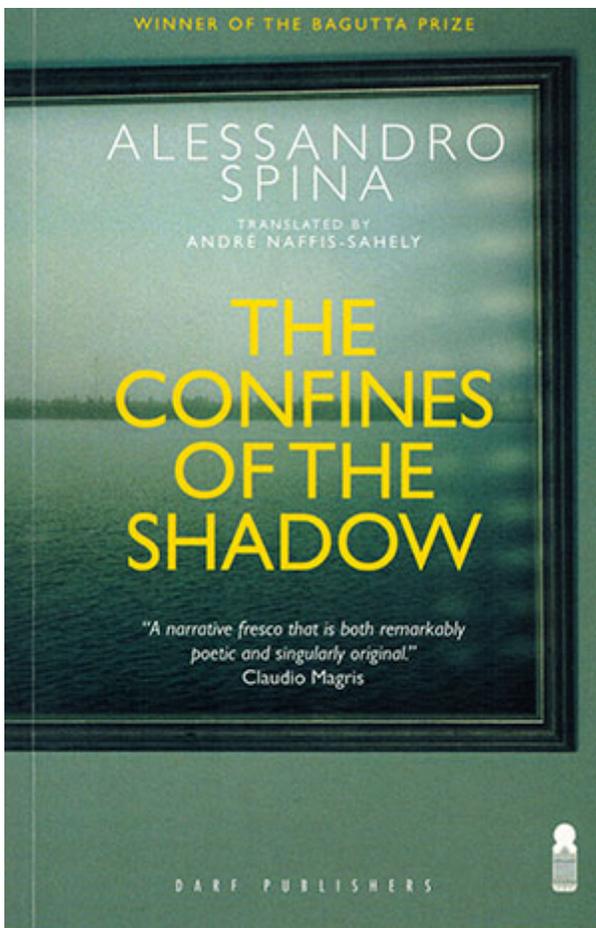


Dark Tour: A Review of Alessandro Spina's *The Confines of Shadow*

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A native of Aleppo who grew up in Benghazi and relocated to Milan, the Maronite and opera-lover Basili Shafik Khouzam carried a copy of *Time Regained* everywhere he went and wrote a university thesis on Alberto Moravia (the author of *The Conformist*). Under the pen name Alessandro Spina, he published *The Confines of the Shadow*, a chronicle of Italy's colonization of Libya, three volumes comprising seven novels and four short story collections that took him twenty-six years to complete, from 1971 to 1997. In these books, Spina created a fictional space where Italians and Libyans met in the imagination, within "the confines of the shadow" of colonialism, whose "dark days, afflicted by a collective anguish," cast a pall over every aspect of life. Subtitled "The Colonial Conquest," this installment is the first to appear, with the next two, "The Colonial Era" and "Independence," slated for release in 2016 and 2017.

After the Fascist disaster had played itself out in Italy, Italian artists began making images of imperialism's most insidious agent, the neoliberal, who appears in *Confines*' first section, set in 1912. Martello, an army captain "disgusted by the Italian officers' disdain," a lover of Catullus stationed in Benghazi, tries to lend a human touch to colonialist aggression: for all

his desire to understand and be accepted by the local population, this cipher with a bad case of the *mal d'Afrique*, this spokesmodel for a kinder, gentler brutality, this sentimentalist whose government rewards him with “a nearly intact mosaic” that his men have plundered, commits himself to nothing more than deploying a weaponized sympathy against the Libyans. Semereth, a merchant and failed politician from Ottoman Turkey, the 350-year colonial power in Libya, has remained in Benghazi after the ‘Turks’ departure. He weds a child bride, and his servants arrange for her to rendezvous with her lover, an orphan whom Semereth has taken in. The affair is inevitably exposed and the entrepreneur balks at killing the two young people. When they’re murdered anyway in reprisal, he joins the Libyan rebels and vanishes into the desert. The Italian army captures Semereth during a botched raid, but before he is tried and hanged, Martello visits his cell, challenges him to a duel, and is ignored; at which point the officer wanders into a cave in the nearby Greek ruins at Cyrene—“a window onto the afterlife”—and is never heard from again.

The colonizer’s attempt to insert himself into others’ lives, wishing to consume and possess their identities, is also a motif of “The Marriage of Omar,” the second section of the book, set in 1920, whose central character, Omar—the coachman of the liberal Count Alonzo, Deputy Governor of Libya—has divorced his wife but now wants to remarry her, in order to rescue their son from his vicious maternal grandmother, Omar’s mother-in-law. The ensuing negotiations embroil the community in the young couple’s tribulations, à la Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*; while Omar’s tagalong, the young officer Antonino, is thrown from his horse and dies an absurd death.

In Part 3, “The Nocturnal Visitor,” set in 1927, Rafiq, a young man, the son of a Sheikh’s servant, stands accused of molesting his his sister Ghazala, and his mother claims that the culprit was not him, but another young man, who resembles him in every way. Rafiq flees to Benghazi and befriends Saad, a boy he meets in the marketplace, who is his spitting image. Rafiq convinces Saad to accompany him to his home, where there lives a girl, he promises, who will fall in love with him. The two journey across the desert, and Saad, having been tricked by Rafiq into entering Ghazala’s room after dark, is shot dead. Saad’s mother arrives to retrieve her son’s body and it is revealed not only that he was Rafiq’s brother, but that they are both sons of the Sheikh himself. When Rafiq learns that he has murdered his own brother, he throws himself from the ramparts of the fort, and the story concludes with the stark reminder that “*God does as He wishes.*”

A host of minor characters lends a sense of completeness to the fictional world of *Confines*: Sharafeddin, Omar’s friend, a resistance sympathizer who loathes Antonino; Khadija, the de facto head of Count Alonzo’s household; Rosina, the Countess who never acclimates to colonial life and plays piano in her compound instead; Émile, the young Maronite merchant, fastidious, irascible, and savvy (Spina’s image of himself in the novel); and Dr. Amilcare and General Delle Stelle, a civilian and a soldier, who critique Alonzo’s idealism and Martello’s delusion. Abandoning conventional plot machinery in a departure from the status quo of contemporary fiction, Spina stylizes his characters to a point just short of mannerism, never letting the reader forget that they are constructs, fictive personages, who speak and act from within colonialism, rather than from within the apparatus of an author.

The “multigenerational family epic” often fails to evoke the breadth of changes affecting more than one society, because the perspectives of its narrative aren’t different enough from each other. The technology of such novels often interposes a false distance between authorial voice and subject matter, a distance that’s actually a proximity, which the author attempts to make up for with various forms of irony. Family novels offer a faulty solution to what might be

termed a spatiotemporal quandary, ultimately a question of cosmology. In contrast, Spina imposes a rigorous linear chronology upon the stories in his oeuvre to unify their otherwise discrete orientations. His lack of ornament is not unrelated to his method: Spina forgoes figuration, except rarely, where it's needed for clarity's sake. He never tries to vivify a scene by using metaphor. He doesn't present us with sense-data except at moments when the detail indicates a message passed among the characters. If a meal is served, for example, the narrative relates this fact not for the taste of the food but for the significance of the dish on the occasion. So distant is the authorial narrative voice from its objects that when Count Alonzo—having returned to Italy and resumed his former life as the director of a textile firm—reflects on a political salon he has just left, where no one made the least mention of the Libyan resistance leader's recent hanging by a Fascist tribunal, the entire circumstance is reported to the reader in a single sentence that closes the middle section of the book: "The Count was astonished that his anti-fascist friends hadn't mentioned that murder during their noble, scholarly, and passionate discussions." Spina's dictum that "Literature is a transaction with the outsider, or he who obeys different rules" applies to *The Confines of the Shadow* in several ways: first, the act of writing the book, when the author is engaged with what is not himself; second, the themes and subjects, the book's content; and third, the relationship between the reader and the writer, each an outsider to the other, each obeying different rules while still operating within the same exchange—for Spina, a "transaction."

The translator of all three volumes, the poet André Naffis-Sahely (whose first collection, *The Promised Land*, is due out from Penguin in 2017), not only makes what he calls in his afterword the "fairly daring choice" of omitting the newsclips with which the original Italian text is interlarded; he also takes the trouble to translate letters from Mussolini that figure in the plot, as well as passages from the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldûn, a work of historiography cited in the text of *Confines*. Reading this version of Spina, one forgets that it's a translation: there's never a crabbed phrase or a congested cadence. The unadorned suppleness of Naffis-Sahely's prose prompts the surmise that Spina's lack of emphasis sets him apart from all but a very few other novelists writing in Italian. The next two installments are eagerly awaited.

Born in Los Angeles, Erik Noonan grew up in Sherman Oaks. He attended Hampshire College, Utrecht University, and New College of California. He published a magazine called *WEIGH STATION* along with limited edition poetry books and a series of zines. He is the author of numerous articles on art, film, literature and music, and his poetry collections include *STANCES* and *HAIKU D'ETAT*. Noonan lives in San Francisco with his family.

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