dealt with more specifically in chapter 5, since they constitute the masterplot of some texts of the *corpus* and contribute once again to the creation of the idea of the Italian victim of a war that he did not seek, in which he tries to save his conscience.

The sixth chapter of the study analyzes the attempt of some texts to disclose responsibility. The key concept of the chapter is that of "transitive silence." In fact, the violence perpetrated by Italians in the examples considered is often only

alluded to, but the silence that surrounds it serves to underline the violence itself. According to Bartolini, in the corpus of Axis War literature, only four texts correctly represent the violence of Italians. These texts, while taking up some of the *topoi* analyzed at the beginning of the study, overturn them, using them to show power relations between the Italian army and oppressed populations.

The conclusion of the book summarizes the theoretical and methodological characteristics and the results achieved by the study: the analysis of the figures of repetition, conducted at several narratological levels, made it possible to examine the collective memory of the Axis War, centred on the literary *corpus*, which constitutes a vector of its memory. The study is accompanied by a rich bibliography. The appendix lists the main texts of Italian literature on the Axis War.

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