

Alberto Godioli

Gadda Giovani 2011. Detecting Italy – a new initiative of The Edinburgh Gadda Prize

Gadda Giovani 2011 is a tale of two countries, and six regions. The main characters are hundreds of secondary school students from different Italian areas: Lombardy, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise, Sardinia. As in the most archetypal tales, the heroes are young, and on a search. In Spring 2011, they accepted an unusual challenge: writing a detective short story or a detective dialogue for the stage, drawing inspiration from the landscape and the history of their region (hence the title of this year's edition, *Detecting Italy*). At stake there was a special prize, on which we shall focus later, but first of all, there was the pleasure of taking part in a unique learning experience. As prescribed by the morphology of fairy-tales, the participants could rely on the guidance of an ideal helper: Carlo Emilio Gadda, Italy's most peculiar crime novelist. His works served as a flexible model, ready to be questioned, examined, re-shaped by the young writers. After all, creating detective fiction *from* and *about* a geographical – therefore historical, geological, and so on – context is a typically Gaddian task: suffice it to mention *That awful mess on via Merulana* in which Rome and its suburbs are not merely a background, but themselves a rich plot to be explored and detected.

In Spring 2011, we said, the seeds were sown. Our protagonists trained hard, honed their crafts, developed new skills; they organized workshops with the help of their teachers, they read Gadda intensively, and reflected on the tricky mechanism of the *giallo* (Italian for detective story); and of course, they started writing. Summer bore fruits: in July, after a pre-selection by the participating schools, the four regional committees of the *Edinburgh Gadda Prize* received over a hundred pieces of work; generally, the level was quite high, which made the choice even tougher than expected for the committees. The real twist in the tale, anyway, took

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place during the Autumn, when the list of semi-finalists was narrowed down to the 14 finalists and ultimately to the six winners. The September Semifinals were a rather unprecedented event: four remarkable venues (Teatro Civico, Cagliari; Castello di Udine; Palazzo Comunale, Cassino; Liceo Parini, Milan); large audiences actively taking part in debates and readings; and most importantly the students reading and performing their texts with the help of professional actors and writers, and sharing their experience. Along with the students' own stories or plays, passages from Gadda's masterpieces (*That awful mess*, *L'Adalgisa*, *The fire on Kepler Street*, etc.) were brilliantly interpreted by students and actors: so much for the old prejudice that saw Gadda as a scarcely enjoyable, almost unreadable author.

In all their tasks the students were assisted by a team of experts in the fields of performance and creative writing: their contribution as "donors", as Propp would say, was vital as was the support offered by the local City and Region Councils, along with a large number of prestigious UK and Italian sponsors. The Semifinals co-hosts and special guests included stage actor Luca Altavilla and novelist Alberto Garlini (Udine), actress Anna Nogara and theatre director Giuseppina Carutti (Milan), artistic director Guido De Monticelli (Cagliari), as well as the honorary president of *Gadda Giovani* – actor and playwright Fabrizio Gifuni (Cassino).

The spell was recast, with impressive results, on the occasion of the Finals, in front of a public of 500 people in a full-seat house (Teatro Parenti, Milan, 14th November 2011): there couldn't have been a better way to celebrate the author's birthday, thanks to the outstanding performances and readings, to the heartfelt speeches delivered by a large number of special guests and patrons (Giorgio Pinotti, Arnaldo Liberati, Gisella Langé, UK Vice-Consul Elsa Einarsdóttir), and to the brilliant contributions of our young protagonists. Interestingly enough, each one of the six winning entries had a Gaddian element to it: grotesque mixed with tragedy (*Su Maccu*, by the overall winner Lorenzo Uccheddu), a detection turning into an epistemological challenge (*Il nonno di Fen*, Eugenio Amato), a breath-taking manhunt through the streets of Rome (*Via dell'Impruneta*, Maria Elena Ienaro), an

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old woman suffering from a long-time acquaintance with grief (*Oltre il vetro*, Giulia Galdino), a young girl getting acquainted with it (*Mia madre non è Anna Karenina*, Francesca Palmisani), mythology degraded to a macabre parody (*Saffo*, Paolo Vacca).

During the Finals (Milan, Teatro Parenti), actress Maria Eugenia d'Aquino coordinated the students in an enthralling series of readings taken from their own detective stories or plays; Anna Nogara and Fabrizio Gifuni gave memorable renditions of Gadda's texts for the spell-bound audience of the full theatre. The key presence of Gifuni, who recently toured Italy with the award-winning monologue *L'ingegner Gadda va alla guerra*, was particularly apt for a project that actually relied much on the theatrical strength of Gadda's fiction.

No successful enterprise, to be sure, ends without a prize. *Gadda Giovani* is no exception, even though the reward does not put an end to the story: it rather marks the beginning of a new challenge. In September 2012 the six winners will fly to Edinburgh, in order to take a protagonist role in the second edition of the international *Gadda Prize*: along with the winners of the Scottish junior awards they will be engaged in the *Best Gadda Juniors* workshops, where their texts will be re-elaborated, partly staged, and prepared for publication. These activities and performances will form the context of the 2012 Award Ceremony, along with the celebrations for the three senior scholarly categories (*Crolla Amato Prize*, *Gadda First*, *Novecento in saggio*). So, as in folktales, the chronological structure of the Prize can be pictured as a cycle: *Gadda Giovani* alternates with the Scottish-based edition, which represents its origin and its aim at the same time. While Edinburgh is the permanent venue of the international award, Milan will take turns with the other Italian venues at hosting the national Finals: the 2013 ceremony, for instance, will be held in Cassino; the Castle of Udine will provide a special scenery for the 2015 events, on the centenary of the beginning of the First World War for Italy.

Settings are indeed a capital element in our tale, as shown by the historical and

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symbolic values that Gadda assigned to the regions involved in the project: North-Eastern Italy stands for wartime memories, *i.e.* the traumatic contact with history, as pictured in the war diaries and in *The Castle of Udine*; Lombardy embodies the myth of origins, the ambiguous stance that defines (but also 'confines', imprisons) the Self and its cognitive parameters; Lazio, Abruzzo and Molise allude to other capital themes of Gadda's imagery – the *centre*, the ideal *polis* ("alta nel nome e nel sito", just like L'Aquila in *Le meraviglie d'Italia*); Sardinia, where the author worked as an engineer, represents the concept of 'periphery', that is to say the region where spatial and logical consistency gradually tends to fade. By connecting all those places, and involving their inhabitants directly, *Gadda Giovani* does not only relive a writer's itinerary through his country: it also serves a wider-ranging cultural purpose, and makes us look into the (more or less forgotten) traces of our sense of community. Crime fiction and fairy-tales, after all, share at least one feature: they are both usually based on the pursuit of something that is hidden. Let us hope that *Detecting Italy* will only be the first chapter of a long story – you never know what may be found.

WEBLIOGRAPHY

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<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/>

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