



## *Am I doing the right thing?*

Maurizio Ascari

There are stories that need to be told and start haunting the author, who becomes obsessed with them. Writing becomes a shamanic ritual, an out-of-body experience. Things are hazy, but suddenly one's imagination is gripped by powerful forces. The drive to write is compelling. This is how I felt when I entered a café, on my way to a meeting or to my office, and spent ten minutes writing on every bit of paper I could find to channel the flux of images and sounds, of thoughts and emotions rising within me.

To write this book I shifted between two interlacing levels of consciousness. On the one hand, a full immersion into the life of my characters. This produced an emotionally surcharged text, an excess of words and emphasis. On the other, a time-consuming, self-critical activity of revising and polishing, which transformed the initial drive into a structure, aiming at narrative and symbolic coherency, stylistic dryness and historical accuracy. I hoped my book would result in a holistic experience, involving readers in a cognitive and emotional journey. I needed readers to *feel* together with my characters.

The result is *Faded Letters*, a novel that is rooted in real facts, notably, tracing the fate of Antonio Ascari, who was deported to Germany in 1944 as a forced labourer and died in Lublin in 1945, while fleeing from Germany with other Italian prisoners.

This creative process was far from linear. I would be misrepresenting this experience if I described it as a free flow, because for three years I was actually caught in a tension between the overpowering need to tell – both what I already knew and what I did not know yet, as if these were the two sides of the same coin – and a special kind of fear.

*Am I doing the right thing?* This is what echoed in my mind right from the beginning. My main source of anxiety was not my family's reactions, for they were quite supportive, but the legitimacy of what I was attempting. My creative itinerary was fraught with doubt and self-questioning. To

render this inner debate, the result of which is *Faded Letters*, I will structure these pages around a series of keywords.<sup>1</sup>

**Forced labour.** My uncle Antonio was neither a hero of Anti-Fascism nor a victim of racial persecution. I was afraid that calling attention to his fate – and implicitly the fate of those who, like him, had been deported to Germany mainly to provide the Nazi regime with a labour force – might deflect it from other, more inhumane, forms of persecution. Yet, I also realised that forced labour needs to be reassessed in the light of the recent developments in globalisation, when the world risks being governed by a new overarching principle – the laws of economy, which nobody dares question. The deportation of forced labourers – ‘Hitler’s slaves’ – was aimed to guarantee the functioning of the German war economy. After being abducted and thrown into Germany’s ‘concentrationary universe’, these human beings became cogs in the productive machine.

Forced labour was a complex phenomenon, intersecting with various forms of persecution (either identity-based, as in the case of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, or political, as in the case of opponents) and with the quickly changing political atlas of Europe. We should not forget that after 8th September 1943 – when the armistice General Badoglio had signed with the Allied forces a few days before was made public – the movement of forced labourers from Italy to Germany intensified dramatically. Nor should we forget that the regime used forced labourers to reinforce the Germans’ perception of the Aryan race as superior, thus boosting their morale during the difficult time of war. As clarified by the catalogue of the exhibition on *Forced Labor in Hitler’s Germany* that opened at the Jewish Museum in Berlin in September 2010:

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Twenty million people – from almost every country in Europe – carried out forced labor for Nazi Germany in the German Reich as well as in the countries occupied or controlled by the Germans. The work extorted from these people was indispensable for the German war effort and moreover helped to ensure the living standards of the German population during the war years. The German ‘master race’ granted itself the right to exploit those it had subjugated and members of allegedly ‘inferior races’ with all its ruthlessness.<sup>2</sup>

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Millions and millions of people were deported to Germany as forced labourers. Many of them however, never came home. Also because many of them were systematically underfed and consequently died of starvation or illness.

While I continued to debate in my mind, fighting my misgivings, it was the work of historians – it was books such as this catalogue – which confirmed me in my intentions, making me feel that what I was doing

was after all legitimate. To render fully the background of this adventure, however, I need to go back in time and describe the cultural humus in which *Faded Letters* is rooted.

**Responsibility.** I am a university teacher. I have been studying with growing passion the relation between contemporary novels and past collective traumas, first of all the Holocaust. When literature and testimony merge, our emotions as well as our intellect are solicited. Words translate into ethical statements and call into question both the author's and the readers' ethical positioning. Our psyche becomes inhabited by powerful energies which we cannot fully control. We feel we are treading on sacred ground.

In October 2010 I was adding the finishing touches to a critical text entitled *Literature of the Global Age* (2011), which discusses what I define as 'narratives of responsibility', texts ranging from Magda Szabó's *The Door* (1987) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) to postmemory novels<sup>3</sup> such as W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002). These literary works appear to me as a reaction to the self-referential character of Postmodernism. They are an attempt to tackle reality and ethical issues, responding to the past not according to the twin modes of nostalgia (pastiche) and irony (parody), but in relation to the present:

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We tend to associate responsibility with care, while the relation between responsibility, memory and guilt—both one's own guilt and somebody else's—is more complex, for what action can atone for evil? In the narratives that we will discuss, words are offered as a ritual of purification, as a meditation on the errors of the past that triggers a process of personal development.<sup>4</sup>

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Narratives of responsibility often take the form of memoirs or border on the memoir. They are rooted in life and aim to impact on life. Their defining element is their *performative* dimension, since author and readers are 'called to respond—both cognitively and emotionally—to their ethical and aesthetic complexity.'<sup>5</sup>

I was imbued with these ideas when I was asked to give a talk on history in contemporary novels. I admit with some embarrassment that only at that time did I find the courage to read two texts of which I had always been afraid: Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1991) and Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*, 1947). Levi's novel was a revelation, a punch in the stomach.

All of a sudden, I felt the need to know more about Uncle Antonio's fate and I contacted the Istituto Storico della Resistenza (Institute for

the History of the Resistance) in Novara, the town where he had lived. With extreme kindness, Mauro Begozzi, Institute Director at the time, offered to do some research in the archives and also advised me to consult a few historical works. Unfortunately, no traces of Antonio could be found. Begozzi explained that there are no complete lists of the Italians who were deported to Germany during World War Two. Researchers are striving to assemble precise data and life histories. I realised that a story was asking to be told and I started reading.

The desire to write this book was like an illness. Perhaps the effort to live – or re-live – all this was so demanding that I had no energy left to live my real life. During those days I read and wrote from morning until night, thanks to the silent complicity of my wife, who left me in this state of trance without questioning what I was doing.

My account of this strange experience, however, would not be complete if I refrained from mentioning that – on a more private level – it was also rooted in what had happened that year in my family. A first event had badly affected us all and a second event had created a rift. The unity of the family was in danger and while we struggled to recompose the fragments and face a difficult time, my pent-up emotions found this outlet. I would not simply tell the story of Antonio, but the story of an entire family. Although this made me feel even worse in a way, since Antonio's deportation was still a legitimate subject, compared with the experiences other members of the family had gone through in those years. My mother came from the Friuli region, in the North-East of Italy, next to the border with Yugoslavia. She had been abducted by Resistance fighters and somebody had attempted to rape her. In the end she had returned home. Her aunt was one of the many victims of the so-called *foibe*, the sinkholes that can be found in that region and into which people were thrown.

We had been spared knowledge of these things when we were young. Memories had been silenced. We could only detect clues to a painful past. My mother, for instance, categorically refused to drink water in a glass where she had drunk red wine. She was horrified at the idea. Only when she grew old did she tell us of the attempted rape, and only while I was writing the book did I know that her aunt had died in a foiba after her husband had disappeared.

**Knowing and not knowing.** My mother's knot of unappeased memories combined in my mind with the story of my uncle Antonio, creating a tension. Diverging experiences of the war years had to interweave in my book. By touching on potentially controversial issues, I aimed to foster understanding and effect reconciliation rather than trigger divisive mechanisms. I was firm in my condemnation of Fascist ideology, but to be

true to my perception of those years I had to revive them eschewing any stereotypes. My story had to be told avoiding a retrospective gaze. Looking at the past with full knowledge of its developments is an easy task. We know what the results of certain actions were, we know what would be later regarded as morally acceptable or unacceptable, we know what choices were right and what were wrong.

That is not how we live. That is not how we experience history in the making, which could rather be described as a big question mark. That is why people make mistakes. Ethics imply making choices in a present that is hazy, starting from our own judgments rather than from 'truths' and values that are universally accepted. This is particularly true when you live in a totalitarian state rather than in a democracy. As Zygmunt Bauman claims in relation to Nazi-Fascism, 'Clearly, then, moral acts meant *breaching* rather than *following* the socially designed and monitored norms.'<sup>6</sup>

I wanted to render the complexity of the years in which Italy was drifting towards totalitarianism and of the years in which the Fascist regime fully asserted its grip on the population, finally involving the country in a disastrous war. Ideally, my book would enable the reader to understand how a middle class family failed to react to that drift and was subsequently affected by the terrible consequences of Fascist politics, with its emphasis on dogma, intolerance, imperial expansion and the enemy.

**Propaganda and anti-semitism.** A totalitarian regime shapes the lives of citizens, starting from their youth. Conforming to an ideological standard, it engenders loyalty also by exerting forms of aesthetic fascination. Propaganda manipulates people's thoughts and emotions, progressively reducing the ideological and ethical alternatives, the lifestyles, the private space (as traditionally marked by individual freedom). It labels what is different as inferior and deviant, fostering a rhetoric at the core of which is the enemy – be it internal or external.

To eliminate Jews from the Fascist State, it was first necessary to sever the network of relations that connected them to the rest of society. In November 1938 the Fascist regime approved a set of racial laws which confined Jews to a marginal territory within society, setting the ground for their disappearance. Jewish children were excluded from schools; adults were prevented from exerting their professions freely or from participating in public life.

In an attempt to restore, at least symbolically, the ties and connections that Fascism aimed to dissolve, in my narrative a Jewish friend is close to Antonio in his last few days. I believe in the cathartic power of words, in their therapeutic dimension, in words as an event. The chapter in which

Antonio dies could be described as a ritual, an attempt to work through distant bereavement that relies on reciprocal recognition between Jews and non-Jews. This mutual recognition is meant to *symbolise*, that is to say reconnect, what the regime had diabolically divided.

In reality, in the first version of my novel, the presence of Jewish people was much more pervasive. The text aimed to demonstrate the proximity between Jewish and non-Jewish characters by intertwining the life history of Antonio with that of Guido Horn D'Arturo, a historical figure. Born in Trieste in 1879, then under Austrian rule, Guido Horn chose to fight on the side of Italy during World War One and even changed his family name, adding D'Arturo to it. He was someone who believed in Italy as the product of the Risorgimento movement. In the aftermath of the conflict Guido – who was an astronomer – obtained a post at the University of Bologna and in 1936 he even created an observatory in Loiano, the small town in the Apennines where Antonio had grown up. The Horn archives still include letters testifying to the fact that while the observatory was under construction Horn lodged in the hotel that belonged to Antonio's family.

Troubles began for Horn in 1938, when because of the racial laws he was forced to abandon his post. In the original version of my novel I followed Guido in his ups and downs, through his successes and defeats, until after the war he came back to his observatory. I meant to use the sense of sight as a symbol of rationality and distance from events. Like Bepi, the painter who still features in the novel, Guido, being an astronomer, acquired the role of a detached but also empathic observer.

Yet, when I started showing my text to friends, colleagues and publishers, this multifaceted approach to history was generally deemed distracting, for it detracted interest from the protagonist, dispersing the readers' energy into a thousand rivulets. As a result I decided to limit the scope of the book to the life history of Antonio and of his family.

What I did not sacrifice, however, was the symbolic dimension of *Faded Letters*. The book does not simply aim to investigate the fate of a single person. It is a meditation on the human condition at large, on our inescapable confrontation with finitude, on our need to overcome the boundaries that separate us from others. It is also a meditation on loss and healing, on the intimate – endlessly tragic but also heartrendingly beautiful – relation between death and life. To render this I had to go beyond words. Music came to my rescue.

**Music and water.** Music features in the novel with two intended aims. On the one hand, it enhances its sensory dimension. I wanted readers to see, listen, smell. I wanted the book to be alive. To recreate a certain

period in history, the text had to appeal to our cultural memory. Popular songs easily evoke the ambience of a certain time. In the original version, each chapter was introduced by some lyrics from either a love song, a pro-regime jingle or a partisan song that was thematically and chronologically appropriate, but I had to leave these out when I rewrote the book in English, aiming it at an international audience, as I had to leave out a different kind of music – the dialect many characters spoke.

Despite these excisions, music still resounds within the volume, notably the music of the regime, which is made up of triumphal songs and slogans, such as *Creedere. Obbedire. Combattere*. BELIEVE. OBEY. FIGHT. This music, like the sirens' song, seduces you, depriving you of your conscience, of your individual responsibility, and ultimately leads to *death*. Suffice it to think of the Fascist's manipulative rhetoric of self-sacrifice in the name of the country, and of the related rhetorical construction of the enemy, which was encapsulated in the Fascist motto, *Many enemies, much honour*.

While propaganda addresses its jingles to the masses in order to encourage conformist behaviour, another kind of music resonates within the pages of the book – an inner music which marks each individual as unique. What happens to this music when external circumstances reduce the space of individual agency? War and incarceration bring humans back to an animal state, reducing them to their primary needs, but humans resist privations, oppression and suffering. They resurrect in empathy. They flee from prisons thanks to their imagination.

To investigate this mysterious energy I chose Chopin's 'Raindrop Prelude' (Op. 28, No. 15). Legend has it that Chopin was inspired to write this after dreaming of drowning and that a raindrop kept falling on his chest. This raindrop entered my story. I read it as the musical rendering of a psychic core which is both delicate and tenacious, which vibrates when humans come into contact and which some may call *soul*. The music of the soul.

Chopin's prelude is pregnant with meaning right from its title. The impalpable enchantment of music coalesces with the liquid dimension of water, a powerful and versatile symbol, which becomes a leitmotiv in *Faded Letters*, often in conjunction with tears. I will not explore the scenes in which Antonio and Pina – having been separated by war – experience a feeling of intimate fusion thanks to the 'Raindrop Prelude', but I will hint at a couple of other passages.

The motif of water as a life-giving element underlies the climactic scene in which Ester accompanies her younger cousins to recognise the body of their mother, which had been thrown into a sinkhole. While they walk up the mountain, a cloud can be seen in the distance:

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They followed the path between the rocks and the grass, which was still brown and dry up there. When Ester looked up, she saw a V-shaped stone valley and behind it the sky. Against the intense, almost electric blue, a white and light grey cloud, as neat as if it had been painted, was swollen with new life. The mountain was still asleep, but the sky announced the incipient spring.<sup>7</sup>

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These lines hint at the cyclic renewal of life that is implicit in nature. The V-shaped valley is a female symbol, and the cloud stands for fecundity. After the macabre – but necessary – ritual has been performed and Ester's two cousins help to carry the body of their mother on their shoulders along the path, Ester – who is thinking of her own abduction and in a way projects herself onto the dead woman – is grasped by a sudden desire for motherhood. Faced with death, she instinctively clings to life:

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She saw her aunt coming up the path, but she was thinking of a younger woman, who had gone up another path, and from the mountain had come back alive. Large drops began to fall from the grey sky. She heard them hit the wooden coffin. They went down her face like tears, but she was not crying. Suddenly she thought of Giulio and said to herself: I want a baby.<sup>8</sup>

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As we can see, rain and tears mingle in this scene – as in others – and deconstruct the binary opposition between life and death, showing them as complementary.

Elsewhere I have used water to render the relation between the individual human being and wholeness, that is the flux of things as symbolised by a stream. This trope marks the scenes that depict Bepi while intent at painting his favourite subject:

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Bepi returned to his stream, where the water touched the blue of the sky, the bright green of the leaves. That stream which was always the same and always different. Water. The origin of life. The image of life with its relentless flow. ... He saw himself, after his death, flying to the places he loved, lighter and happier than he now was, at one with the wind, with water, playing among the rocks, among the foliage. He saw himself as liquid. Without bones. Without form. At one with all forms. One in one.<sup>9</sup>

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In Bepi's eyes, by depriving human beings of their individuality, death actually restores their unity with the absolute. Paradoxically, death – taking leave of one's consciousness and body – comes to coincide not with finitude, but with the end of finitude itself, triggering an experience of fusion akin to Freud's *oceanic feeling*.



Individuals, humanity, nature. My book had to investigate all these dimensions, together with the urge for destruction, the dehumanisation of the enemy, hatred, indifference, but also love and compassion. In the space of a book there was room for contrasting attitudes, room to depict that jumble of conflicting emotions and passions that we call life.

**Complexity.** I wanted to write a book about complexity. Perhaps because of the many books I had read lately about the need for a holistic approach to life, perhaps because of my inborn frame of mind, perhaps because of my Jamesian literary ‘upbringing’. As Henry James wrote in one of his Prefaces, ‘Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.’<sup>10</sup> Right from the beginning, my story had an omnivorous appetite. It started from a feeling of interrelatedness which these reflections by anarchist thinker Errico Malatesta (1853–1932) aptly convey:

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The well-being, the freedom, the future of a mountaineer who is lost in the gorges of the Apennines depend not only on the state of well-being or poverty in which the inhabitants of his village find themselves, depend not only on the general conditions of the Italian people, but depend also on the conditions of workers in America or in Australia, on the discovery that is made by a Swedish scientist, on the moral and the material conditions of the Chinese, on war or peace in Africa. Briefly, they depend on all the huge and small circumstances that in every part of the world act upon a single human being.<sup>11</sup>

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I came across these words while I was doing research for the book and I felt that they encapsulated what I wanted to achieve. This idea of total interdependence inspired me to conceive the book as a large fresco in the attempt to render the complexity of an epoch. Thus, in the early versions the story of Antonio and of his family intertwined with other narrative threads, ranging from the history of Fascist Italy – including the progressive grip the Fascist State had on the education system so as to mould future party members – to the international political scenario.

The more I researched into those years, the more paths and vistas opened before me, and I actually strove to create a network, in the belief that each of the phenomena and personal stories I was relating shed light on the other aspects of this multifaceted reality. This attempt was probably over-ambitious, for the impact it had on my first readers was negative, as previously hinted. I realised that I was asking too much, so I renounced some aspects of my narrative, but I retained others.

**Fragmentation.** I was approaching a distant past from the present, starting from scattered clues, traces that gestured towards a reality which I would never be able to grasp in its essence. While this contributed to the fascination of my quest, it was also a source of misgiving. To reconstruct the life stories of Antonio and of his family, I had started from a bunch of documents and oral memories which I had collected in the course of years. Then my 90-year-old mother put at my disposal the proverbial bundle of letters. These were my father's letters to her, which she had jealously kept in a straw box, while she kept telling us that they were all very similar and insinuated – with a mixture of old-age pessimism and coquetterie – that she still wondered whether my father had really loved her. None of her children had ever dared open the box.

When I began to investigate my family's past I knew that certain things could not be told, and I have not told them. Yet so many things needed to be told and this need was impellent, although the task demanded so much energy and I did not feel up to it. And then, once again, I began to wonder: *Am I doing the right thing?*

To write this book, I had to conduct an ongoing negotiation between my rationality and that magmatic inner dimension which is deep down inside each of us. On the one hand, I kept doing research, while on the other I had to perform rituals, hoping that they would provide me with answers and show me the way. One of these rituals is actually described at the beginning of the novel:

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*Last night I wrote a sentence on a piece of paper. I filled the sink with water. I dipped the paper in the water and went to sleep. This morning the paper was there but the sentence was gone. Only faded letters, blanks. The soaking wet paper broke up as soon as I tried to lift it. Thus began this book. Only faded letters, blanks. A story that had been written in a distant past needed to be rewritten. And in the meantime what I held in my hands was that drowned, fragile paper, a page that had been deleted.<sup>12</sup>*

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The book originated from fragmentation, fadedness, blurredness and I wanted its form to incorporate this epistemic condition. I wanted it to be a dialogue with silence. I wanted its episodes to be like sketches which shed light on a fragment of life while floating in indeterminacy. The years I had spent studying and translating Henry James, William Faulkner and Katherine Mansfield, had taught me to relish impressionist techniques, which simultaneously titillate and frustrate the reader's desire to know, creating a hermeneutic tension.

I tried to obtain this effect by structuring the text as a series of entries, each marked by a date and place name. I would depict single days, brief scenes, leaving readers the task to connect them, to fill the blanks with

their own imagination. In doing this I had in mind what Modernist writers like Mansfield, Woolf and Joyce respectively called ‘blazing moment’, ‘moment of being’ and ‘epiphany’. A moment of intensified awareness, of fusion with the surrounding environment – notably with nature – or conversely a moment in which a character is on the brink of a painful awareness that he/she refrains from acknowledging. The effects I wanted to achieve in order to render the story of my family and of an epoch mingled with my literary background, of which I could not despoil myself since this is part of my imaginative horizon.

**Facts and fiction.** To tell this story I needed to be simultaneously in it and out of it. I needed to infuse my characters with life without betraying their individuality, sensing their personality through the traces they had left, but to fill the blanks I also needed to borrow from my own life or from the life of people who had shared their fate, who had gone through the multifarious experiences of the 1940s. I was helped by the many testimonies of forced labourers which I found on the internet,<sup>13</sup> but also by books and documentaries. To render the plight of American soldiers fighting along the Gothic line, in the Italian Apennines, I relied on the memoirs of GIs, which I then rewrote imaginatively. This is not plagiarism. I wanted my novel to be rooted in reality, although I was aware of the difference between a history book and a work of fiction. Thus I felt free to alter, but only when I had a good reason to do so. I knew that I should achieve a balance between the gravity force of reality and the lightness of the imagination, something akin to the tension Woolf described in her essay ‘The New Biography’:

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if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.<sup>14</sup>

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Although I knew my work was not a ‘biography’, I definitely regarded it as an instance of ‘life writing’, which implied a responsibility towards facts, but I was also aware of its fictional nature, which meant a concern for form and for readers. If a real letter proved too long to be included, if it broke the rhythm of the narrative, I had to shorten it. When you write a text you try to achieve a geometric economy. Readers will follow you up to a point... To this end I had to obliterate many facts that I was not able to accommodate in the alternative universe that was taking shape. In real life, Antonio’s cousin Francesco had a sister, called Maria, who died

young, but I had to nip her story off to achieve what I perceived as a balance between my characters. Ethics and aesthetics mingled throughout the writing process, and I endlessly negotiated between their respective claims.

**Polyphony.** Moving from the idea that each of my characters was a unique human being – something that was very clear to me, also because most of them were based on people I had ‘known’, either directly or through intermediaries – I found it natural to respect their personalities, endowing each of them with a different point of view. *Faded Letters* is not a *roman à thèse*. I was not interested in easy binarisms, in black and white ideological views. I knew I was dealing with a period in which people were divided, since totalitarianism resulted in a civil war.

What I wanted to render, however, was the tragic condition of internecine conflict that marked those years, together with the widespread loss people experienced, the hardship they had to overcome. Ideological polarisation was of course part of my subject, but I did not want it to obscure the complexity of individual allegiances and stances. Consequently, I conceived the novel as a polyphony and often worked by contrast, juxtaposing characters whose views of religion, politics, society differed in various ways.

Probably due to the historical background of the text – a time concerning which collective memories are still divided – I had the impression that some Italian readers were a bit taken aback or suspicious, as if they could not tell exactly where I positioned myself as an author. The truth is I did not want to offer ready-made answers, although I wish to state once again that my rejection of Fascism and horror for Anti-Semitism are among the basic premises of this book. At the same time, I did not want readers to be confronted with pre-digested views, but I wished their act of reading to approximate, as far as possible, a form of experience, inducing bewilderment and uncertainty, but also the necessity of choice, and this with the aim to foster – hopefully, ideally – a critical attitude, perhaps a process of inner growth.

**Auto/Biography.** Writing this book was also a quest at a personal level. It marked a turning point in my life. When I was three my father – who suffered from throat cancer – underwent a tracheotomy. They made a hole in his throat. He survived, but this changed his existence. He spoke with a hoary voice. He retired from his job. He basically spent the rest of his life as an invalid, increasingly estranged from his wife and family. This book enabled me to meet him as a young man, to reconnect with him.

Reading his letters from Africa, in which he was always ready to turn war into a joke and was so obviously doing his best so that people at home would not worry about him, made me feel closer to him. Reading my mother's letters also made me better understand aspects of her personality that I had just taken for granted. Briefly, this worked like psychoanalysis. As a result, I am certainly a different person.

To tell the entire story, behind this book there is another father figure, I mean Guido Fink, a professor whose formative influence on me was central both during my university years and during my doctorate, which I did under his supervision. Guido's father died in a camp. A few years ago Guido himself lost his voice, like my father. I know that while recreating the character of Guido Horn I had in mind Guido Fink's Jewishness, his love of knowledge, his spontaneous kindness, his goodness, on which we have always been able to count.

**Metamorphoses.** This book was written over and over again. Assembled together, the episodes composing its various versions would make up a volume at least twice as big as the final text. This probably happens quite often when people try to give shape to a story, which first gains and then loses weight... Along the way, the book became more of a novel and less of a memoir, a process which took momentum when I changed the names of some characters in order to acknowledge their distance from the 'originals', their in-between-ness, their being also a figment of my imagination.

I wrote prefaces which I then deleted and I wrote chapters which I then made redundant. And then I added others, but the text was always deemed too fragmented and confusing, so I had to resort to drastic means. I cut and cut until I obtained a concise version that I entitled *La pagina cancellata* (The Deleted Page), although I developed in parallel what I labelled as the 'epic version', for which I have still a penchant...

I wrote several proposals, but no Italian publisher wanted to take a chance on this novel. I addressed institutions, but the only answer was silence. The book might have possibly rested in peace in its computer file, the postmodern equivalent of the proverbial desk drawer, had it not been for friendship. I made a new friend, a Russian who did not speak Italian. I discussed the book with Yegor and to enable him to get an idea of what I was attempting I processed a chapter with google translate. After revising this text, I realised that I liked the way it sounded in English and I gained confidence.

So I started over again. I sent this sample chapter to agents and publishers on both shores of the Atlantic. When Patricia Borlenghi of Patrician Press answered my message with her characteristic enthusiasm, telling me that she was interested in the novel, a new episode in my adventures began. It was Patricia who suggested the final title, *Faded Letters*. After I

finished translating, rewriting began once again, but in a different language, which I did not master completely.

The experience was dizzying. I had previously published critical essays in English, and translated literary works from English into Italian, but this was different. I simply knew I was not in control and I was afraid of making a mess of a text I had carefully wrought out in the course of years. The rhythm of sentences, the sociolinguistic appropriateness of spoken language to my characters, the flavour of words – all these problems seemed insurmountable at first. I was at a loss, but then it was precisely this condition of helplessness, this impossibility to work on my own which made me discover – or better re-discover – how important friends (Patricia herself, Philip Platts, Michael Webb) are and that joint ventures and common efforts can effect what a single individual would never be able to achieve. This is one of the many gifts I received from the experience of writing this book.

**The human.** I wish to conclude with a page from the novel – not one of the pages that feature in the published edition, but an entry from that much longer volume which never found its shape. In this short episode two friends are talking. One of them is the astronomer Guido Horn and the other is the Bolognese painter Giorgio Morandi, who was his friend in real life as in this text. For those who do not know Morandi, my first advice is to discover his poetically intimate paintings, many of which simply portray empty bottles, jars, vases... while others render the humble beauty of the Apennines.

While I was writing this strange book about dehumanization and the need to acknowledge the value of each single human being, Morandi's endlessly repeated bottles spoke to me, acquiring the value of a statement. The time, the tact, the care Morandi devoted to these objects that he captured in their nakedness, after they had been despoiled of everything – of a function, of a label, of the liquid they contained, of the cork which sealed them – became a source of revelation, the same revelation Guido Horn experiences in this passage, with which I take my leave:

*25 July 1939, Grizzana, in the Apennines, south-west of Bologna.*  
 'So tonight we're playing cards!' exclaimed Guido. 'I'll beat you eyes closed!' answered Giorgio. They had met in the Apennines once again, that year, Prof. Horn and his friend Giorgio Morandi, for their after-dinner chess games and their chats.

When Guido saw his friend painting in a field or next to a barn he joined him and stood by his side, looking in silence. He looked at those landscapes which were taking shape, warm as the soil in August, when

only the stubble remains in the fields. He looked at those clear skies, those rustic walls, that simple world.

He and Giorgio did not talk much about painting. They did not talk much in general. They understood each other by instinct. There was no need for them to sniff at each other.

One day Guido had gone to see Giorgio in Via Fondazza. Giorgio's studio was littered with objects and canvases. Then a comment had escaped from Guido's mouth: 'I say, there aren't many people in your paintings, eh!'

His friend had looked at him and answered: 'D'you think so?' Then Guido had understood. Those bottles. Those infinite bottles, all the same and all different. Those bottles against a monotone background. Those bottles and carafes. Human beings were there. Those naked bottles. That essence of bottle. That bottle behind the bottle that Giorgio strove to capture with his brush before it vanished once again in its appearance.

Things behind things. The soul of things? Things that do not reveal themselves to everyone. Things that you can pass by a thousand times without noticing. And then, all of a sudden, they are there, as they had never been.

'I'm sorry,' said Guido. 'If I didn't know I was clever, given the fact that I've been made professor, I'd say I'm a real dummy...'

## NOTES

- 1 I wish to thank Monica Soeting for kindly responding to the message I sent her concerning my book, and for pointing me to two deeply moving authors' accounts of the writing process – Marilyn Moos's 'Truth and the Novel' (*The European Journal of Life Writing* 1, 2012: 8–11) and Kenneth Pratt's "Hunting Captain Henley": Finding Fascism in the Reflective Voice' (*European Journal of Life Writing* 2, 2013: 1–20). I found both texts inspiring. I also wish to thank my friends Patricia Borlenghi and Michael Webb for reading my article.
- 2 Volkhard Knigge, Rikola-Gunnar Lüttengau, Jens-Christian Wagner, Introduction to *Forced Labor: The Germans, the Forced Laborers, and the War*, Companion Volume to the Exhibition (Weimar: The Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, 2010), p. 6.
- 3 An interesting aspect of the current fictional reappraisal of the Holocaust – and more generally of European history at the time of World War Two – is the fact that several authors are too young to have lived through these events, but have inherited trauma from parents and grandparents. For a discussion of postmemory novels see Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008), pp. 103–28; by the same author see also *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- 4 Maurizio Ascari, *Literature of the Global Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), p. 33.
- 5 Ascari, *Literature of the Global Age*, p. 36.

- 6 Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 53.
- 7 Maurizio Ascari, *Faded Letters* (Manningtree: Patrician Press, 2013), pp. 151–152.
- 8 Ascari, *Faded Letters*, p. 154.
- 9 Ascari, *Faded Letters*, pp. 146–147.
- 10 Henry James, ‘Preface to *Roderick Hudson*’ (1907), in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York and London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953) p. 5.
- 11 Errico Malatesta, *L’anarchia – Il nostro programma*. <[http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/m/malatesta/1\\_anarchia/pdf/malatesta\\_1\\_anarchia.pdf](http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/m/malatesta/1_anarchia/pdf/malatesta_1_anarchia.pdf)>
- 12 Ascari, *Faded Letters*, p. 3.
- 13 In Italy, the Istituto di Storia Contemporanea ‘Pier Amato Perretta’ created a virtual museum that includes hundreds of testimonies by Italians who were deported to Germany under the Reich. See <<http://www.schiavidihitler.it/homepage.asp>>
- 14 Virginia Woolf, ‘The New Biography’, in *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1958), p. 149.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maurizio Ascari is a senior lecturer in English Literature at the University of Bologna (Italy). His recent publications include books and essays on crime fiction (*A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, 2007), transcultural literature (*Literature of the Global Age*, 2011) and interart exchanges (*Cinema and the Imagination in Katherine Mansfield’s Writing*, 2014). He has also edited and translated works by Henry James, Katherine Mansfield, William Faulkner, Jack London and William Wilkie Collins. *Faded Letters* (Patrician Press, 2013) is his first fictional work.