

REVIEW ESSAY

**To Silvio Berlusconi, with irony: Giuseppe Rosato
 narrates Italy's *Normal Anomalies* in the era of the
 Cavaliere**

Dagmar Reichardt

University of Bremen

Giuseppe Rosato (2003) *Normali anomalie, Romanzo*. Biblioteca di Ciminiera. Collana di narrativa diretta da Giovanni Cara (Civitanova Marche, Macerata: Gruppo Editore Domina), pp. 1–60, €9.00.

The Berlusconi phenomenon, from a literary point of view, is a collection of *Normal Anomalies*. With this oxymoron the Abruzzese author Giuseppe Rosato synthesizes in his new novel's title the double meanings of the story he tells us.

After an avalanche of wildly varied journalistic documentation, political essays in scientific reviews and a series of popular books on the subject,¹ Rosato offers us a further occasion for amusement in a literary fantasy whose style is eloquent, meaningful, and dynamic. As in other literary texts with clear allusions to Berlusconiism,² the plot, of which we will present a brief synopsis before analyzing the text in greater depth, makes use of stinging and significant critical equipment.

A 'usurer' (p. 9), the accountant Gelindo Tazi, employee of a trucking firm, wakes up one morning – almost as Gregor Samsa does in Kafka's famous 'Metamorphosis' – not in the form of a cockroach but with a 'big lump' (p. 10) under his chin. The swelling is alarming, and the 'hard mass' (p. 9) on his neck keeps growing. He summons the doctor who can suggest no remedy, but who tells him that strangely enough, that very morning, he has seen a similar case. By a few pages later, in the second chapter, the whole of the Italian peninsula has been stricken: it's an Italian sickness. At the beginning there are 'tens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of individuals' (p. 17). After only nine days, 'fifty million persons' (p. 127) are suffering from an illness which science is unable either to treat or to explain. Diverse social groups are afflicted with malformations: first, usurers, then dealers and recyclers of dirty money, drug traffickers, members of the Camorra. On the sixth day, with a democratic twist, symptoms start appearing in women: female professors and teachers, postal employees at their windows, and even a singular conservative association of charitable ladies, the so-called 'Famigliarine' (p. 53). The masculine world, too,

is gradually infected throughout all social classes. The '*mala cosa*' or '*bad thing*' (p. 42, italics Rosato's) spares only children under the age of 14 or 15. An emergency committee composed of five experts from the Ministry of Health is formed: a theologian, an immunologist, a professor of clinical medicine, a psychologist, and a surgeon whose specialty is 'tumoral forms of all kinds' (p. 61). Explanations are at first attempted, there is talk of guilt and punishment, of 'fate' (p. 68) and of 'physical breakdowns' that might express 'the revelatory clue to internal breakdowns' (p. 80). As public life comes to a halt, the cities are emptied of citizens who, ashamed of their obscene deformities, first assume bizarre disguises, swathing their heads in turbans, affecting a variety of hats, including knitted ski masks; subsequently they don't leave their houses at all. The Pope, strangely enough, 'was traveling during those days, on one of the long and mysterious trips that marked his pontificate' (p. 86).

The only organs of communication and information that remain are radio stations, newspapers, and, most of all, television. But soon gross pustules appear on the faces of pretty female announcers (the '*signorine buonasera*') and television news anchors, and the public has to give up live broadcasts and be fed images from stock footage (p. 85), growing increasingly dependent on radio and the internet as the only sources of information. Air and train traffic is reduced to a minimum; Italy remains isolated while slowly it becomes apparent that the illness strikes only Italian citizens and is non-existent in the rest of the global population. The sixteenth chapter refers to an interdisciplinary 'great debate' on the radio, 'with nothing available to use but words' (p. 100). With the help of intervention by 'the cream of our intelligence' and the participation of the public by telephone, the central question, "'Why Italy?'" is raised (p. 101), but the ensuing reflections remain without scientific, political, or even religious answers. The illogical progress of this absurd situation leads only to heretical and autoironic speculations: 'Has God gone on vacation? Or has he – unheard of! – become an accomplice in the devil's work?' (p. 103). Esoteric, millennial, end-of-the-world suggestions abound. There are those who believe that the source of the problem is certain unusual sunspots, perceptible only from the Italian national territory.

Finally, on the evening of the eighth day, 'the President of the Council of Ministers' appears on television screens from Palazzo Chigi. 'As usual smiling a smile that might be said to be lightly ironic [. . .], free and without stain, neither on his face or on any other part of his body' (p. 115), the President launches an appeal, urging all Italians to return to their work and to normal activities. Even on the ninth day only a few citizens are seen outside, the few brave ones have 'large bandages on their faces, or exaggeratedly large headgear, or big shawls that cover head and shoulders' (p. 121). A union and an association 'named "those with little injuries"' (p. 133) are organized: corporate Italy is still standing, while radio broadcasts incessantly discuss the state of emergency. A 'famous literary historian' (p. 125), an 'illustrious Italian specialist' in Bologna (is it Umberto Eco?), discusses the 'thesis of correlation' (p. 124) – a kind of

Dantean *contrapasso*, wherein punishment reflects the sin – and thus the moral dimension of the problem.

On the tenth day, finally, miraculously, the accountant Gelindo Tazi awakens – and the lump has disappeared! Crowds rush into the streets and piazzas, where tricolor flags appear. Headlines and television announce the ‘incredible new reality’: the ‘terror’ (p. 142) and the illness have been ended simultaneously, ‘in un sol colpo’, with a single blow (p. 141). The Pope, who has returned without warning, appears at the historic window at St. Peter’s. The strange sunspots go back where they belong, ‘Palazzo Chigi’ presents them as the solution of the inexplicable occurrences. And ‘television regains its central place’ (p. 145). In short: ‘the extraordinary anomaly can be considered henceforth an episode that is closed’ (p. 144). The ‘Head of Government’ (p. 150), supported by scientifically excogitated explanations, declares the sun and its aforementioned spots to have been responsible for this tragic episode of the recent past. The populace, relieved and encouraged by television and public opinion, believes him. Everything returns to normal, as though nothing had happened: airplanes take off, trains leave, tourists come back, and no one any longer bothers to look for explanations of the ‘strange Italian story’ (p. 152). Rosato comments laconically at the end of the last chapter that, after all, the entire ‘history of the world and mankind’ is full of unanswered questions and ‘numberless mysteries’ like the one he has just told us. ‘And now’, he concludes, ‘no one, no one at all, remembers these events: it’s as though this story might have been completely invented’ (p. 152).

The obvious political parable that Giuseppe Rosato – journalist for Italian radio and television and various periodicals, skilled writer and poet, born in 1932 at Lanciano where he still lives – is a provocative satire about today’s Italy, rich in ideas and possible projects for the future. The implied narrator criticizes generalized hypocrisy, indirectly inviting the reader to safeguard himself from ‘tricks of the falsity of fiction’ (p. 112) as he poetically says.⁵ His book unmasks the various components of the nullity that exists in the world of politics, and demonstrates the abnormality of narcissistic excess, especially in men. Indeed, the ‘horrid spur’ (p. 47) that soon adorns the face or breast of schoolmistresses and woman professors clearly has a phallic morphology. The fact that ‘no foreign citizen visiting in Italy was stricken with the illness’ (p. 123) suggests that the mysterious malady of the flesh not only ‘must derive from those of the spirit’, as Roberto Pazzi comments on the back cover of *Normali anomalie*, but that beyond the allusions to the Cavaliere and to Berlusconi in general, Rosato is addressing questions that go beyond the current state of Italian politics. The abstract political metaphor of *Normali anomalie* returns to a quest for identity that involves the whole country, and especially the whole population, and this did not begin only yesterday. Italy and the Italians unfortunately know all too well that they have been dominated by situations that are difficult for them to control. During centuries and centuries of foreign domination, a mentality was created, one that Rosato succeeds in portraying to

perfection: certainly, a disaster is a terrible thing, but it also serves to unite Italians in their suffering. They first react ‘normally’: in the case of the situation in the novel, they huddle inside their houses. Then they nakedly exhibit their dependence on television, which however they are soon forced to renounce. Without the drug of television, the Italians remain inert, practically paralyzed. Nothing more happens: everything stops. Finally, once everything is resolved, hypocritically, they return to ‘normalcy’. But this normalcy, as the author demonstrates, is not normal. Indeed, it is completely anomalous. This message from the author contains a final appeal: civil courage has to be lived. In order to have convictions, however, one must first think and reflect. ‘Readymade’ opinions – even if propagated by the Head of Government or by any other authority – are nothing other than a big lie. Instead of accepting them without any criticism and swallowing them thoughtlessly, one must involve oneself and act.

With *Normali anomalie* Rosato offers us *littérature engagé* modeled on both Dante and Ionesco, simultaneously serious and light. The greatest merit of this book is surely that it succeeds in reproducing in literary images the public opinions that characterize the illogical and paradoxical situations of the Italians under the Berlusconi government: nobody really believes him, but nonetheless they vote for him. Reading, there appears before the reader’s eyes a world that is contradictory, mad, topsy-turvy. *Normali anomalie* also makes reference to the traditional literary discussion of madness,⁴ which lies so near normality and daily life in the Berlusconi era.

Rosato apparently is convinced of the transitory nature of this historical phase, which he obviously judges to be intense but of brief duration. The system and the concrete figure of Berlusconi, President of the Council, are of so little importance, so insignificant and lacking in enduring consequences that Rosato never mentions Berlusconi’s name in any part of the text. Furthermore, he draws from the phenomenon another aspect, one that is enigmatic and poetic. He invents an inexplicable malady that assaults the population but does not kill it. Considering the fact that children remain ‘safe and sound’ (p. 88) because obviously they cannot have a mature political understanding, the central question that Rosato poses to himself (and us) is the following: in what does the social and political responsibility of the adult citizen of the Italian *televocracy* consist? How should one react to the feeling of being treated like a fool by the government in power? How does one confront a *force majeure* that has been brought about by oneself? Rosato lists the possibilities: one can either be ashamed or try to hide the truth. If that doesn’t work, hold on until the problem resolves itself. And finally: forget about it. This ‘Italian response’ recalls the tone of Roberto Benigni’s film, *Life is Beautiful*. At the end of Rosato’s novel, the nightmare over, retrospectively it all could have been a bad dream, an illusion almost as in Molière’s *Malade imaginaire* (1673). Only a certain lightness of soul can make the heavy and ambivalent literary topos of illness tolerable.

The image of the epidemic that produces hideous (but, from a medical point of view, innocuous) buboes, even contains a potent aesthetic charge: there is an undeniable connotation of the grotesque and fantastic. Thus, Rosato links himself to a rich tradition that has its origins in English or Anglo-Irish literature and that evokes the eighteenth-century allegories of Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Twentieth-century Italian writers of fantasy include Pirandello, Bontempelli, Landolfi, Calvino, Bonaviri, and Buzzati, to cite only a very few names. The fantasy genre in Italy has always been neglected, undervalued, even ignored and degraded – very different from its situation in Germany, France, Russia, England, or the United States. It is therefore to be hoped that Rosato's book may contribute to a better understanding of this literary tradition that Roberto Pazzi characterizes as 'the junior branch of our country's literature, where realism holds the field'.⁵

On the other hand, the subtle allegory of physical deformities opens a vast intertextual dimension. Pazzi recalls Saramago's *Cecità (Blindness)*, while Giacomo d'Angelo evokes the work of George Orwell as he confesses to the reader 'that Giuseppe Rosato's prickly book, undermining the monsters of the sleep of reason, rushed over me like a deep breath of oxygen'.⁶ I would add that beyond Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1959–60), the function of the bubonic plague in *Normali anomalie* includes a clear reference to Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The only Italians not afflicted by the illness are fourteen – 'Fourteen saints?' (p. 120, italics Rosato's), the narrator asks ironically; eight men and six women. Even though the numbers are not identical, this group nonetheless recalls Boccaccio's *brigata*, composed of seven women and three men who manage to save themselves from the epidemic. Like Boccaccio, Rosato describes an arc of ten days, and, as in the *Decameron*, the narrator of *Normali anomalie* explicitly recounts the individual days, emphasizing the miraculous ending which comes 'suddenly, at the opening of that amazing morning of the tenth day' (p. 141).

But counting the days has also a biblical connotation,⁷ and here we touch upon a weak point of *Normali anomalie*. It is not that the question of morality or amorality of the happenings is to be considered a specifically Italian problem. One must note, however, that the insistence of the Christian nature of the events (in relation to the contagion among women, the plot begins emphasizing terms such as 'scourge' and 'biblical plagues' from the eighth chapter until Berlusconi's television appearance in the sixteenth chapter) provokes a sharp drop in tension foreshadowed in the early chapters. It is natural, understandable, and to some degree also desirable to take as a theme the religious aspect of the plague which had 'flung ridicule upon Catholic Italy' (p. 103), 'seat of the Papacy, Italy, cradle of Catholicism' (p. 105). But Rosato's exaggerated dilatoriness about how to evaluate the disaster within a Christian perspective – 'devil's work' (p. 103) or 'punishment from God' (p. 111)? – dawdling through at least nine long chapters, from the point of view of dramaturgy really does nothing to enhance the architecture of a tale constructed in an incontrovertible manner, full of potential and suspense.

In conclusion, apart from this reservation about structure, one should not be surprised that, considering the critical parallels that the novel draws, not only with the present Berlusconi government but also with the Fascist period,⁸ *Normali anomalie* was published by a small press that collaborates with the independent 'Association of Poets of Ciminiera' in Macerata. This does not detract from the fact that Italian literature had been waiting years for a novel like this, and that Rosato writes with stylistic bravura that which Italian intelligence has been secretly thinking for some time. He has succeeded in writing not only a bitter parody of the condition of Italy today, but also he has conveyed his message through a series of concrete and unforgettable images that have a genuinely Italian flavor: they especially express one of the Italian qualities *par excellence*: a sense of humor and the 'freedom to laugh',⁹ in the words of Giacomo D'Angelo. Of course, not even this manages really to surprise those who are familiar with Giuseppe Rosato's activities as a cartoonist. Under the pseudonym of 'Ros', he also transforms a bitter and in a certain sense pitiless vision of reality into the figures he draws. All this, however, with a style that is never merely aggressive, mean, or downright sadistic, but rather ironic, detached, concealing an interior attitude that is disenchanted and not easily corrupted, happy, pleasant, and profoundly intelligent.

Notes

- 1 The recent titles in Italy include Poli (2001), Bocca (2002) (who, unlike Rosato, suggests that the Berlusconi phenomenon may be the Italian symptom of a worldwide malady), Ginsborg (2003), Rusconi (2003), Travaglio (2003), Barbacetto (2004) and Tuccari (2004). In his introduction (cf. Tuccari 2004: v–vii) Tuccari diagnoses three 'anomalies' of the 'Italian system': (1) the end of the 'first Republic' in the period of 1991–5 (2004: v), (2) the Berlusconi government, and (3) opposition to the Berlusconi government.
- 2 In the context, for example, tales by Stefano Benni (2002) and Andrea Camilleri (2000) have been published. Other texts, perhaps less literary in mode and with a more clearly political message, appeared in Scateni and Sebaste (2002) and were translated into German, enriched by various articles by Italian writers that had appeared in supplements to *Le Monde* and *L'Unita* on the occasion of the opening of the Salon du livre in Paris (central theme: Italy) on 24 March 2002.
- 3 The theme of deception or trickery is a subject dear to Rosato, who has already pursued it in his volume of poetry entitled *L'inganno della luce* [*A Trick of the Light*] (2002), in which the author, according to Esposito, would seem to express a traditional 'pessimism [...] with a Christian imprint' (cf. Esposito 2002).
- 4 I think of the famous humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, of Dostoyevsky's *Idiot*, of psychology in twentieth-century literature, and of such recent Italian works as Cavazzoni (1994), Bonaviri and Bonaviri (1999), or Ramondino (2000).
- 5 Jacket blurb for the novel under discussion (Rosato 2003).
- 6 D'Angelo (2003).
- 7 Rosato speaks with decidedly biblical allusion of the 'seventh day' (which was not a Sunday but a Friday) (Rosato 2003: 89).

- 8 'It really seemed as if it were the eighth of September 1943 [. . .]' (Rosato 2003: 92) – academic criticism in Germany has been notably sensitive to this historic analogy; cf., for example, Petersen (1994), Renner (1994), Feldbauer (2002) and Rusconi (2002).
- 9 D'Angelo (2003).

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