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After Autarchy: Male Subjectivity from Carlo Emilio Gadda to the *Gruppo 63*

by

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Committee in charge:

Professor Barbara Spackman, Chair

Professor Albert Ascoli

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## Abstract

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*After Autarchy: Male Subjectivity from Carlo Emilio Gadda to the Gruppo '63* traces an indirect but enduring legacy of Italian fascism in models of male subjectivity and literature in writing by Carlo Emilio Gadda and two members of the short-lived, loose-knit, but nonetheless influential literary association, the *Gruppo '63*: Giorgio Manganelli and Luigi Malerba. As critics have noted, experimentalist writers of the 1960s find an aesthetic ideal in Gadda because of his baroque stylistics, particularly the use of digressive narrative trajectories and a multiplicity of languages, dialects, and registers in ways incongruous with linguistic realism. The dissertation raises the stakes of these stylistic affinities between Gadda and the writers he inspires by drawing parallels between his autarchic writings and theories of subjectivity and aesthetics that emerge from his fiction, as well as texts by Manganelli and Malerba.

“Autarchy” refers to the period of relative isolation and economic autonomy of fascist Italy following the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations in response to the attack on the member nation. The introduction studies autarchic discourse to isolate a tension between a scarcity of raw materials and an abundance resulting from reproductivity and various forms of productivity. I propose that this tension comes to bear critical—and critically imbricated—economic, sexual, and aesthetic implications. The first chapter argues that the nexus of contradictions that characterize the period of economic autarchy is central to the work of Gadda, whose gradual transformation from engineer to writer equilibrates in a series of popular essays that explain scientific and technical strategies to foster Italian economic self-sufficiency. I locate Gadda’s changing affect with regards to autarchy in his representations of various systems along with the exclusions upon which they are predicated, the waste they produce, and the debris that accumulates at their fringes.

The second chapter examines the graphic figurative economy of Manganelli’s *Hilarotragoedia* (1964), and argues that the treatise sets out autarchic models of literature and male subjectivity. I propose, however, that these models are structured by their own impossibility insofar as they are built upon a series of *topoi* that themselves forge an intertext—a ‘figaliation’ with Gadda established by similar figurations of a horror of the feminine. Malerba’s understanding of the autonomy of literature, on the other hand, is rooted in an avowal of a tautological mode of signification based upon the immediacy of objects. The final chapter considers this semiotic

dogma in the context of *Il serpente* (1966). I argue that by foregrounding collecting and signifying practices that today might fall within the nascent diagnostic category of “hoarding disorder,” the novel necessarily departs from the epistemological foundation of the conventional *giallo*.

With an introductory chapter set during the period of economic autarchy, Malerba’s novel urges the reader to take on a project very much like that of this dissertation: to consider the aesthetic and libidinal legacies of economic autarchy, and to interrogate the historico-political stakes of the dreams of aesthetic autonomy and self-sufficiency that persist long after autarchy. The power of this project is both theoretical and historical: broadening the understanding of autarchy to encompass varied iterations of autonomy, *After Autarchy* fashions an analogy between autarchic discourse and experimentalist narrative of the 1960s, and poses a challenge to the autonomous subject of enlightenment philosophy.

*In memory of my grandmother,  
Fontaine Maury Maverick Falkoff,  
poet, Italophile, maverick, hoarder.*

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## Introduction. After Autarchy: Male Subjectivity from Carlo Emilio Gadda to the Gruppo '63

### After Autarchy

This dissertation studies autarchy both as a historical moment and as figure for articulations of male subjectivity and aesthetic theory in the writing of Carlo Emilio Gadda and two members of the loose-knit, short-lived literary association, the *Gruppo '63*: Giorgio Manganelli and Luigi Malerba. “Autarchy” refers to the period of relative isolation and economic autonomy of fascist Italy following the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations in response to the attack on the member nation. A critical turning point in fascist Italy, the autarchic period is marked by striking contradictions: the scarcity wrought by the sanctions and by the costly war is paired with promises of excess created by technological innovation; the emphasis on isolation and self-sufficiency is coupled with the annexation of new lands; and a propaganda campaign figuring Italy as a victim of the international community is matched with vicious violence in Ethiopia, including the use of poison gas, against the stipulations of the Geneva Protocol of 1925.<sup>1</sup>

This nexus of contradictions is central to the work of Gadda, whose gradual transformation from engineer to writer equilibrates in a series of popular essays that explain scientific and technical strategies to support economic autarchy. These essays grapple with concerns that develop from a perception of scarcity, and devote considerable attention to the efficient use of waste products. In Gadda’s fiction, the problem of waste is also posed at the level of the subject, as misanthropic characters excluded from the social suggest larger biopolitical questions about lives worthy of living.<sup>2</sup> For writers of the *Gruppo '63*, Gadda represents an important literary father (or uncle, as Alberto Arbasino proposes in the noted 1959 essay “I nipotini dell’ingegnere e il gatto di casa De Feo”).<sup>3</sup> While Arbasino subtly sets out an alternate literary lineage between Gadda and later gay writers, other members of the *Gruppo '63* find an aesthetic ideal in “l’ingegnere” because of his baroque stylistics, particularly the use of

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<sup>1</sup> On the use of poison gas during the invasion of Ethiopia, see Del Boca 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*.

<sup>3</sup> Though he does not mention homosexuality explicitly, Arbasino forges a genealogy between Gadda and himself, as well as two other openly gay writers, Giovanni Testori and Pier Paolo Pasolini. “I nipotini dell’ingegnere” begins by acknowledging Gadda’s lack of direct progeny: “L’Ingegnere Carlo Emilio Gadda non ha mai proliferato direttamente, né si è mai curato di intrattenere una progenie qualsiasi—ma forse non sarebbe stato neanche possibile” (173). This first line creates a calculated confusion between biological and literary progeny, so that the reader might suspect Gadda unlikely to produce direct progeny because of his sexual preferences. Arbasino then clarifies this ambiguity, explaining that Gadda’s literary works, *i pasticciacci*, are so singular as to be unreproducible: “i pasticciacci sono obelischi solitari nel paesaggio, monumenti non meno irripetibili che i Gattopardi...” (173). Notwithstanding this clarification, the comparison of such singular literary works to solitary obelisks—lone phalluses—also preserves a subtext that points towards Gadda’s sexual preferences. Rather than direct progeny, Arbasino continues, Gadda engenders nephews—an “unusual attraction” or tainted love that is likened to that of the cat who became enamored of the *Espresso* theater critic Italo de Feo.

On Gadda’s dissimulated homosexuality, see also Francesco Gnerre, *L’eroe negato: omosessualità e letteratura nel Novecento italiano*.

digressive narrative trajectories and a multiplicity of languages, dialects, and registers in ways incongruous with linguistic realism. The dissertation raises the stakes of these stylistic affinities between Gadda and his *seguaci* by drawing parallels between the historical and economic autarchy of his scientific and technical writings, and articulations of male subjectivity and aesthetic theory in his fiction, as well as writings by Manganelli and Malerba. The significance of “after” in the title of this dissertation is twofold: the figurations of male subjectivity and aesthetics I discuss in this dissertation follow autarchy in both form and in time.

Charting articulations of self-sufficiency from fascist economic policy to the realms of sexuality and aesthetics, I find paradoxical fantasies of forms of boundless immateriality that are predicated upon boundaries between nations, sexes, and representational forms. In autarchic-era discourse, I isolate an insistence on a scarcity of raw materials that is offset by an abundance resulting from various forms of reproductivity and productivity. This split comes to bear critical—and critically imbricated—economic, sexual, and aesthetic implications that are evidenced in the texts I study by an interest in hoarding and squandering, the thematization of parthenogenesis and masturbation, and theories of a language that bears no relationship to reality, and a literature that adamantly rejects *impegno*.

### **Autarchy**

The period of economic autarchy develops from Italy’s October 3, 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, a League of Nations member since 1923. After Emperor Haile Selassie fled to England on May 5 of the following year, Mussolini declared victory. Four days later, in the “Discorso della proclamazione dell’impero,” he announced the formation of Africa Orientale Italiana, to be ruled by “emperor” Victor Emanuel III. The attack was largely figured in domestic propaganda as a “civilizing mission” that would lead to improved infrastructure in Ethiopia and the development of a settlement colony for Italians.<sup>4</sup> As such, the sanctions, which went into effect on November 18, 1935, were understood domestically as evidence of unjust treatment, an “assedio che cinquantadue paesi decisero contro l’Italia” by an international community that would deny Italy’s right to “legittima espansione nell’Africa orientale,” to a(nother) “posto al sole.”<sup>5</sup> England and France are particular antagonists in this figuration, owing to their expansive empires, their influence in the League, and to the old slight of the Treaty of Versailles, which failed to grant Italy’s claim to the Adriatic port of Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia).

In a speech of March 23, 1936, Mussolini introduces the concept of economic autarchy, which he calls a new phase of Italian history, characterized by an emphasis on economic independence in response to the sanctions: “La nuova fase della storia italiana sarà dominata da questo postulato: realizzare nel più breve termine possibile il massimo possibile di autonomia nella vita economica della Nazione” (28: 80). Though the sanctions were the occasion for such a brazen periodization of Italian history, they lasted only until July of the following year and had

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<sup>4</sup> Gadda’s essay, “La donna si prepara ai suoi compiti coloniali,” premised upon this understanding of the invasion as a civilizing mission, describes courses offered to women in Milan preparation for life in the colonies. See also Nicola Labanca and Mark Choate.

<sup>5</sup> Benito Mussolini, “Discorso del 23 marzo,” Vol. 28: 68.

Notwithstanding Mussolini’s portrayal of the sanctions as an unjust attack on Italy, the League of Nations’ response to the invasion was entirely foreseeable. Indeed, in the months leading up to the invasion, Italy began stockpiling essential materials in anticipation of sanctions. See George Baer 166-7.

little direct economic impact.<sup>6</sup> Both the war itself and the subsequent occupation of Ethiopia, however, were costly: resistance was organized and effective, and the resources Italy hoped to find, (petroleum, saltpeter, diamonds, etc.), were scarce or nonexistent (Baer 156). The Italian budget deficit increased from two billion lire in 1934-1935 to more than 12.5 billion the following year, and everyday life was marked by sacrifice as cotton, wool, milk, coffee, and soap were substituted with less costly alternatives, and meat was limited (Baer 165). Notwithstanding these sacrifices, the period immediately following the invasion of Ethiopia represents the peak of the regime's popularity.<sup>7</sup>

Early support for the war was so strong that one month after the imposition of sanctions, when the nation celebrated the *Giornata della fede*, many Italians parted willingly with their wedding rings, donating them to support the war effort. Contemporary newsreels show crowds in cities and towns throughout Italy clamoring to drop their gold bands into the smoking cauldrons set up in central piazzas.<sup>8</sup> Though the monetary value of these rings was negligible—particularly when compared to the cost of producing such public spectacles—the donations represent a substantial expression of Italians' faith in and commitment to war and autarchy.<sup>9</sup> In the smoking cauldrons, an alchemical process transforms the rings from a symbol of commitment to a heterosexual union to an expression of dedication to the *patria* “ingiustamente boicottata.”<sup>10</sup> Italians were also called upon by films like *Gli italiani ricordino i sanzionisti sappiano* to participate in the alchemical process of transfiguring the trappings of domestic dwellings into public offerings. The newsreel shows men and women carrying metal bed frames, tables, and other household items out of a *palazzo* and loading them onto a truck carrying more of the same. The domestic effects are amassed at a dumpsite, where they are transformed to serve an important symbolic purpose, whether or not they are ever reconstituted as arms. As the newsreel boasts: “La più umile offerta acquista un alto valore simbolico.”

The initial popularity of autarchy might be attributed in good part to an intense propaganda campaign that solicited and celebrated these and other sacrifices, promised imperial glory, and attributed scarcity not to war but to the “legulei di Ginevra” responsible for the “inique sanzioni.”<sup>11</sup> But the picture of autarchy that emerges from fascist rhetoric also represents a negotiation between a complex constellation of often-conflicting propositions that has important implications for theoretical elaborations of subjectivity and aesthetics. At the center of

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<sup>6</sup> The impact of the sanctions was minimal in part because Italy had stockpiled food, coal, oil, gasoline, scrap iron, textiles, and other essentials in anticipation of the League of Nations' response to the invasion, but also because Italian access to the Suez canal and important sources of coal, iron, and oil, remained unaffected (Baer 156-170).

<sup>7</sup> See Ruth Ben-Ghiat 126-7, Baer 275-281, and Labanca 196-7 and 246-9.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example *L'atto di fede del popolo italiano*, the *Giornata della fede* newsreels dedicated to Bologna-Firenze, Palermo, Torre di Passeri, Ariano Irpino, and Milano-Forlì, and *La forgiatura dei cerchi d'acciaio brunito*, all produced by the Istituto nazionale luce in 1935.

<sup>9</sup> Two and a half tons of gold were collected on the *Giornata della fede*, with about 250,000 rings donated in Rome and 180,000 in Milan, which Baer estimates to be worth about four and a half million U.S. dollars in 1935; while the cost of conquering Ethiopia, over a two-year period was about one billion U.S. dollars (160).

<sup>10</sup> *Gli italiani ricordino, i sanzionisti sappiano. Come reagisce la popolazione alle inique sanzioni*, produced by the Istituto nazionale luce in 1935.

<sup>11</sup> Gadda, “Diciotto novembre.”

this constellation are raw materials, understood to be scarce in Italy. Umberto Rossi's short documentary *Azoto*, the first of the series *I documentari dell'autarchia*, explains:

L'economia di tutti gli stati oggi si orienta verso una netta tendenza autarchica. Ma per i paesi come il nostro, poveri di materie prime e d'oro, l'autarchia economica e il presupposto fondamentale della loro difesa, della loro efficienza, e dello sviluppo senso di benessere per la collettività nazionale.<sup>12</sup>

Autarchy, *Azoto* claims, is essential to countries poor in raw materials, it is "il presupposto fondamentale." *Gli italiani ricordino, i sanzionisti sappiano* instead understands autarchy as the result of sanctions that aim to "privare Italia dalle materie prime." As such, autarchy seems to represent both cause and effect of Italy's dearth of raw materials.

Offsetting this circuitous dependence on the scarcity of raw materials, autarchy conjures an abundance that results from a creative capacity of Italians, be it reproductive or productive (industrial, agricultural, scientific, artistic, alchemical, etc.). Hungarian economist Odon Por makes the connection between scarce raw materials and prolific reproduction explicit in *Italy's Policy of Social Economics*: "It is precisely the countries poor in raw materials that have strongly rising birth rates and this is explicable by the fact that with increasing human effort they could provide themselves with all that they need" (32). Presenting Italy's rising birth rates as a logical consequence of its scarce raw materials, Por obscures two important points: first, that birth rates in Italy were not rising, but declined steadily throughout the *ventennio*; and second, that rather than a natural result of scarcity, rising birth rates are an explicit objective of the pronatalist platform set out in Mussolini's Ascension Day speech of May 26, 1927.<sup>13</sup>

Introducing the new demographic campaign, the Ascension Day speech establishes as policy biopolitical fantasies animating Italy at least since unification, and demonstrates Foucault's formulation of new forms of power beginning in the late eighteenth century: "Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die" (*Society* 247). Indeed, the Ascension Day speech links the very future of the nation to its capacity to make live: "L'Italia, per contare qualche cosa, deve affacciarsi sulla soglia della seconda metà di questo secolo con una popolazione non inferiore ai sessanta milioni di abitanti."<sup>14</sup> Increasing natality, in the speech, is not a characteristic of poor nations—as Por proposes above—but rather

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<sup>12</sup> *I documentari dell'autarchia: Altre produzioni italiane: Azoto*, directed by Umberto Rossi.

"Azoto" is the Italian word for nitrogen. The name "azote" was coined by the French chemist Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier in 1779 when he discovered that life could not survive by breathing nitrogen gas: the word is the privative "a" prefix with the Greek "zoe," meaning without life. See G. J. Leigh 97.

<sup>13</sup> On the new emphasis on biopolitics set out in the Ascension Day Speech, see Horn 46-8, Barbara Spackman 143-55, Ben-Ghiat 19-20, and Victoria de Grazia 41-76.

<sup>14</sup> The second part of the speech, dedicated to dissent and other forms of criminality, offers the ominous warning: "Si levano questi individui dalla circolazione come un medico toglie dalla circolazione un infetto" (378). In *Fascist Virilities*, Spackman traces the biopolitical imperatives that link these two sections of the speech, as Mussolini figures himself not as ruler, but as astute clinician caring for the social body.

*the* factor that creates (imperial) wealth: “Se si diminuisce, signori, non si fa l'Impero, si diventa una colonia!” (22: 364).<sup>15</sup>

While in Por's discussion high birth rates are characteristic of nations poor in raw materials, childlessness translates indirectly into emigration—either to foreign lands or to urban centers: “A peasant with no sons cannot work his own land. Off the land he has no particular skill, no prestige, he drifts into slum populations, is a mere drifting proletariat, a state he fears more than any other” (32). The childless proletariat, then, either migrates to urban centers, which Mussolini claims “porta alla sterilità le popolazioni” (367) or emigrates to foreign lands, rendering Italy a mere “fornitrice di braccia scontate,” its expatriate workers “rifiutati, come merce avariata.”<sup>16</sup> Making emigration a product of *low* fertility rates, Por's intervention represents an inversion of one of two conflicting assumptions that extend from the late nineteenth century until at least the Ascension Day speech, wherein there are at once *too many* Italians, (and so some must migrate to urban centers or emigrate to foreign lands), and *too few*, (and so they must increase their numbers in order to satisfy Italy's imperial ambition).<sup>17</sup> Mussolini nods to this tension in the Ascension Day speech, but decides resolutely in favor of the latter assumption: “Qualche inintelligente dice: ‘Siamo in troppi.’ Gli intelligenti rispondono: ‘Siamo in pochi’” (364).

Just as he inverts the tenet that emigration results from *too many* Italians, Por claims not that colonial desire demands increased natality, but rather that because of rising birth rates colonialism is a necessity for Italy:

To keep an increasing population in civilized conditions—a population that cannot find an outlet in emigration—in a country poor in raw materials (gold included) and with relatively narrow territory is not possible without autarchy; i.e. the use of all its resources. There must also be colonization, since the resources cannot be filled out by exchange with foreign countries. (33)

Por's analysis, Mussolini's Ascension Day speech, and autarchic-era documentaries bind colonialism, economic self-sufficiency, and natality together with a shifting string of causality. Largely unaffected by these rearrangements of cause and effect, the dearth of raw materials remains the unaltered axiom of autarchy.

The contrast between the scarcity of raw materials and the various plenitudes that proliferate around it might be summarized by Gadda's characterization of Italians in “Pane e chimica sintetica” as “Popoli poveri, di terre non d'animo” (*SVP* 125). Indeed, the material scarcity that underlies figurations of the autarchic period is countered by an “inventive genius” that takes the form of both reproductivity and various forms of productivity. In the passage above, Por defines autarchy not as self-sufficiency, but as an acute resourcefulness in the context of limited raw materials. This resourcefulness will be fused with “inventive genius”:

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<sup>15</sup> Mussolini's warning of the risk of becoming a colony is a topos in Italy at least since Ugo Foscolo's *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo*, which imagines a grim future for Italians: “E verrà forse un giorno che noi perdendo le sostanze, e l'intelletto, e la voce, saremo fatti simili agli schiavi domestici degli antichi, o trafficati come miseri negri” (119).

<sup>16</sup> Giovanni Pascoli, “La grande proletaria si è mossa.”

<sup>17</sup> See Spackman's discussion of these conflicting assumptions in *Fascist Virilities* 143-4.

Inventive genius impels toward self-sufficiency because said genius finds in autarchy the conditions where it can fully expand, conversely an autarchic system stimulates inventors by giving them specific problems to solve, specific jobs to get on with. The inventive urge fuses with the autarchic urge. (35)

Inventive genius, then, participates in a circuitous, mutually reinforcing relationship with autarchy.

This inventive genius is celebrated with particular gusto, for example, in the field of textiles. Beginning in the early 1930s, textile manufacturers worked to develop long-term strategies to combat high prices of imported wool and cotton, as well as fossil fuels and Scandinavian trees necessary to produce viscose-based fabrics (Schnapp 210-1). In the mid-1930s, as “buy Italian!” became a national slogan, three new textiles were developed: lanital, made from the milk protein casein; the hemp-based Cafioc; and Ginestra, made from common broom.<sup>18</sup> Other autarchic innovations in fashion include the wood and cork platform shoes designed by Salvatore Ferragamo when the quality of steel needed to support traditional heels became unavailable.<sup>19</sup> Several exhibitions showcasing these new textiles and design elements, organized on anniversaries of the sanctions, drew large crowds and were given considerable attention in the press. Lanital, in particular, was hailed as a triumph not only of “inventive genius,” but also of the economic system that aimed to foster such creativity: “‘Lanital’ might have been a scientific curiosity had not autarchic economy mobilized its corporative machinery and coherences, i.e. the remunerative price and the accord between the producers of ‘Lanital’ and the textile industry” (35).<sup>20</sup>

In “The Fabric of Modern Times,” Jeffrey Schnapp reads F. T. Marinetti’s *Il poema del vestito di latte*, which was commissioned by the Società Nazionale Industria Applicazioni Viscosa (SNIA Viscosa) in 1937, as a celebration not only of industrial production, but also of reproduction. He notes: “Cheese making, at least since Aristotle, had served as the privileged analogy in the Western tradition for describing how the masculine seed succeeds in fixing the blood secreted in the uterus, thereby initiating the formation of that peculiar composite of matter and spirit: the human embryo” (238-9). The case of lanital, then, is particularly well suited to illustrate the extent to which the autarchic split between the paucity of raw materials (*mater*) and the abundance of inventive genius is reinforced with and reinforces sexual difference. This alignment corroborates Jean-Joseph Goux’s analysis in *Symbolic Economies*, where he proposes succinctly: “*Idealism is first of all a conception of conception*” (213). Barbara Spackman expands on this formulation in *Fascist Virilities*:

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<sup>18</sup> Spackman designates “Buy Italian!” a national slogan in “Shopping for Autarchy: Fascism and Reproductive Fantasy in Mario Camerini’s *Grandi magazzini*.” Schnapp describes these new textiles in “The Fabric of Modern Times” 229-30.

The invention of new textiles, particularly rayon, known as “artificial silk,” is particularly relevant to Gadda’s personal history, since his father, Francesco Gadda, made unfortunate investments in silkworms just before the invention of rayon. See Gian Carlo Roscioni, *Il duca di Sant’Aquila: Infanzia e giovinezza di Gadda* 22-4. In a *Scheda autobiografica* emphasizing his ties to Manzoni, Gadda writes: “Padre ‘filatore di seta’ come Renzo, ma in forma leggermente più capitalistica; in dialetto lombardo 1890 ‘negoziante de seda’ o anche ‘seditrö’” (*SGF II* 873).

<sup>19</sup> See Natalia Aspesi, “Gli eleganti sandali di carta,” in *Il lusso e l’autarchia* 165-71.

<sup>20</sup> Lanital did indeed become mere scientific (and historico-cultural) curiosity after the war: the textile was scrapped as soon as wool and cotton became more widely available.



That conception is one in which woman supplies matter, and man supplies form; its progeny is the philosophical opposition between matter and spirit; and its dream is that of immaculate conception or, as Goux also puts it, ‘scissiparous reproduction, sexless procreation,’ in which value reproduces itself, concepts spawn concepts, and fathers create sons, all without ‘mother’ or ‘labor,’ ‘out of desire and form alone.’ (54)

With regards to lanital, the split between abundant inventive genius and scarce matter is vividly sexed because the material from which the fabric is made, milk, is so clearly *maternal*. Marinetti’s poem—as well as autarchy more broadly—expresses idealism’s dream, as the production of lanital is figured as a scissiparous process that obscures woman’s role in reproduction: “l’uomo comanda/ Latte, dividiti.”

Consistent with this privileging of inventive genius over matter, Karen Pinkus notes in *Bodily Regimes* that autarchic-era advertisements—particularly those for synthetic textiles—often feature the human form only as silhouette, shadow, or outline. She interprets these representations of disappearing bodies in luminous outline as fetishes that enable a disavowal of the labor involved in the production of rayon and other new textiles.<sup>21</sup> Like Schnapp in “The Fabric of Modern Times,” then, Pinkus fashions an understanding of autarchy that carries philosophical and sexual significance. Indeed, in autarchic discourse relating to the production of rayon and other textiles, both the disavowal of the body and its labors and the dream of scissiparous reproduction attest to the supremacy of inventive genius over scarce raw materials, and to the corresponding philosophical (idealism over materialism) and sexual (male over female) implications.

The word ‘autarchy’ itself evokes both the sexual and economic—a duality Spackman emphasizes by using the Greek ‘*autarkeia*’ throughout the chapter “Mafarka and Son: Marinetti’s Homophobic Economics” to recall Jason’s desire for autonomy from women (54). In the dense chapter she isolates an “ideo-logic” in Marinetti’s 1909 *Mafarka le futuriste* that binds together autarchic fantasies related to the novel’s theme of reproduction without “la puante complicité de la matrice de la femme” (1984: 169). Like the dream of parthenogenesis central to *Il poema del vestito di latte*, which grows from the aim of economic self-sufficiency, the reproductive project of *Mafarka*, Spackman argues, is also essentially economic. Her reading of the novel’s conclusion as a fable of phallic economics lays bare a structure shared by parthenogenetic fantasy and by the economic “perversion” of hoarding.

Spackman describes the economy of *Mafarka* as one in which the exchange of women as commodities structures the relationships between men by propelling exogamy. In this patriarchal, hom(m)o-social economy, sexual relations between men are proscribed because they would mar the symbolic value of the penis as universal equivalent. Luce Irigaray explains: “Once the penis [...] becomes merely a means to pleasure, of pleasure among men, *the phallus loses its power*” (193). The fable of phallic economics Spackman finds in the novel involves a series of exchanges and encounters that upset this hom(m)o-sociality by endowing the penis with immediate use value or relative exchange value and thus degrading its symbolic power as phallus. In the fable, the devil serves a horse’s penis prepared with curdled milk, violets, and cinnamon to an unknowing Mafarka. Upon consuming the delicacy, Mafarka begins copulating frenetically and his penis grows, ultimately to a length of eleven meters. Using the *zeb* as a mast,

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<sup>21</sup> Pinkus notes that much of the labor in textile factories was performed by women, and that because of the toxic chemicals and intense heat involved, such labor posed grave risks. See *Bodily Regimes* 213-28.

he sails to Tell-el-Kibir, where his uncle, King Boubassa, asks to personally experience the virtues of the enormous *zeb*. Taking advantage of his uncle's submissive posture, Mafarka steals the royal scepter. Spackman identifies a series of increasingly "primitive" economies in this sequence, which moves from exchanges based in money (Mafarka sells the horse to the devil), to barter (the devil takes revenge by serving Mafarka the horse's penis), to hoarding (Mafarka's own penis grows after consuming the *zeb*), and finally to theft (Mafarka usurps the throne) (66).

The hoarding in the sequence above, Spackman explains, is rooted in a fantasy of increase without exchange: "The fantasy of eating the *zeb* and the consequent growth of Mafarka's own penis appears to be based upon the notion that grounds the fantasy of hoarding: to accumulate something is to increase it" (66). While accumulating grain in anticipation of a food shortage may represent a profitable form of hoarding, its profitability is predicated on a subsequent exchange, either when grain is sold at a higher price, or when it is consumed in place of grain purchased at a higher price. This dependence on a redemptive moment of exchange—and the resulting futility of the fantasy of hoarding—is even more apparent in the case of the general equivalent—be it money or the phallus—which cannot be *used* but only *exchanged*. Spackman continues:

This notion is, of course, faulty with respect to money, since money must circulate. As Marx explains, the independence of wealth is 'a mere semblance; its independence of circulation exists only in view of circulation, exists as dependence on it.' Wealth is dependent upon exchange, so that what appears to be, in hoarding, an increase in wealth is in fact its decrease. (66)

Like this hoarding of the universal equivalent, the autarchic economics set out by Mussolini and Por above involve the transformation of scarce raw materials into abundance despite the absence of exchange.

Measures taken by the regime to dissimulate the scarcities of the autarchic period resemble the fantasy of hoarding Spackman isolates in *Mafarka* insofar as they put accumulation in place of exchange. In the course of 1935, circulation was increased by four billion lire to 19 billion, and the 40% minimum gold cover held in reserve was suspended (Baer 165-6). Such inflation is the basis of what Gadda will call "la menzogna dell'autosufficienza sive ἀὐτάρκεια" in his vehemently antifascist postwar treatise *Eros e Priapo*:

Lo studioso di scienza delle finanze, da misurare con il metro del terrore la caduta de' bilanci di stato, ch'erano ottimi od almeno onesti, e in genere l'entità e la natura contabile delle concussioni: e 'l discredito, anzi la totale abrogazione del credito: e la menzogna dell'autosufficienza sive ἀὐτάρκεια, e la inflata carta e lo sperpero, e gli altri infiniti malestri: combinati e comportati dalla fanfaronesca gestione. Ipotecava il futuro da rattoppar le tasche, le buche tasche al presente. (*SGF II* 223)

The lie of self-sufficiency is, on the one hand, that upon which fantasies of both hoarding and parthenogenesis rely: that is, the notion that isolation can produce multiplication: that accumulation is possible without exchange, and that procreation is possible "sans le concours et la puante complicité de la matrice de la femme." As Gadda continues, the lie becomes that of self-sufficiency itself, since autonomy is built by borrowing from the future to mend the hemorrhaging pockets of the present. Though Gadda does not specify as much in the passage

above, the self-sufficiency of autarchy is also a lie because the isolation from international markets, of course, is in great part the result of Italy's violent appropriation of Ethiopia.

Given the parallels drawn in the passage above between various inflections of the lie of self-sufficiency, it may be unsurprising that Marx likens hoarding to colonial appropriation, setting out a paradox wherein the practice represents an attempt to concomitantly shut out the world and conquer it:

The hoarding drive is boundless in its nature. Qualitatively or formally considered, money is independent of all limits, that is it is the universal representative of material wealth because it is directly convertible into any other commodity. But at the same time every actual sum of money is limited in amount, and therefore has only a limited efficacy as a means of purchase. This contradiction between the quantitative limitation and the qualitative lack of limitation of money keeps driving the hoarder back to his Sisyphean task: accumulation. He is in the same situation as a world conqueror, who discovers a new boundary with each country he annexes. (*Capital* 230)

In addition to the absence of exchange, the problem with hoarding, for Marx, is that the infinite uses of money—its capacity to “possess all pleasures in potentiality” (*Grundrisse* 228)—contrasts with the finitude of any actual sum. In this sense, hoarding resembles (Freudian) fetishism as described by Giorgio Agamben in *Stanzas*:

Insofar as it is a presence, the fetish object is in fact something concrete and tangible, but insofar as it is the presence of an absence, it is, at the same time, immaterial and intangible, because it alludes continuously beyond itself to something that can never really be possessed.

This essential ambiguity in the status of the fetish perfectly explains a fact that observation had already revealed some time ago, that is, that the fetishist unfailingly tends to collect and multiply fetishes. (33)

For the fetishist whose erotic attachments substitute a phantasized maternal phallus, then, no object can ever approximate the ambivalence balanced between presence and absence embodied in the fetish, and so fetishes tend to proliferate. Similarly, no sum can ever match the boundlessness of money's infinite potential in which the hoarder delights, and so the he is doomed to the Sisyphean task of accumulation.

Goux begins translating this Sisyphean task of accumulating the general equivalent into a libidinal economy by recalling a Sadean description of masturbating before piles of gold: “How divine it is to swim in gold and, as one reckons up one's wealth, to be able to say, here are the means to every black deed, to every pleasure; with this all my wishes can be made to come true, all my fancies can be satisfied” (324). Like the capacity both Sade and Marx isolate in money to possess all pleasures in potentiality, masturbation is fueled by the endless vicissitudes of fantasy unbound to any love object. Accordingly, Thomas Laqueur argues in *Solitary Sex*, an intensifying interest in masturbation beginning in the mid-eighteenth century focuses on the threat of excess posed by the practice, its offer of infinite pleasures unbound to any discrete love object. And as we shall see in the second chapter of this dissertation, the “imaginative excess” that haunts the modern discourse of masturbation—that is, the anxious notion that solitary sex is motored not by any real object but by fantasy—resonates with the rhetorical extravagance of

Manganelli's writing. A semiotic analogue to the modern discourse of masturbation would involve a departure from the referential function in language. Chapters two and three of this dissertation explore the ways in which both Manganelli and Malerba practice and propose aesthetics predicated upon such a departure from referentiality.

Here it may be prudent to pause for a moment to take stock of the fantasies that have started to constellate around our analysis of autarchy. We began by proposing that the autarchic period is characterized by an insistence on a scarcity of raw materials offset by an abundance resulting from various forms of reproductivity and productivity. We noted that this split between scarce raw materials and ample inventive genius bears critical economic, sexual, and philosophical implications, and is sustained by fantasies of parthenogenesis and hoarding, two forms of increase without exchange. In addition to the fantasy of increase without exchange, we have seen the way in which hoarding relies on a tension between a "qualitative lack of limitation" in money's capacity to "possess all pleasures in potentiality" and a "quantitative limitation" in the finitude of any sum. The boundlessness offered by money's potential thus parallels the dangerous excesses of fantasy forewarned by the modern discourse of masturbation, as well as twentieth-century semiotic theory that puts an endless chain of signifying metonymies in place of referentiality. The considerations of various forms of self-sufficiency in the dissertation are guided by these homologies, so that at the core of this dissertation are inflections of idealism that parallel the autarchic insistence on scarce raw material and prolific inventive genius. Whether in the realm of sexuality or aesthetics, the writers discussed in these pages thematize and experiment in very different ways with paradoxical fantasies of boundless immateriality that are nonetheless predicated upon boundaries between nations, sexes, and representational forms.

### **Chapter One. After Time Has Been Consumed: Waste, Debris, and the Subject of Autarchy in Gadda**

Gadda is unique among the writers with whom this dissertation is primarily concerned because his work spans the *ventennio fascista* and grapples directly with both autarchy and the autarchic rift between scarce raw materials and unlimited inventive genius. Chapter one locates Gadda's changing assessments of autarchy in his figurations of various systems, along with the exclusions upon which they are predicated, the waste they produce, and the debris that accumulates at their fringes. In his *Pagine di divulgazione tecnica* dedicated to nitrogen, for example, Gadda imagines a diminished reliance on waste by celebrating new technologies for producing explosives and fertilizers by taking nitrogen directly from the vast atmospheric trove rather than from nitrogenous decomposing vegetable and animal matter. A similar interest in what a system renders useful or discards as extraneous will also be central to "Carabattole a Porta Ludovica," as Gadda describes raggedy knickknacks that seem to have outlived their use but that are nonetheless returned to circulation at the flea market of the essay's title. Gadda's fictional characters, particularly the protagonist of *La cognizione del dolore*, Gonzalo Pirobutirro d'Eltino, embody the isolation of the figurative understanding of autarchy. Ultimately, I argue that while Gonzalo may seem like an autarchic subject because he longs for isolation, he also becomes a sort of waste that cannot be productively integrated into the "tessuto della collettività" (*RR I 573*), and as such poses biopolitical questions that reflect Gadda's growing antipathy for autarchy.

## **Chapter Two. After the Gaze of Another: Sexual and Aesthetic Solidarities of 'Figaliation' in Giorgio Manganelli**

Unlike Gadda, Manganelli does not write explicitly about the period of economic autarchy. Instead, he imagines literature as an isolated and self-sufficient realm, characterized by illegibility, *menzogna*, and a rejection of *impegno*. Chapter two proposes that in “La letteratura come menzogna,” the poem “ta ta tapum” and a posthumously published *appunto critico*, Manganelli binds these terms to bodies in general and reproductive organs in particular. Examining the graphic figurative economy of *Hilarotragoedia*, I find an expression of fury and frustration at the impossibility of parthenogenesis and at the cycles of fallen erections and squandered sperm to which man is bound. The genesis of the text itself is part of this economy, so that Manganelli consistently likens his own writing to reproduction and its myriad alternatives, which will include sperm languishing on sweat-soaked sheets, hysterical pregnancies, senile fetuses, aborted words, a fellow-abortion (“conaborto”), mocking abortions, economized genitals, an infecund vagina, phosphorous fetuses, the never born, and many others.

Chapter two understands Manganelli’s thematization of squandered sperm in the context of the modern discourse of masturbation that Laqueur isolates in *Solitary Sex*. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, he argues, the threat masturbation was considered to pose shifted from its depletion of a limited stock of sperm to the intemperate profligacy it offered. Characterized by secrecy, isolation, and imaginative excess, masturbation emerges from modern discourse as a frightful *doppelgänger* of the qualities that define Enlightenment individualism and the development of a credit-driven market in which desire is not bound to finite resources but must be essentially insatiable. In both models, masturbation is understood in terms of the autarchic threat it poses, though the locus of this autarchic threat shifts from the physical to the psychical. Such a shift involves a transformed concept of autarchy—first characterized by an economy in which there is limited reservoir, then by the isolation that results from infinite stock. As we have already noted, both iterations autarchy are essential in fascist Italy.

In addition to the thematization of masturbation, Manganelli’s texts perform Laqueur’s figuration of the threat posed by modern masturbation as based in the triad of imaginative excess (*menzogna*), solitude (lack of *impegno*), and secrecy (illegibility). Indeed, the “imaginative excess” of modern masturbation resonates with the rhetorical extravagance advocated and practiced in “La letteratura come menzogna”: most basically, a departure from the referential function in language, so that the infinitely refracting *mise-en-abîme* comes to represent literature itself. Manganelli’s poetics are also characterized by the use of metaphors that either fail to effect the transport suggested by the figure’s etymology, or that bridge no difference with the copular “to be,” and thus achieve tautology rather than analogy. Such figures advance Manganelli’s affirmation of illegibility. More radically, however, they hold vehicle and tenor, proper and improper in suspense, and thus offer a glimpse of the more equitable models of “authentic metaphor” and “analogy” described by Agamben in *Stanzas* and Kaja Silverman in *Flesh of My Flesh* respectively.

## **Chapter Three. After the *Giallo*: Hoarding, Contagion, and the Boundaries of Genre in Luigi Malerba’s *Il serpente***

The autarchy chapter two isolates in *Hilarotragoedia* and other writings by Manganelli is primarily sexual and aesthetic: the historical specificity that roots these writings in fascist period is indirect and mediated, forged through a *figaliation* with Gadda established by their similar figurations of a horror of the feminine. Like the aesthetic dogma outlined by Manganelli, which imagines the text as a parturient space inaccessible to the reader’s comprehension and to any

form of engagement with reality, Malerba theorizes literature as an isolated realm. Manganelli's embrace of isolation produces a language that is virtually freed of referential weight, so that literature becomes infinitely reflexive: "L'opera letteraria è un artificio, un artefatto di incerta e ironicamente fatale destinazione. L'artificio racchiude, ad infinitum, altri artifici" ("La letteratura come menzogna" 222). Malerba's understanding of the autonomy of literature, on the other hand, is based on an insistence upon a sort of absolute referentiality, according to which "una barca è una barca" (Cannon 235)—though a boat in literature bears no relation to a real boat, let alone to female anatomy (as the dime-store Freudian who seems to haunt the writer might propose). Malerba's theorizations of his own aesthetic practice, then, amount to something like an avowal—however unsustainable—of a tautological mode of signification based upon the immediacy of objects.

Chapter three considers the problematization of the relationship between words and things inherent in such aesthetic theories in the context of Malerba's *Il serpente*, a crime novel without a crime, told by a narrator who repudiates his narrative. I argue that by foregrounding collecting and signifying practices that today might fall within the nascent diagnostic category of "hoarding disorder" and, more broadly, the cultural discourse of hoarding, *Il serpente* necessarily departs from what Carlo Ginzburg calls the "evidential paradigm": the epistemological foundation of the conventional *giallo*.<sup>22</sup> Following Brian Richardson's discussion of the "denarrated" text, I trace the ways in which the novel's chain of negations solicits a pathologizing reading according to which the descriptions of increasingly cluttered interior spaces, the use of objects to reflect on mortality, and the persistence of logical paradoxes based in "underinclusion" anticipate the contemporary invention of hoarding as a distinct pathology, the hoarder as a type of individual. I argue, finally, that with an introductory chapter set during the period of economic autarchy, the novel gestures toward a logic shared by hoarding and fascist imperialism. External from the chain of negations that tethers the plot, the introductory chapter therefore emerges as a sort of primal scene—if not because of a relationship of causality, then because the suggestive parallels drawn in the novel.

Readers of *Il serpente*, then, are invited to take on a project very much like that of this dissertation: to consider the aesthetic and libidinal legacies of economic autarchy, and to interrogate the historico-political stakes of the dreams of aesthetic autonomy and self-sufficiency that persist long after autarchy.

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the diagnostic category and discursive formation of hoarding are both geographically and chronologically distant from Malerba's *Il serpente*. The explosion of discourse about compulsive hoarding occurred in the last decade, and has taken place primarily in the United States.

## Chapter One. After Time Has Been Consumed: Waste, Debris, and the Subject of Autarchy in Gadda

### The Subject of Autarchy

In the introduction we saw how autarchy functions in this dissertation both as a historical moment and as a figure that expresses fantasies of isolation and self-sufficiency. Of the writers with whom this dissertation is primarily concerned, this double meaning is most central to the work of Gadda, who writes throughout the *ventennio fascista*. His misanthropic characters—particularly Gonzalo Pirobutirro d’Eltino, the sullen protagonist of *La cognizione del dolore*—embody the isolation of the figurative understanding of autarchy.<sup>1</sup> Gadda also grapples directly with autarchy during the autarchic period, with most urgency in short news items and technical essays.<sup>2</sup> In these and other articles published in the aftermath of the invasion of Ethiopia, Gadda sets out scientific and economic strategies to buttress national autarchy. These writings represent a critical threshold in Gadda’s metamorphosis from engineer to writer, so that Lorenzo Greco calls them “Il grado zero della scrittura gaddiana” (54). In postwar writings—particularly in the 1967 treatise *Eros e Priapo*—autarchy, now derisively labeled “la menzogna dell’autosufficienza sive αὐτάρκεια” also figures prominently, often representing fascism synecdochically.

In the Introduction, we noted Por’s definition of autarchy as an emphatic resourcefulness: “To keep an increasing population in civilized conditions [...] in a country poor in raw materials [...] and with relatively narrow territory is not possible without autarchy; i.e. the use of all its resources” (33). Building on this formulation, I locate Gadda’s changing assessments of autarchy in his figurations of various systems along with the exclusions upon which they are predicated, the waste they produce, and the debris that accumulates at their fringes. In his essays on nitrogen, for example, Gadda imagines a diminished reliance on waste by celebrating new technologies for producing explosives and fertilizers that utilize nitrogen taken directly from the vast atmospheric

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<sup>1</sup> *La cognizione del dolore* was first published in seven non-consecutive issues of *Letteratura* between 1938-1941. The last of the seven parts concluded with “continua.” In 1963, Einaudi published the first united version of the text, under the supervision of Gian Carlo Roscioni. In 1969, two additional chapters, not yet published in Italian, were included in William Weaver’s translation, *Acquainted With Grief*. Weaver divided the novel into three parts, the last of which contained the two previously unpublished chapters, and was introduced with the translator’s note: “The Third Part, unpublished in Italian, was written immediately after the preceding sections, in 1941. The translation has therefore been made from the manuscript, which the author was unwilling or unable to reread” (186). In 1970, Roscioni edited a second edition that included the two final chapters previously unpublished in Italian, which were introduced by Weaver’s note (translated but not cited). The poem “Autunno,” which was included in the 1963 edition, was placed between the Second and Third parts. In 1971 Einaudi redressed these strange editorial decisions by dividing the novel into two parts, the first comprising chapters one through four, the second chapters five through nine, and changing the editorial note that precedes the final two chapters to the less speculative: “Il testo che segue è, salve alcune correzioni apportate nel dicembre 1960, quello provvisorio di allora: consentendone la pubblicazione nel 1970, l’Autore non l’ha rivisto né riletto,” and including the dialogue, “L’editore chiede venia del recupero chiamando in causa l’autore,” as well as “Autunno” at the end of the novel. In 1987, Emilio Manzotti edited a critical edition with ample notes and an appendix that includes sketches, outlines, and fragments.

<sup>2</sup> The articles were subsequently published in the *Azoto e altri scritti di divulgazione scientifica*, edited by Vanni Scheiwiller in 1986, and in the Garzanti collected works with the title *Pagine di divulgazione tecnica*.

trove rather than relying upon nitrogenous decomposing vegetable and animal matter.<sup>3</sup> A similar tension between what a system renders useful or discards as extraneous will also be central to “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” as Gadda describes raggedy knickknacks that seem to have outlived their use but that are nonetheless returned to circulation at the flea market of the essay’s title.<sup>4</sup> *La cognizione* also grapples with the problem of waste, as Gonzalo’s exclusion from the “tessuto della collettività” suggests biopolitical questions about lives worthy of living. Indeed, this chapter argues that while Gonzalo may seem like an autarchic subject because he longs for isolation, he also becomes a sort of waste that cannot be productively integrated into the social fabric, and as such reveals “la menzogna dell’autosufficienza sive αὐτάρκεια”—and with it Gadda’s growing antipathy for autarchy.

Perhaps no one better embodies an autarchic model of subjectivity than Gonzalo, the tormented “ultimo Hidalgo” of *La cognizione* who lives with his mother, “the Signora,” in Lukones, a town in the Néa Kéltiké region of the fictional—if also transparently Italian—South American country Maradagàl. The hidalgo is introduced indirectly by the condemning chorus of the “albero della collettività,” (*RR I 579*), which is decorated by the lively accounts of Peppa, the washerwoman, Beppa, “la pescivendola a pié scalzi” (*RR I 580*), and Pina, “la moglie nana dell’affossatore principale” (*RR I 580*). José, the “peon” of the Pirobutirro villa, joins this chorus, describing Gonzalo as having all seven deadly sins closed up in his stomach: “Sosteneva ch’egli avesse dentro, tutti e sette, nel ventre, i sette peccati capitali, chiusi dentro nel ventre, come sette serpenti: che lo rimordevano e divoravano dal di dentro, dalla mattina alla sera: e perfin di notte, nel sonno” (*RR I 597*). Summoned to the villa by José at the outset of the novel, Doctor Higuera conducts a thorough medical examination of Gonzalo: he squeezes, pricks, tickles and pokes the patient and listens to his heart, bronchia, lungs and belly, but finds nothing wrong save the recurrent “crisi di sfiducia nella vita” (*RR I 622*).

Gonzalo’s lack of faith in life, his “male oscuro” is a central enigma of the novel.<sup>5</sup> It manifests itself in the character’s contempt for the people of Lukones and the filth they trample through the Pirobutirro villa, his flashes of cruelty toward his mother, his rage toward those who usurp the Signora’s attention and covet her possessions, and perhaps most importantly if less obscurely, his grief at the loss of his brother.<sup>6</sup> Unlike his illustrious forefathers, Spanish settlers

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<sup>3</sup> Approximately 78% of the earth’s atmosphere is composed of nitrogen gas (N<sub>2</sub>).

<sup>4</sup> “Carabattole di Porta Ludovica” was first published with accompanying photographs as “Fiera a Milano” in *Panorama* on March 27, 1940, then included in *Gli anni* (1943), *Verso la Certosa* (1961), and *Le meraviglie d’Italia – Gli anni* (1964).

<sup>5</sup> In one of the most lyric sections of the novel, the Signora wanders about the villa during a storm, recalling the sweetness of her lost son and wondering at the foul-disposition of her son who remains among the living: “Era il male oscuro di cui le storie e le leggi e le universe discipline delle gran cattedre persistono a dover ignorare la causa, i modi: e lo si porta dentro di sé per tutto il folgorato scoscendere d’una vita, più greve ogni giorno, immedicato” (*RR I 690*). This characterization of Gonzalo’s *male oscuro* will provide the title for Giuseppe Berto’s psychoanalytic novel, *Il male oscuro*, published in 1964.

<sup>6</sup> In a televised interview of 1963, Gadda describes the death of a brother as both motive and meaning of the novel:

Cognizione è anche il procedimento conoscitivo, il graduale avvicinamento ad una determinata nozione. Questo procedimento può essere lento, penoso, amaro, può comportare il passaggio attraverso esperienze strazianti della realtà. La morte di un giovine fratello caduto in guerra può distruggere la nostra vita. Si ricordino i versi disperati di Catullo. (“*Per favore*” 153)



who ruled ruthlessly according to the orders of Philip II, Gonzalo wants only to be left alone, in silence, to write: “Attediato dai clamori della radio, avrebbe voluto una investitura da Dio, non a gestire la Néa Keltiké per gli stipendi di Don Felipe el Rey Católico, bensì a scrivere una postilla al *Timeo*, nel silenzio, per gli stipendi di nessuno” (RR I 607). Ordained by God, salaried by no one, Gonzalo would remove himself from all human interaction, (save for his passionate and possessive relationship with his mother), and write for nobody: “prosa dura, incollata, che nessuno legge” (RR I 616), bejeweled with “parole difficili, che nessuno capisce” (RR I 616). Among the symptoms of Gonzalo’s *crisi di sfiducia*, his *male oscuro*, is the refusal that indirectly provokes the tragedy with which the novel ends: his failure to subscribe to the *Nistitùos de vigilancia para la noche*, a mafia-like organization that offers landowners of Maradagàl the choice “d’aderire o di non aderire.” Like “your money or your life,” however, “d’aderire o di non aderire” turns out to be no choice at all: though the novel concludes on a note of ambiguity, all evidence suggests that the assault that leaves the Signora for dead represents a retaliation for the latter choice.

Gonzalo’s repudiation of the world, his irritable rage and misanthropic isolation is so total that, in the influential 1963 introduction to *La cognizione*, Gianfranco Contini describes the hidalgo as a “bozzolo allergico” (10), whose neurosis seems to preexist any grievance. Like critics of *La cognizione*, its characters note Gonzalo’s isolation and ill disposition. Approaching the Villa Pirobutirro, Doctor Higuera considers his patient: “Così appartato, e così lontano da tutti, a Lukones, che lo si sarebbe detto un misantropo” (RR I 596). Gadda scholar Robert Dombroski understands Gonzalo as “no longer a ‘subject-in-the-world’” (1999: 75), and recalls a passage from the philosophical dialogue *Meditazione milanese* in which the character of “Il critico” asks: “Non ricordate che la monade o io è un assolutamente semplice: e che la monade è la casa buia senza finestre?... È il chiuso pensiero, puro io, che non ha bisogno di luce dal di fuori, ché ha in sé la luce?...” (SVP 804).<sup>7</sup> A self-sufficient dark house without windows, a pure ego or closed thought, the subject Gadda describes in *Meditazione* is one that is utterly cut off from the world—which, as in *La cognizione*, is a gossiping network that is gendered, maleficent, and working class. *Il critico* continues: “Un sistema è invece, secondo le vostre espressioni, un mostro indescrivibile, che fa pettegolezzi con tutti, come certe serve che coinvolgono nella loro curiosità malefica tutti i coinquilini nella casa del mondo universo” (SVP 804).<sup>8</sup>

In one of the most famous passages of *La cognizione*, Gonzalo literalizes Gadda’s figuration in *Meditazione* of the ego as a house without windows, concluding a tirade against

The loss of a brother, in the passage above, is shared by Gonzalo, insofar as he is the character whose *cognizione del dolore* is at the center of the novel; the author, whose brother Enrico, also fell in war; the reader, evoked by “la nostra vita”; and Catullus, whose verses struggle with the loss of a brother. While a longstanding critical tradition designates *La cognizione* the “romanzo della madre,” recent scholarship by Federica Pedriali emphasizes the centrality of the deceased brother. See “The Mark of Cain: Mourning and Dissimulation in the Works of Carlo Emilio Gadda.”

<sup>7</sup> *Meditazione milanese*, a collection of philosophical notes, was composed in Milan between February 1928 and May of the following year, when Gadda was on leave of absence from the Società Ammonia Casale because of a stomach ulcer—an ailment that will also afflict Gonzalo. It was published posthumously in 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the house without windows and the gossiping apartment building map surprisingly well onto Gadda’s two most celebrated novels, *La cognizione* and *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, respectively.

personal pronouns delivered to the perplexed Doctor Higuera by voicing a desire to shut himself up with his mother in the Villa Pirobutirro:

“Dentro, io, nella mia casa, con mia madre: e tutti i Giuseppi e le Battistine e le Pi.... le Beppe, tutti i nipoti ciuchi e trombati in francese o in matematica di tutti i colonnelli del Maradagàl.... Via, via! fuori!.... fuori tutti! Questa è, e deve essere, la mia casa.... nel mio silenzio.... la mia povera casa....” (RR I 639)

The tirade begins, however, not with an expression of Gonzalo’s wish for isolation, but with an invective that doubly undermines such a desire, both by scoffing at his mother’s refusal to seek medical attention, and by speaking *as* her: “Bel modo di curarsi!.... a dire: io non ho nulla. Io non ho mai avuto bisogno di nessuno!.... io, più i dottori stanno alla larga, e meglio mi sento.... Io mi riguardo da me, che son sicura di non sbagliare.... Io, io, io!” (RR I 635). Gonzalo here undercuts a model of subjectivity rooted in an isolated ego both by mocking his mother’s embrace of such a model, and by speaking *as* her.

Gonzalo’s attack on his mother’s resolute independence and more generally on personal pronouns, however, morphs into an expression of his exasperation with the domestic workers who trample through his villa, seeking favors from his mother, and leaving behind a trail of mud, urine, and lice: “.... I pronomi! Sono i pidocchi del pensiero. Quando il pensiero ha i pidocchi, si gratta, come tutti quelli che hanno i pidocchi.... e nelle unghie, allora.... ci ritrova i pronomi: i pronomi di persona....” (RR I 635). Like lice, personal pronouns—particularly shifters—are contagious, as is the logic of Gonzalo’s diatribe. They hop about from host to host, but never really *belong* to anyone. And lice, along with bedbugs and fleas, become a critical locus of Gonzalo’s increasing irritation—most vividly in the scene that provokes his enraged departure in the penultimate chapter of the novel, as he looks on at the swarm of filthy villagers surrounding his mother. The scene begins as Gonzalo recalls the biblical mandate: “Nel suo spirito, eccitato dagli alcaloidi del caffè, si insinuarono i Vangeli: ‘ama il tuo prossimo come te stesso.’ Ma subito il maligno gli suggeriva: ‘....comprese le pulci?....’” (RR I 715). The problem, then, for Gonzalo (as for all), is that you can’t be an “io”—you can’t take up a subject position—without sharing it with the filthy flea-bitten system: it’s not just the will of God, it’s the nature of language.

In moving from mimicking his mother’s independence to raging against personal pronouns, Gonzalo first repudiates the isolated ego and then assails the flea-bitten intersubjectivity of personal pronouns. In this tirade, as in the *Meditazione*, the house becomes a central metaphor, as Gonzalo understands the ego to be formed: “Quando l’essere si parzializza, in un sacco, in una lercia trippa, i di cui confini sono più miserabili e più fessi di questo fesso muro pagatasse...” (RR I 637-8). The ego, then, is formed when being is separated into a foul sack of guts and is confined, as though by a taxpaying but crumbling old wall, like the one that surrounds the Pirobutirro villa. Gonzalo concludes by lamenting the vulnerability of the villa and expressing a desire to shut himself up with his mother:

“Il muro è gobbo, lo vedo, e anche le anime dei morti lo scavalcherebbero. [...] È storto, tutto gobbe: lo so: ma il suo segno, il suo significato rimane, e agli onesti gli deve valere, alla gente: deve valere. Per forza. Dacché attesta il possesso: il sacrosanto privato privatissimo mio, mio!.... mio proprio e particolare possesso.... che è possesso delle mie unghie, dieci unghie, delle mie giuste e vere dieci unghie!....” levò le mani dalle tasche e

le mise daddovero sotto agli occhi del medico, tutt'e due pari, con dita adunche, come fossero artigli d'un avvoltoio. (RR I 638-9)

The wall that encloses the villa, like the bounds of foul being, is deteriorating; its perimeter merely signifies—but does not enforce—possession. And like the border of being, violated by the lice-like pronouns that burrow beneath our fingernails, the confines of the Pirobutirro property are invaded by Giuseppes, Battistinas, Beppes, and inept colonels' grandchildren. The boundaries are further debased by the ridicule of the narrating voice, which counteracts the referential urgency of Gonzalo's gesture by likening the hands he claims so emphatically to possess to a vulture's claws.

More importantly, in literalizing the metaphor of the “casa buia senza finestre” to embrace the self-sufficiency Gonzalo faults in his mother, the culmination of the diatribe reverses the motivating drive with which it began. And finally, as the ego transforms from a walled-in sack of foul guts to a *povera casa* whose dilapidated wall symbolizes but doesn't enforce proprietary boundaries, the “io” becomes “mio,” eliding being and having. Possession, in Gonzalo's rant, represents a means to partition something off for oneself—be it a villa, a sack of foul guts, or a personal pronoun. The elision of being and having above, then, amounts to the dream of an autonomous form of being. But as might be surmised from the impossibility of ever really *possessing* the shifter “I,” such a form of being does not fare well in the text. Nonetheless, the elision of being and having, as well as the emphatic “il sacrosanto privato privatissimo mio, mio!” signals the interest in possession that will be central to Gadda's writing and his understanding of subjectivity, from his 1918 observation in *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* of his cell-mate, Cola's “mania di possesso” (SGF II 841), to his bedraggled theorization of fascism and subjectivity in *Eros e Priapo*.

### **Comprese le pulci!**

Despite multiple and manifest similarities between Gonzalo and Gadda, the “privato privatissimo mio, mio!” of the former, as we have seen, is doomed: not just by the mockery of *La cognizione*'s narrating voice, but also by the poetic and scientific projects of the latter.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The hermeneutic imperative cast by these autobiographical resonances is so forceful as to prompt a frequent elision in Gadda studies between the writer and his characters. This tendency becomes so pronounced, for example, in the critical edition of *La cognizione*, that Manzotti glosses the Signora's recollection: “Le avevano precisato il nome, crudele e nero del monte: dove era caduto” with the biography of Gadda's mother: “Il nome del monte dove il figlio (Enrico G.) era precipitato col suo aereo il 23 aprile 1918” (256), without any acknowledgement that the Signora of *La cognizione* is not *actually* Gadda's mother.

Such metonymical blurring reaches such excesses that it is a commonplace in writing about *La cognizione*, for example, to refer to the protagonist as “Gadda-Gonzalo” (See, for example Elio Gioanola's *L'uomo dei topazi*, Albert Sbragia's “Fear of the Periphery” and *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic*, Francesco Gábici's *Gadda: Il dolore della cognizione*, Romano Luperini, “La costruzione della cognizione in Gadda.” Elio Gioanola renders this hyphenating impulse to a prattling extreme, with “Gadda-Rineri” (“La passeggiata autunnale”), “Gigi-Carlo Emilio” and “Gigi-Enrico” (“San Giorgio in casa Brocchi”), and “capitano-Gadda” (“*Socer generque*”), among others. This blurring may be justified for Gioanola by the aim of his 1977 *L'uomo dei topazi*: he studies Gadda's writing to understand the ills of the mind that produced it, in a very Freudian tradition of literary criticism. He takes a more restrained approach in *Topazi e altre gioie familiari* (2004), justifying the interpretive tendency by

Indeed, the complexity with which Gadda figures objects suggests the difficulty of removing some element from the system, of partitioning off anything for “proprio e particolare” possession. In the essay “Un’opinione sul neorealismo,” Gadda distinguishes his own poetics from those of neorealism on the basis of his treatment of objects and events:

E poi, cose, oggetti, eventi, non mi valgono per sé, chiusi nell’involucro di una loro pelle individua, sfericamente contornati nei loro apparenti confini (Spinoza direbbe modi): mi valgono in una aspettazione, in una attesa di ciò che seguirà, o in un richiamo di quanto li ha preceduti e determinati.<sup>10</sup> (*SGF I* 629)

Gadda figures his style, then, as one in which objects and events are not discrete, but embody both memory and potentiality that transcend their form. In neorealism, on the other hand, he considers each object and episode a “nudo nocciolo” (*SGF I* 649) that, like rosary beads, can be strung together but remain distinct. Gadda’s own narrative architecture, unlike what he describes as the resulting beaded “racconto astrutturale, granulare” of neorealism, is composed of a richly ambiguous semiotic density, so that, as Gian Carlo Roscioni explains in his seminal study *La disarmonia prestabilita* (1969): “Ogni pietra, ogni oggetto, ogni fatto è dunque suscettibile di innumerevoli significati. Gli oggetti sono punti da cui partono (o, piuttosto, in cui convergono) raggi infiniti, e non hanno, non possono avere ‘contorni’” (8).

This understanding of the interrelatedness of objects echoes Gadda’s theorization of causality in the *Meditazione*:

Qui voglio concludere che cause ed effetti sono un pulsare della molteplicità irretita in sé stessa e non sono mai pensabili al singolare. La più semplice causa, un colpo di martello presuppone l’incudine. E la forza non è mai sola: si manifesta polarmente. L’ipotiposi della catena delle cause va emendata e guarita, se mai, con quella di una maglia o rete: ma non di una maglia a due dimensioni (superficie) o a tre dimensioni

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likening Gadda to Hitchcock: “Per un vezzo narcisistico Alfred Hitchcock metteva sempre il suo faccione in una qualche inquadratura di ogni suo film” (34).

In the second monograph, Gioanola also justifies his critical move by citing the limited horizons of Gadda’s literary world:

A solito Roscioni, a cui in ogni caso tutti i lettori di Gadda devono la massima riconoscenza, punta a distinguere, anche nei più patente autobiografismo, tra rispecchiante e rispecchiato, sempre nel timore di confondere autore e personaggio, quando il fare la spola tra ‘una e l’altro presenta, tra differenze e somiglianze, tanti vantaggi interpretativi. (34)

In “Terre emerse: Il problema degli indici di Gadda,” the final chapter of *La disarmonia prestabilita*, Roscioni describes the extent to which oblique allusions in Gadda’s oeuvre are often decipherable only by referencing his neurosis and biography.

Gadda too blurs the distinction between himself and his characters. For example, in an interview with Dacia Maraini, he describes his father’s investment in the reviled villa in Brianza. Maraini asks, “Lei ha vissuto in questa proprietà per qualche tempo?” Gadda responds: “Sì, certo. Ne ho parlato nella *Cognizione del dolore*” (“*Per favore*” 156). This response obscures the fact that the novel is set in Maradagàl, a fictional South American country, and that any resemblance to the villa in Brianza is mediated by that fiction.

<sup>10</sup> First published in 1951 in the volume *Inchiesta su neorealismo* edited by Carlo Bo; then included in *I viaggi la morte* in 1958.

(spazio-maglia, catena spaziale, catena a tre dimensioni), sì di una maglia o rete a dimensioni infinite. Ogni anello o grumo o groviglio di relazioni è legato da infiniti filamenti a grumi o groviglio infiniti. (*SVP* 650)

Like the objects and events described above, causes and effects, in the *Meditazione*, are so thoroughly enmeshed that they cannot be separated out into any discrete singularity. Accordingly, Gadda suggests that the trite image of a causal chain be emended to more accurately reflect the infinite complexity of causality. In place of a chain, he proposes a fabric sewn in infinite dimensions, so that each stitch is stitched with infinite threads to infinite other stitches. Like a shared language, whose shifters can never be claimed by any one individual, such a great fabric of causality cannot be unraveled to release any one stitch.

The infinitely dimensioned fabric of causes Gadda describes in the *Meditazione* in turn anticipates detective Francesco Ingravallo's famous philosophy in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*:

Sosteneva, fra l'altro, che le inopinate catastrofi non sono mai la conseguenza o l'effetto che dir si voglia d'un unico motivo, d'una causa al singolar: ma sono come un vortice, un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo, verso cui hanno cospirato tutta una molteplicità di causali convergenti. Diceva anche nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio, o gnommero, che alla romana vuol dire gomitolò. (*RR II* 16)

This “nodo o groviglio, o garbuglio, o gnommero” of converging multiplicities that cannot be untangled into any discrete singularity in many ways becomes emblematic of Gadda's poetics—in part because the variations of the image appear throughout his oeuvre, but also because it approximates the very shape of his digressive narratives.

At the level of style, Gadda's texts develop this model of objects and causes as a densely woven and infinitely dimensioned fabric in part through an emphatic privileging of metonymy, both in syntax and in structure.<sup>11</sup> In a sentence that Roscioni cites as an example of Gadda's frequent use of qualifying nouns, rather than adjectives, *La cognizione* announces José's entrance as follows: “Intanto entrò, zoccolando, la miseria e il fetore d'un peone” (*RR I* 704).<sup>12</sup> Here it is the “miseria” and “fetore” that perform the action rather than the peon with whom the qualities are associated. At the level of structure, Gadda's narrative works follow wildly digressive trajectories that are usually guided by metonymy. In *Resisting Arrest*, Robert Rushing announces this digressivity by prefacing a lengthy quotation with the disclaimer: “A ‘proper’ citation from Gadda would necessarily require dozens if not hundreds of pages, as every scene is always enmeshed, situated within a subdigression of a digression from what appeared to be a principal plot” (137). This characterization of Gadda's densely woven texts clearly recalls the description above of a fabric of causality from which no single stich could be removed. In *Digression: A Narrative Strategy of the Italian Novel*, Olivia Santovetti writes: “In Gadda digression is not simply one narrative technique among others, but the technique that best expresses the originality of his writing” (141). Building on Pierpaolo Antonello's study of Gadda's Darwinism, Santovetti proposes that the narrative digressions mimic evolution, which proceeds meandering along multiple pathways marked by genetic variation. She notes that Gadda's description of Darwinism

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<sup>11</sup> On the privileging of metonymy in Gadda see Roscioni, *La disarmonia* 8.

<sup>12</sup> Roscioni, *La disarmonia* 15–17.

in the *Meditazione* might just as well apply to his own narrative digressions: “La teoria dell’evoluzione, ne’ suoi più recenti comunicati, ama rappresentare i complessi geologici come un successivo differenziarsi o moltiplicarsi, per derivazioni, per divergenze, delle specie dai generi” (145).

Privileging metonymy at the levels of both syntax and structure, Gadda’s texts forge a slippery system that fuses cause with effect, part with whole, and contiguous entities. And beyond this metonymic work of each text, Gadda’s oeuvre similarly seems a densely woven fabric, with recurring character types and topoi, and even passages repeated verbatim.<sup>13</sup> Gadda’s theoretical model of a *garbuglio*, as he explains in “I viaggi la morte” (1927), results in a world of causes and effects so enmeshed that: “Se una libellula vola a Tokio, innesca una catena di reazioni che raggiungono a me” (*SGF I* 581). And Gadda’s textual world, as Roscioni notes, reiterates this interconnectivity, so that in *La cognizione*, when Gonzalo laments the heavy tax burden borne by the Pirobutirro, he alludes laconically to the *libellula a Tokio* of “I viaggi la morte”: “Perché la colpa ce l’avremo noi; noi Pirobutirro. E dunque dovremo pagare. Dacché siamo colpevoli d’ogni cosa. Abbiamo noi la colpa di tutto.... qualunque cosa succeda.... Anche a Tokio.... a Singapore.... la colpa è nostra” (*RR I* 645).

Gonzalo’s desire for isolation is utterly incompatible with this *garbuglio* of converging causes, in which even the most minute phenomena trigger a “catena di reazioni,” or perhaps more accurately, a “maglia o rete a dimensioni infinite” with global consequences. Similarly, his longing for possession—for a linguistic conflation of being and having so that “I” might be “mine”—cannot be realized in a shared language, or in a world where objects have no boundaries but extend beyond themselves in a densely-woven fabric.

Though the conflation of being and having cannot be realized in Gadda’s literary universe, the *mania di possesso* is nonetheless central to his writings, which see the intersection of two distinct models of hoarding. The first might be understood as an investment strategy in response to scarcity. Such a strategy is predicated upon a subsequent exchange, when the possession is sold at a higher place, or consumed in place of something else purchased at a higher price. This form of “hoarding,” then, depends upon a redemptive moment of exchange. The second form prefigures hoarding discourse as it has very recently come to be characterized by an aesthetic fetishization of waste and useless objects. The thematization of waste and useless objects in Gadda’s writing, this chapter argues, amounts to a meditation on a system’s exclusions, and becomes inflected with first with enthusiasm for, then with disillusionment with fascism and more specifically, autarchy.

Gadda’s popular writings on nitrogen set out a similar tension between the *garbuglio* and some element that would be removed from it. “L’azoto,” published on March 21, 1932 in *L’Ambrosiano*, figures the world as a single metabolic system with respect to nitrogen, while the three-part series bearing the heading “Per l’autarchia economica,” published in the *Gazzetta del*

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<sup>13</sup> Roscioni explains: “Gadda non esita infatti a ripetersi, e lo fa con un’insistenza che non sarebbe perdonata a uno scrittore di minor estro e respiro” (43), and isolates several prominent topoi in Gadda’s oeuvre:

Sono *tipi* (il giovanotto che ha successo con le donne, l’aristocratico che scrive il trattato di morale, le vecchia o la Contadina senza mutande, il bambino che non riesce a scuola, ecc.) situazioni (la gita in macchina con la ragazza, il temuto furto degli orecchini, il monile dimenticato nella toilette), oggetti e animali simboli (la torre, la campana, il castello, il muro, il fulmine, il parafulmine, il paracarro, il pitale, la gallina, la mosca, il tarlo, lo scarafaggio, il cavallo, ecc.) movimenti psicologici e stilistici. (43)

*Popolo* every two weeks beginning on April 13, 1937, reframes the nitrogen cycle so as to isolate Italy from the rest of the world. “L’azoto” also differs from the autarchic writings on nitrogen because it is markedly more interested in bacteria and processes of putrefaction that are integral to the nitrogen cycle. The autarchic essays, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on the extent to which technologies might allow Italy to bypass the decomposition inherent to the cycle. What the 1932 essay and the autarchic writings share is a new awareness of the finite resources that are required to make fertilizers and explosives using traditional methods.

If Gonzalo’s desire to shut himself up in the Villa Purobutirro is risible, Gadda’s writings on nitrogen represent a more earnest embrace of economic autarchy in which Italy might be removed from international markets, and in which processes of decomposition might be separated from the nitrogen cycle. In these and other writings, autarchy organizes a constellation of ideas relating to scarcity, waste, and possession that remains cohesive even as Gadda’s affect toward it shifts radically, mirroring his changed opinion of fascism, which moves from early support to intense, if superficial acrimony.

#### “Fascista no, non direi”<sup>14</sup>

Until recent work by Peter Hainsworth (1997) and Dombroski (1984 and 1999), Gadda was generally considered to have borne a quietly dissimulated disdain for the regime, vented only in the vitriol of his later works *Quer pasticciaccio* (first serialized in *Letteratura* between 1946-1947, then published in a revised and expanded form in 1957) and *Eros and Priapo*, and in the posthumous *I miti del somaro* (1988).<sup>15</sup> This understanding develops from a knotty skein of causes, including allusive statements by Gadda like his celebration of the figure of Alessandro Manzoni’s Don Abbondio in a televised interview: “Io sento una simpatia per il personaggio di Don Abbondio, il quale non ha altro torto di fronte alla morale illustre, se non quello di avere ceduto alla violenza e al terrore di questa violenza.”<sup>16</sup> In his biography *Il gran lombardo*, Giulio Cattaneo describes an encounter between Gadda and a young communist, who asks, “Ingegnere, Lei è stato fascista?” (116). Gadda responds: “Ma, veramente, fascista no, non direi. All’inizio

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<sup>14</sup> Gadda, quoted in Giulio Cattaneo’s *Il gran lombardo* 117.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Adriano Seroni, who writes in *Gadda*: “In conclusione, dunque, lo ‘sfogo’ abreattivo ‘postumo’ gaddiano contro il fascismo e il suo fondatore può essere assunto dal lettore di Gadda come un punto di riferimento costante e necessario a un approfondimento interpretativo di tutta l’opera gaddiana” (93). Dombroski cites Giuliano Manacorda, who calls the patriotism and concern with military correctness of *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*: “Il massimo delle concessioni che Gadda abbia fatto al fascismo” (245). Finally, Gian Paolo Biasin writes, in “L’eros di Gadda e il Priapo di Mussolini”: “egli ha vissuto e sofferto sdegnosamente, silenziosamente” (473).

Other noteworthy considerations of Gadda’s fascism that focus not on the vitriolic (if often superficial) antifascism of the postwar works, but on earlier texts include Cesare Cases’ “Un ingegnere de letteratura” (1958), Greco’s “L’autocensura di Gadda: gli scritti tecnico-autarchici,” Dombroski’s chapter “Gadda: fascismo e psicanalisi” in *L’esistenza ubbidente* (1984), and Peter Hainsworth’s “Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Gadda” in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives* (1997).

In “(Re)Considering Gadda and Futurism” (2002), Norma Bouchard notes that discussions of Gadda’s relationship to futurism have been overshadowed by (and often conflated with) considerations of his fascism. In “L’elica e il sistema: *I miti del somaro* di Carlo Emilio Gadda” (1997), Manuela Marchesini discusses Gadda’s posthumous antifascist text.

<sup>16</sup> The interview is transcribed in “*Per favore, mi lasci nell’ombra*”: *Interviste 1950 – 1972*, 87-90. Videos of the interview are also available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UyUz9iFVXQ>, (12/4/11).

posso aver avuto, se non della simpatia, qualche indulgenza. Ma ancora prima del delitto Matteotti avevo capito di che si trattava” (117).

Gadda addresses his relationship to fascism more directly—and dates his disillusionment not to 1924, but to 1934—in a frequently cited 1968 interview with Dacia Maraini:

Solo nel '34 ho capito cos'era il fascismo e come mi ripugnasse. Prima non me n'ero mai occupato. Le camicie nere mi davano fastidio anche prima, ma era un fastidio e basta. D'altronde il libro *Eros e Priapo* l'ho scritto nel '28 e mostra tutta la mia insofferenza per il regime. Ma solo nel '34, con la guerra etiopica, ho capito veramente cos'era il fascismo. E ne ho avvertito tutto il pericolo. (*“Per favore”* 168)

This self-representation, recent scholarship has convincingly established, is jarringly inaccurate.

In “Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Gadda,” Hainsworth describes the interview as “generally mendacious and bizarrely neurotic” (221).<sup>17</sup> Most basically, Gadda is erroneous in dating the invasion of Ethiopia to 1934, rather than 1935. Almost as easy to refute is his contention that *Eros e Priapo* was first drafted in 1928: Giorgio Pinotti instead chronicles a writing process that began between 1944 and 1945, and the text makes frequent reference to events that took place well after 1928.<sup>18</sup> The most noteworthy inaccuracy of the interview, however, is not the dating of the invasion of Ethiopia or the composition of *Eros e Priapo*, but Gadda’s characterization of his own relationship to fascism.<sup>19</sup> And yet the claim: “Con la guerra etiopica, ho capito veramente cos'era il Fascismo,” may be partly truthful insofar as the period of economic autarchy that resulted from Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia is the subject of some of his most passionate writing about the regime—first approving, then scathing. Indeed, autarchy focuses Gadda’s attention on scarcity, waste, and excess, and engages his longstanding interest in

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<sup>17</sup> “Mendacious” may be imprecise, because at several points in the interview Gadda reveals a disorientation so total that he seems unaware even of the date. In one of the more bizarre moments in the interview, Gadda describes a traumatic childhood “shock,” and glosses it in a way that suggests significant confusion:

Gadda: Io non sono antipopulista; anche se da giovane ho avuto degli *shock*.

Maraini: Che genere di *shock*?

Gadda: [...] Mi ricordo per esempio di una volta che io andavo in bicicletta con mia sorella e mio fratello e dei ragazzacci ci hanno fatto cadere per terra. Un'altra volta, in una giornata di pioggia, hanno preso del fango e ce l'hanno buttato addosso.

Maraini: È perché?

Gadda: Così, per teppismo. Sa, il teppismo è una vecchia cosa. Immagini di essere in bicicletta e che un ragazzo prenda una manata di fango e gliela butti sull'abito bianco. Era l'unico abito un po' decente che mia sorella aveva. Dico aveva perché *adesso* non l'ha più. (170)

A second moment in the interview indicates further disorientation with regards to the date. Gadda worries that the resemblance between fascists and the night watchmen of *La cognizione* might cause him problems: “Deve tenere presente, ma questo non so se è bene che lo scriva, che in questo libro io ho creato una confusione narrativa, fra l'idea dei fascisti e l'idea dei vigili notturni. Non vorrei però avere dei fastidi. I vigili notturni insomma sono visti come fascisti. Crede che potrò avere delle noie?” Maraini politely reassures him: “Credo di no” (171).

<sup>18</sup> See the editorial notes to *Eros e Priapo* (SVP 993-1023).

<sup>19</sup> Evidence of overt support for the regime—from as early as 1922 until as late as 1943—is too vast to recount here and has already been discussed in some detail by Hainsworth and Dombroski.



colonialism in such a way as to imbricate discursive genres and to facilitate his transformation from engineer to writer.

### Gadda's Colonialisms

Gadda's interest in colonialism more broadly can be traced at least to the end of the First World War, when he writes of "la nostra vecchia idea": that of serving in Libya with friend and fellow *baracca dei poeti* prisoner, Bonaventura Tecchi, after being freed from the Celle-Lager.<sup>20</sup> Through their dream is never realized, Libya remains, for Gadda's characters, (as well as his contemporaries), a site of quixotic reverie, of sexual and military adventure.<sup>21</sup> In *Quer pasticciaccio*, for example, the laundress, procuress, and former prostitute Zamira Pácori fondly recalls her popularity in the colony: "Parlava loro della Libia: della quarta sponda: dei datteri che vi maturano, squisiti, e degli ufficiali che vi aveva conosciuto e che l'avevano 'corteggiata' con successo" (*RR II* 153). In the short story "L'Adalgisa" the titular character's deceased husband, Carlo, had served in Libya, and his colonial experience, (along with his virile moustache), represents the apex of his youthful conquests in love and war: "I suoi baffi, al loro tempo, avevano trionfato in Libia, terrore del deserto. [...] Quei baffi avevano innamorato una mora, ma una mora vera, di Tobruk: nonché un paio di morettone un po' più nostrane" (*RR I* 514-5). Carlo's service in Libya remains the subject of a lifelong passion—one of two that Adalgisa describes: "Le raccolte, oltre ai ritratti dei paesaggi della Libia, erano il suo più grande ideale" (*RR I* 515). We will return to Carlo's *raccolte* later in this chapter, but for now it suffices to note Gadda's consistent figuration of Libya as a space of sexual conquest, military victory, and nostalgia.

In "Fear of the Periphery: Colonialism, Class, and the South American Outback," Albert Sbragia outlines another iteration of the "colonial idea" in Gadda's work: that of emigrational colonialism. Gadda participated in this colonial form between December 1922 and February 1924, while working as a civilian engineer for the Compañía General de Fósforos in Argentina, and later, to some extent, during shorter sojourns in England, France, Germany, and Switzerland, where he supervised the construction of ammonia plants while working for the Società Ammonia Casale. Unlike his nostalgic figurations of Libya as a site of military and sexual conquest, Gadda's writings about expatriate communities in Argentina and migrant workers in France convey instead an erosion of *italianità* and virility. In "Il pozzo numero quattordici," an essay about his experience working in France, Gadda describes a sense of soullessness of a place inhabited by foreigners:

Un clima senza passato e senza intimità, dove lo straniero incontra e non saluta lo straniero, mi conduceva a percepire 'sperimentalmente' il profondo valore e peso che ha l'ambiente e la patria, quando crea e determina l'anima nostra, liberandola verso un'armoniosa gratitudine, arricchendola di figurazioni che i secoli hanno disegnato. Qui

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<sup>20</sup> Gadda writes of his imprisonment, which lasted from October 1917 to December 1919, in *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*. Celle-Lager hut 15c later became known as *la baracca dei poeti*, because of its high concentration of writers, including Tecchi, Ugo Betti, and others. See Pedriali "A Trial—Notes on a Friendship Through the Letters" 268.

<sup>21</sup> Celebrations of the 1911 attack and subsequent occupation of Tripoli include Pascoli's speech "La grande proletaria si è mossa," delivered at the Teatro del commune di Barga on November 21, 1912, as well as the Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 film *Cabiria*. See also Labanca 108-25.

la necessità del mangiare convoca uomini strani in un raduno straordinario di popoli, con passaporti penosi. (*SGF I* 124)

Here the migrant destination is figured as a climate without past or intimacy, far from the centuries of history that form the Italian soul. Rather than the culmination of a heroic Italian ideal, the French town is a soulless non-place, where migrant workers save their wages: “sospirando il granoturco lontano, il campo che avrebbero comperato al paese” (*SGF I* 123), and longing to be elsewhere.

Gadda finds a similarly diminished *italianità* in Argentina. In a letter of September 3, 1923 to his sister Clara, he describes the weekly meetings of his Buenos Aires Fascio: “Le difficoltà, intendiamoci bene, non sono quelle di carattere ‘eroico’ dei fasci in Italia, ma hanno invece la tinta intrigante e pettegola adatta alla microcefalia della colonia” (85-6).<sup>22</sup> The diluted *italianità* Gadda finds in Argentina is mirrored in the setting of *La cognizione*: Maradagàl, a fictional South American country that transparently resembles Italy.<sup>23</sup> The bitter war with Parapagàl from which Maradagàl emerged in 1924 recalls World War I. In the postwar devastation, increasingly oppressive laws and taxes create an easily discernible sketch of fascist Italy, and the *Nistitios de vigilancia para la noche* evokes the gang violence of the early years of fascism. Fascism and war are by no means the only points of congruence between Maradagàl and Italy: croconsuelo, the celebrated cheese of Maradagàl, smells like gorgonzola; the national hero, General Jaun Muceno Pastrufazio, represents Giuseppe Garibaldi; and the recently deceased national poet, Carlos Caçoncellos, is a stand-in for Gabriele D’Annunzio. Geographic parallels are mediated by personal and literary intertexts, so that Néa Keltiké is Brianza; the nearby metropolis, Pastrufazio, is Milan; Lukones is Longone, where Gadda’s father built the family villa; and the Serruchón mountain range is the Resegone celebrated by Manzoni in *I promessi sposi*: “Qualcosa di simile, per il nome e più per l’aspetto, al manzoniano Resegone” (*RR I* 575). If the South American setting of *La cognizione*—and its transparent *italianità*—reflects Gadda’s experience in Argentina, the climate of scarcity in Maradagàl evokes his writings about the period of economic autarchy following Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. The novel opens by emphasizing this dearth with a description of the heavy tax burden, which can equal or even surpass the value of the corn-like *banzavòis* harvested once every leap year, when the crop is not devastated by drought, flooding, or parasites.

In “Diciotto novembre,” published anonymously in *L’Ambrosiano* on the eponymous date in 1935 when sanctions went into effect, Gadda exhorts Italians to confront a like dearth with courage, and positions the period within a longer temporal trajectory in which Italy emerges victorious: “Faremo a meno dell’unguento dell’indaco, della spezia e del dentifricio, della catenella e dell’orologio: il tempo batterà egualmente i suoi attimi come il cuore ed il polso, i battiti dell’onore e del coraggio, l’ora della vittoria.”<sup>24</sup> The article imagines Italy as a “Madre latina, [...] che ha dato e insegnato a tutti, e finanche a loro ogni segno di bellezza, di verità, e di

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<sup>22</sup> Gadda’s figuration of the microcephaly of the colony and the diluted *italianità* anticipates Mario Camerini’s *Il grande appello* (1936), whose protagonist, Ben-Ghiat proposes, “symbolizes the ruin that resulted from a rootless cosmopolitan lifestyle” (134).

<sup>23</sup> For a more thorough consideration of the relationship between the South American setting and Gadda’s experience in Argentina, see Sbragia, “Fear of the Periphery.”

<sup>24</sup> The article is attributed to Gadda in the index of the Garzanti *Opere di Carlo Emilio Gadda* (though it is not included in the series).

vita,” so that the sanctions represent an almost matricidal act, a “cosa mostruosa.” But in retaliation for the wounds inflicted by the “legulei di Ginevra,” Gadda declares, destiny will impose its own sanction: “la sanzione terribile del destino, presto o tardi, non mancherà di raggiungerli.” The enthusiasm for the invasion and patriotic zeal expressed in “Diciotto novembre” is not unique to the article: Ben-Ghiat explains that the sense that Italy was a victim of the international community had the effect of “[uniting] Italians in patriotic outrage during the war and brought forth a show of support for fascism once empire was declared” (126-7). What is noteworthy about Gadda’s article, however, is its promise that the scarcity of the present will be reversed by the larger timeframe.

The invasion of Ethiopia and the period of economic autarchy that follows are further associated with scarcity in *Quer pasticciaccio*. Though the novel is set in 1927, the imminent declaration of Italian East Africa becomes a vehicle for poverty in a description of destitute vagrants: “Certi scarcagnati con addosso tutta la migragna dell’impero imminente” (*RR II* 156) and in an expression of awe at a particularly hearty sandwich: “Madonna!, ch’oggiorno manco se n’aricordamo, com’ereno, doppo che c’è stato de mezzo l’impero” (*RR II* 141). As in “Diciotto novembre,” which promises a future reversal of the scarcity of the present, the poverty associated with imminent empire in *Quer pasticciaccio* is isolated within a specific time (if one that continues into the present of the narrating chorus).

Though Gadda consistently figures the autarchic period as a time of scarcity, he also writes enthusiastically about raw materials that might be extracted from Ethiopia after the invasion of 1935. In “Le risorse minerarie del territorio etiopico,” first published in *L’Ambrosiano* on June 13, 1936, just over a month after the declaration of Italian East Africa, and just under a month before the sanctions were lifted, Gadda describes the colony as though it were a warehouse of raw materials, accessible only after the removal of the “l’ostacolo politico” and “il solito ostruzionismo del governo etiopico.” First among raw materials of interest to Gadda is potassium chloride, a salt used in the production of fertilizers and explosives:

Le possibilità minerarie della Dankalia non verranno certo neglette dalle ricerche dell’Ente, visto che oltre al salgemma (cloruro di sodio) un altro sale vi si trova depositato in interessanti giacimenti: e cioè il cloruro di potassio. Il potassio, com’è noto, è uno dei tre elementi-base della fertilizzazione e trova quindi impiego nei concimi sintetici: ma anche nella preparazione di tutta una classe di esplosivi, per usi bellici e minerari.

Gadda’s focus on fertilizers and explosives is not limited to “Le risorse minerarie”: as an engineer at the Società Ammonia Casale from 1925-1931, he worked to develop and implement industrial processes to fix atmospheric nitrogen to produce such compounds, and five of his *Scritti di divulgazione scientifica* are dedicated to the subject. These essays translate the *garbuglio* of Gadda’s poetics into a global chemical problem. As we have seen, both isolation and possession are untenable in the context of a poetic world in which an all-encompassing causal chain tethers the remotest of phenomena, and objects extend beyond themselves. A similar problem develops in the nitrogen essays, where the global metabolic system of the first essay, “L’azoto,” seems incompatible with the three-part series bearing the title “Per l’autarchia economica,” which isolates Italy from this system.

### “A Life and Death Question for Generations to Come”<sup>25</sup>

Gadda's first essay on nitrogen, “L'azoto,” published on March 21, 1932 in *L'Ambrosiano*, anticipates the *garbuglio* that will become emblematic of his poetics by figuring the world as a complex metabolic system, an organic totality. As we shall see, the essay begins by equating poet and engineer, and celebrating the improvements each makes upon nature. The second essay, “La calciocianamide” published a week later in the same newspaper, adopts a more technical register to detail industrial processes used to fix atmospheric nitrogen. The remaining three articles on nitrogen, “Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane,” “Pane e chimica sintetica,” and “Automobili e automotrici azionate ad ammoniaca,” were published as a series bearing the title “Per L'autarchia economica” in *Gazzetta del Popolo* every two weeks beginning on April 13, 1937. These essays reframe the global metabolic system of “L'azoto” to figure Italy as a nation of engineers and workers who transform natural resources into industrial marvels, and England as a nation of hoarders, stockpiling raw materials.

Before examining “L'azoto” and Gadda's other essays on the element, a brief sketch of the nitrogen cycle and the critical role of nitrogen compounds in shaping international relations of the preceding century is in order.<sup>26</sup> Nitrogen compounds are essential to both plant and animal life. And though approximately 78% of the earth's atmosphere is composed of nitrogen, neither plants nor animals can access the element directly from the atmosphere because nitrogen gas (N<sub>2</sub>) is so stable that it will not readily react with other substances. The nitrogen cycle is the system according to which the element is fixed (taken from the atmosphere and bonded with other elements) so that it can be used by animals and plants, and then converted back into nitrogen gas. Without human intervention, atmospheric nitrogen is fixed by lightning and by various bacteria in soil. The resulting compounds are absorbed by plants and consumed by animals. Nitrogen compounds then return to the soil as excrement and putrefying plant and animal matter. Through processes of decomposition, and with the help of different bacteria, these compounds are converted into nitrogen gas, which is released back into the atmosphere.

Nitrogen compounds are essential to both fertilizers and explosives. Before the early twentieth century, when technologies were developed for fixing atmospheric nitrogen, farmers relied on compost and crop rotation to ensure that plants got enough nitrogen. Because some plants—primarily legumes—have a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, they can serve the important function of replenishing soil with nitrogen compounds. Saltpeter (KNO<sub>3</sub> or NaNO<sub>3</sub>), for explosives was either harvested from deposits discovered in caves and basements, or produced from manure and other waste in a slow and laborious process. In the early nineteenth century, European nations struggled to gain control of two important sources of nitrogen compounds: the Peruvian guano islands, landmasses composed of nitrogen-rich bird excrement, and saltpeter from the Chilean Atacama desert. The centrality of these resources to international politics by the mid-nineteenth century might be garnered from the unprecedented U.S. Guano Islands Act, passed in 1856, which gave any citizen the right to claim as U.S. property any unoccupied island containing guano deposits that does not fall within the jurisdiction of another nation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the guano islands were

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<sup>25</sup> William Crookes, *The Wheat Problem* 8.

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed history of nitrogen compounds see Thomas Hager, *The Alchemy of Air: A Jewish Genius, a Doomed Tycoon, and the Scientific Discovery That Fed the World but Fueled the Rise of Hitler*; Daniel Charles, *Master Mind: The Rise and Fall of Fritz Haber, the Nobel Laureate Who Launched the Age of Chemical Warfare*; and G. J. Leigh, *The World's Greatest Fix: A History of Nitrogen and Agriculture*.

depleted. Chilean saltpeter mining and exportation, controlled largely by England, continued with growing intensity and gnawing awareness of the finitude of the resource.

It is in this context that William Crookes dedicated his inaugural 1898 British Academy of Sciences Presidential Address to the “Wheat Problem.” Without the production of synthetic fertilizers, he warned, the earth would not be able to produce enough wheat to feed the growing world population: “My chief subject is of interest to the whole world—to every race—to every human being. It is of urgent importance to-day, and it is a life and death question for generations to come” (3). *The Wheat Problem*, based on the remarks to the British Academy of Sciences, had enormous influence and can be credited with advancing a new sense of urgency regarding the scarcity of the world’s resources. Crookes concluded the Presidential Address by calling on his colleagues to develop industrial processes to fix atmospheric nitrogen—a project that was already well underway. Early methods of fixing atmospheric nitrogen were prohibitively expensive because of the extraordinary amount of energy required to separate the N<sub>2</sub> molecule, the high pressures and temperatures therefore necessary, and the volatility of elements involved. By the First World War, the Haber-Bosch process of fixing atmospheric nitrogen was effective enough to keep Germany in the war despite being cut off from Chilean saltpeter, and in 1918 Fritz Haber was awarded a Nobel Prize for his primary role in developing the process.

Crookes’ concern about the scarcity of resources adequate to sustain the growing world population resonated strongly in Italy, which had been losing a considerable population—motivated by poverty and hunger—to emigration since the late nineteenth century. In the Introduction, we noted the pervasive tension in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Italian discourse about the body politic, wherein there appear to be at once *too many* Italians (and so some must emigrate to foreign lands) and *too few* (and so Italy is unable to satisfy its colonial desire).<sup>27</sup> The question of whether there are too many or too few Italians; of course, is not unrelated to the question of whether there is enough food.<sup>28</sup> We also noted in the Introduction that Mussolini’s Ascension Day speech of May 26, 1927 represents a turning point in fascist ideology because it lays new emphasis on the biopolitical, announcing that there are decidedly *too few* Italians. But before this explicit embrace of pronatalist policy, in 1925 the regime launched its first major campaign, the *Battaglia del grano*, which aimed to resolve the problem posed in Crookes’ speech by increasing wheat cultivation in Italy, in part by investing in the industrial production of nitrogen-based fertilizers and by offering subsidies to farmers for their purchase. The 1925 documentary *La battaglia del grano* emphasizes this new importance of the Italian-made fertilizers: “Per il pane italiano si adoperino concimi Italiani! Questo è il comandamento del Duce!”

To summarize, in the century leading up to Gadda’s “L’azoto” and related essays, nitrogen compounds occupy a critical role on the world stage, shaping international relations and engendering a new awareness of the earth’s limited resources. This scarcity, however, is coupled with an abundance in the form of the 78% of the atmosphere composed of nitrogen gas. In addition to foregrounding both scarcity and excess, demand for nitrogen compounds prompts a reconsideration of value, particularly with regards to waste. Indeed, decomposing animal and

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<sup>27</sup> On the shifting panorama of demography, see Spackman, *Fascist Virilities* 143-8 and Horn, *Social Bodies* 46-65.

<sup>28</sup> See John Dickie, *Delizia!* 216-40 on the relationship between the scarcity of food and emigration, and 243-65 on fascism and wheat.

plant matter and other waste, in the context of the “wheat problem,” become valuable resources, so that Crookes writes of “the treasure locked up in the sewage and drainage of our towns” (31).

Like Crookes’ celebration of the waste held in sewers, Gadda’s “Il pozzo numero quattordici” marvels at proprietary attitudes toward waste. He describes compost heaps lining the main street of the small French town:

Davanti alle case ermetiche le concimaie quadrate, ricolme di uno strabocchevole e dovizioso letame cavallino: quasi per mostra di un’agreste opulenza, per testimonio di legittimati possessi. Caldi fumi ne vaporavano dentro il gennaio, esalando un vaticinio di primavera. Fugavano gli spettri delle ipoteche con il loro silente incantesimo. (*SGF I* 118)

On the one hand, the compost piles spilling over with steaming horse dung seem grotesque: the legitimate possession to which such waste attests hardly seems opulent. And yet, the details that render the compost piles particularly grotesque (their being composed of horse dung, the hot vapors rising from them) are indications of the nitrogen-rich fertilizer they produce. As such, the compost heaps indeed represent a “vaticinio di primavera” and give the impression of “un’agreste opulenza.” Gadda goes on to explain that he is in France to supervise the construction of an ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>) plant—a project that would reduce the need for nitrogen-rich compost. The proprietary attitude toward waste thus seems like a relic of obsolescent ways, though the difficulties Gadda encounters in constructing the plant—inefficiencies and explosions—suggest a tension between old and new, with Italian technologies at the forefront of the latter. In the context of the essay, which, as we have seen, describes the soullessness of a place inhabited by foreigners, the quaint backwardness of the compost heaps also attests to the diluted *italianità* of the setting.

### **The “grande serbatoio atmosferico”<sup>29</sup>**

Gadda’s first essay on nitrogen, “L’azoto,” begins by challenging Rousseau’s opposition between nature and artifice:

L’uomo, che Rousseau incolpava di falsare e coartare l’opera felice della natura, è in realtà un ‘ingegnere’ inguaribile. Vieni voglia di chiedere all’autore del fantasmagorico paradosso che cosa egli pensi del cemento armato, delle centrali elettriche e dell’ammoniaca sintetica: svolgendo il suo tema prediletto, potentemente martellato nell’ouverture dell’*Emile* (Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’Auteur des choses, tout est dégénéré entre les mains de l’homme), egli ci risponderebbe che le costruzioni in cemento armato sono una falsificazione della caverna, dove il troglodita si rannicchia sul suo giaciglio di strame, ‘cui la fedel sposa ed i cari suoi figlioletti intiepidir la notte’; che le centrali elettriche sono una falsificazione della gravità, o meglio una fabbrica di gravità ‘degenerata’ in lavoro; che l’ammoniaca sintetica è l’ultimo e più sfrontato falso perpetrato dall’uomo, il quale ha sorpreso una pausa tipica del ciclo naturale dell’azoto, e ‘ne deorum quidem satis metuens,’ l’ha rifatta sostituendosi alla natura, crumiro diabolico della natura; cui ha condotto a ‘degenerare’ nell’opera delle macchine. (*SVP* 71)

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<sup>29</sup> Gadda, “L’azoto” *SVP* 74.

By calling the production of synthetic ammonia, the “ultimo è più sfrontato falso perpetrato dall’uomo,” the incipit positions the compound as humanity’s crowning technological achievement. In his hypothesized responses, Rousseau likens the electrical power plant to “una fabbrica di gravità ‘degenerata’ in lavoro,” and dubs synthetic ammonia a strikebreaker. Each metaphor distinguishes nature from artifice on the basis of work; but the second has both nature and artifice performing the same labor at the same factory, with the former only temporarily paused. And Gadda’s Rousseau himself is figured as a manual laborer, his formulation in *Emile*, “potentemente martellato.” If Rousseau’s writing is likened to manual labor, the pastiche of the incipit resembles the work of a chemical engineer combing literary elements. Quoting directly from three literary sources (Rousseau’s *Emile*, Parini’s *Il giorno*, and Livy’s *History of Rome*) in French, Italian, and Latin, the paragraph is cobbled together from diverse textual elements. Though each of the direct quotations seems to warn against artifice, they are pieced together in such a manner as to both undermine the warning and perform its subversion.

If both nature and artifice, (be it literary or chemical), are performed at the same factory in “L’azoto,” the former is figured as the work of one great Mind, “Una Mente che ha preceduto e superato la mente nostra” (*SVP* 72). This Mind; however, operates in anticipation of the pleasures—particularly those intellectual—that nature will provide for humanity: “Una Mente che trascende la nostra, che l’ha preceduta nella buia deiezione dei millenni dopo aver combinato la cosa; perché noi ci divertissimo prima a vivere, poi a poter scoprire il segreto ‘meccanismo’ della vita” (*SVP* 73). And as the great Mind envisages the work of the engineer, Dante’s *Commedia* prefigures “L’azoto.” Describing the nitrogen cycle, Gadda pauses to ask:

Come potranno questi ultimi prodotti azotati, questi avanzati di disfacimento essere riutilizzati per una nuova vita, essere attinti ancora dalle silenti radici le quali, al nuovo alito di primavera fervorosamente lavoreranno, perché sia, la pianta novella, rinnovellata di novella fronda? (*SVP* 72)

Gadda’s question echoes the final four lines of the *Purgatorio*: “Io ritornai da la santissima onda/ rifatto sì come piante novelle/ rinnovellate di novella fronda,/ puro e disposto a salire a le stelle” (XXXIII 142-145). The essay thus establishes a grandiose congruence between God and engineer and between Dante and Gadda. Nature also participates in this congruence, as nitrogen-fixing bacteria are themselves identified as engineers: “Questi bacteri [...] sono dei veri e propri ossidatori: sono gente che fa della chimica sintetica sotto terra: sono a loro volta degli artificiosi falsari della natura pura, come un qualunque ingegnere, come un qualunque chimista” (*SVP* 72). God, engineer, and bacteria, Dante and Gadda all perform the same work.

In addition to forging a literary persona and establishing the work of the engineer as being in harmony with that of God and nature, the essay celebrates the stuff of squalor: bacteria, excreta, and putrefying substances. Using a lofty register to describe such waste and insisting on its necessity, Gadda follows Crookes’ discussion of the treasure locked up in sewage.<sup>30</sup> Of nitrogen-fixing bacteria, Gadda writes: “Questi bacteri di Winogradski, oh! Le care creature!”

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<sup>30</sup> Greco details “L’azoto’s” use of an elevated register in “L’autocensura di Gadda: gli scritti tecnico-autarchici,” finding in the essay the stylistic germ of Gadda’s later works. The medley of registers is but one part of Gadda’s famed multilingualism. In his analysis of “L’Adalgisa” in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Il narratore come delinquente*, Walter Pedullà analyzes the short story’s use of a lofty register to describe, for example, a cockroach laboriously dragging its excrement home to its family.

(SVP 72). In dwelling on the stuff of squalor, “L’azoto” anticipates visual representations of hoarding in contemporary—and primarily American—film and television; though Gadda celebrates such matter only in its potential for transformation.<sup>31</sup> As such, putrefaction, which provides nourishment for the *care creature*, is figured as a process both necessary and restorative: “Nella putrefazione bisogna vedere un processo ‘necessario’ al rinnovarsi della vita, un processo di liberazione della materia dai vincoli del passato, allorché ‘mūnere functo’ ella si rivolge ad una ricreazione futura” (SVP 72).

Without putrefaction, Gadda warns, citing Pasteur, the surface of the earth would be overwhelmed by the heavy burden of the past: “Si può citare Pasteur: ‘La superficie della terra sarebbe ingombra di materia inutile e la vita ne sarebbe ostacolata, qualora, per l’azione di processi putrefattivi, la funzione della morte non si adempisse’” (SVP 73). This figuration of waste anticipates literary scholar David Trotter’s description in *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction*, where he distinguishes mess—a testament to contingency—from waste: “Waste is the measure of an organism’s ability to renew itself by excluding whatever it does not require for its own immediate purposes. However foul it may have become, it still gleams with efficiency” (20).

If Gonzalo would siphon off some part of the world for himself, rejoicing in possession, the waste products of “L’azoto,” instead, are part of a single metabolic system through which nitrogen circulates: “Ne entra e ne esce. Ne esce sia ad opera di eliminazione (orina, sudore, secrezioni varie), sia in occasione della morte di un organismo, fra i prodotti della decomposizione” (SVP 71). The world, with respect to nitrogen, is a “grande serbatoio atmosferico” (SVP 74) guided by a “complesso metabolismo” (SVP 74), an organic system that accumulates and reconstitutes its waste. Gadda continues, emphasizing the totality of the system: “Vogliamo insistere su un concetto di un gran serbatoio di partenza e di arrivo, sul concetto di un ‘oceano’ dell’azoto” (SVP 74). This vision of organic totality is, in many ways, at odds with the autarchic project of isolation and self-sufficiency—be it that of Italy or of Gonzalo. Furthermore, the *grande serbatoio atmosferico* of “L’azoto” produces no waste that does not gleam with efficiency. No uncomfortable remainder attests to its inefficiencies, its contingencies, or its mess.

Not only does the figuration of the universe as a “grande serbatoio atmosferico” preclude the possessive exclusion of any nation or individual, it also forms a *garbuglio* larger than humanity, so that our history is but a parenthesis in the ongoing nitrogen cycle: “Fra composti azotati che interessano la vita e la storia umana [...] figurano due grandi classi di sostanze: i concimi naturali e gli esplosivi” (SVP 73). While the nitrogen cycle exists before humanity and is composed of more compounds than those of interest to humanity, the manipulation of the cycle, Gadda writes, following Crookes’ warning and a central tenet of the *Battaglia del grano*, is essential to the continuation of human history: “Nel regime moderno della vita umana la produzione industriale delle sostanze azotate non è più una utilità, è una necessità. [...] Il problema del pane di domani, per la crescente popolazione terrestre, è legato al problema dell’azoto” (SVP 74).

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<sup>31</sup> Examples of contemporary American visual culture of hoarding include the documentary film *My Mother’s Garden* (2008) by Cynthia Lester, and the three reality television series: *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009-2012), *Hoarding: Buried Alive* (TLC, 2010-2012), and *Confessions: Animal Hoarding* (Animal Planet, 2010-2012).



### “Primo capitolo dell’autarchia: il pane, i concimi azotati”<sup>32</sup>

As we have seen, “L’azoto” figures God, bacteria, and engineer as performing the same work as part of a universal metabolic system. Putrefaction, in the essay, is a necessary process of transformation, wherein the surface of the earth is cleared of the heavy weight of its past in order to create a future. Although the thematization of the abject in “L’azoto” anticipates the aesthetic fetishization of squalor in contemporary hoarding discourse, the essay does not deal explicitly with hoarding. Instead, the specter of overwhelming amassment is raised only in its absence: the earth would be encumbered with useless materials of the past, were it not for the tireless work of engineers—be they human or microbial.

In the three-part series “Per l’autarchia economica,” Gadda reformulates his thinking on nitrogen in such a way as to reflect and reinforce economic autarchy. Greco notes the shift in emphasis that takes place between the 1932 “L’azoto” and the first of the autarchic articles on nitrogen:

Con l’altro articolo, “Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane,” Gadda spiega come si ricavino concimi azotati utilizzando la energia elettrica prodotta dal corso del Nera: siamo nel vivo di quella propaganda autarchica che insisteva sul fatto che si potesse ricavare ‘pane’ (cioè concimi chimici per l’agricoltura) dall’aria, dall’atmosfera. (67)

For Greco, the insistence on the possibility of making bread out of air is the crux of Gadda’s autarchic re-conception of the nitrogen cycle. But the aim of fixing atmospheric nitrogen to produce fertilizers is not unique to Italian autarchy, nor is it the quixotic project that Greco’s use of the subjunctive mood might suggest. As we have seen, beginning at least with Crookes’ influential 1898 address, fixing nitrogen from the vast atmospheric reserve was understood as a necessity given the growing population.<sup>33</sup> Nor is the topos of making bread from air unique to Gadda: in his 1934 obituary of Haber, fellow Nobel Laureate Max von Laue describes his subject as, “the man who [...] won bread out of air and achieved a triumph in the service of his nation and all of humanity” (Charles 241). I propose instead that Gadda’s autarchic reframing of the nitrogen cycle in “Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane” and “Pane e chimica sintetica” consists in the shift away from a figuration of the world as a single metabolic system: a move that mirrors Gonzalo’s unrealizable aim of subtracting himself from the *garbuglio* by shutting himself up in the Pirobutirro villa. Furthermore, I argue that the role played by the microbial engineers is marginalized in these later essays, so that the dream of autarchy rests in a marked move away from the gendered *matter* of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

“Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane” begins with a with a shift in perspective with regards to “L’azoto,” as the narrating voice casts a cinematic gaze over the Nera Valley and celebrates in the subjection of the landscape to ant-like workers:

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<sup>32</sup> Gadda, “Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane” (*SVP* 127).

<sup>33</sup> On the ecological and nutritional consequences of the increased reliance on fertilizers made from fixed atmospheric nitrogen, see the final chapter of Hager’s *The Alchemy of Air*, as well as Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*.

<sup>34</sup> The documentary *Azoto* demonstrates such move with the formulation “Questa vecchia terra italiana può dare il pane ai suoi figli di oggi e di domani quando gli uomini italiani sappiano utilizzare questi elementi il sole – l’acqua – il lavoro – la scienza.”

Rimontando la valle del Nera così radicalmente manomessa dalle opere, dove il sereno cielo dell'Umbria è velato e fatto greve da bianchi vapori, pensavo quante valli d'Italia, quanti suoi fiumi conoscono la fatica dei minuscoli esseri, indaffarate formiche, che giorno per giorno ne cavano materia di vita, dopo aver contenuto e vinto la ignara pienezza dell'acque! (*SVP* 119)

With the Nera Valley radically violated, the Umbrian sky heavy with smoke, and the river contained and conquered, the landscape Gadda describes is one boldly molded by human labor. Unlike "L'azoto," in which nature and artifice, bacteria and engineer, perform the same work at the same factory, in "Azoto atmosferico tramutato in pane," the landscape surrenders completely to and is shaped by human labor.

In the second of the three essays, "Pane e chimica sintetica," Gadda reworks the incipit of "L'azoto" into an abridged rejection of Rousseau that further belabors the subjection of *natura* to *uomo*:

L'uomo, a cui Rousseau addebitò di falsare e coartare le felici operazioni di natura, è un ingegnere inguaribile. Come ingegnere egli tenta di riscattarsi dallo stato di indigenza e di angoscia dove lo hanno collocato il cùmulo dei pigri destini o la distorsione dei repentini cataclismi. E batte l'antico ferro e incide la terra perenne: per sfamarsi, per dominare. (*SVP* 125)

Falsifying and constraining nature, here, is not a matter of improving upon natural processes already underway, as in "L'azoto," but of avoiding its lazy destinies and inevitable catastrophes. This process is figured as military conquest, as man "batte l'antico ferro" to dominate nature. Gadda continues:

Così noi giudichiamo le operazioni della tecnica non già come illecite contraffazioni della natura, ma come ritrovati dello studio e del coraggio dedaleo, a cui l'artefice pervenga sotto lo stimolo di vitali esigenze, di angosciose necessità. Prigioniero nell'isola del destino, egli attua la evasione eroica. (*SVP* 125)

The domination of nature, then, is a courageous act of hard work and careful study, and a means to heroically evade the prison of destiny.

In these figurations of the triumph of *l'uomo* over *natura*, the latter term is gendered in a manner so self-conscious as to focus attention on the work of gendering. Gadda writes:

Ma il pieno deflusso del Nera, o della Nera, se preferite, m'avvince: dopo la serenità di colli, querceti, uliveti, il fiume va così torbido e ricco, allorché le sue forre lo inghiottono, che mi riviene a mente il detto che dicono a Orte: 'Il Tevere non sarebbe il Tevere, se la Nera non gli desse da bere.'" (*SVP* 121)

Though rivers, the Nera included, are grammatically male in Italian, Gadda proposes "della Nera" instead of "del Nera," presumably because in the context of its radical submission to the works of man, the former would be more appropriate. Gadda employs a similar rhetorical device in *Quer pasticciaccio* in a description of the priest don Corpi: "Era un bel prete alto e massiccio, con qualche rado fil bianco appena appena tra i capelli corvini, con due occhioni di gufo molto

vicini al naso: il quale, in immagine, in mezzo a loro, non poté non adeguarsi al becco” (*RR II* 98). Like don Corpi’s nose, which cannot but be likened to beak given its placement between two already owl-like eyes, the Nera is feminized in the context being “radicalmente manomessa dalle opere,” and of giving life, or at least nourishment to the Tiber. On the one hand, this figure calls attention to the linguistic gendering of the Nera; while on the other hand it reifies the implicit gendering that precedes it. This retrospective reification of lends the essay a certain figurative coherence and inescapability.

In contrast to Italy, which dominates nature with intellect and force, England, in “Pane e chimica sintetica,” stockpiles raw materials:

C’è chi vuol tutto, anche il superfluo e l’assurdo, come il bambino nelle crisi iniziali della vita: vuole convulsivamente: stringe per il bisogno di stringere. Ipoteche immense dei popoli ricchi e avidi sui continenti, sui mari. Fili spinati tesi da mano anglosassone a ricingere le terre disabitate e incolte, le foreste che tali rimarranno, chissà fino a quando. ‘Accaparramento delle materie prime’: e non solo delle materie: guerre: feroci dibattiti al tavolo. Camuffati di magri ideali, puzzano talora di petrolio; tal altra, in fondo agl’ideali ci sono il rame, l’oro, i diamanti. (*SVP* 125)

The specter of hoarding raised in “L’azoto,” in the form of an earth weighted down by useless matter, is realized in “Pane e chimica sintetica” not in Italy, but in England. In contrast to the hardworking Italy, England is figured as an inert nation, lacking labor and intellect.<sup>35</sup> Likened to a baby convulsively yearning, grabbing out of a need to grab, England’s approach to nature is a sharp contrast to Italy’s laboriously achieved triumph over it. In addition, England’s appropriation of uninhabited land, which is to remain so “chissà fino a quando” diverges from Italian East Africa, imagined as a settlement colony for Italians.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the raw materials listed in the article: petroleum, copper, gold, and diamonds, are those only of secondary interest to Gadda in “Le risorse minerarie del territorio etiopico,” which focuses instead on salts that might be extracted from Dankalia.

Industrially producing nitrogen compounds according to the Italian Casale method, in “Pane e chimica sintetica,” represents an alternative to hoarding raw materials that is rooted not only in necessity, but also in a fundamental difference of the Italian spirit with respect to that of England. Gadda first describes three sources of nitrogen-based fertilizers: Chilean saltpeter, coke deposits, and the Norwegian method of fixing atmospheric nitrogen, then rejects them: “Noi fissiamo invece queste tre idee: Cile, carbone, Norvegia. Tre accidenti un po’ lontano da noi: dal nostro appetito. Fossero anche prossimi, sarebbero comunque *esterni* alla nostra economia” (*SVP* 125). Rather than products of labor and intellect, these sources are called accidents, distant from Italy not only geographically, but also because they are external to economic autarchy. Unlike

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<sup>35</sup> This figuration of Italians as poor but hard working evokes a long-standing tradition perhaps most vividly expressed in Pascoli’s “La grande proletaria si è mossa,” delivered to a rapt audience at the Teatro comunale di Berga less than two months after Italy’s 1911 invasion of Italy.

<sup>36</sup> Gadda celebrates this understanding of Italian East Africa in “La donna si prepara ai suoi compiti coloniale,” which describes courses offered to women to prepare them for life in the colonies. He writes: “l’idea coloniale [...] è oggi tra le più congeniali allo spirito italiano” (80). The article was first published in *Le vie d’Italia* on October 10, 1938. Not included in the Garzanti *Opere*, it is reprinted in (and here cited from) the volume *I littoriali del lavoro e altri scritti giornalistici, 1932-1941*, edited by Manuela Bertone.

England, Italy is figured as being poor in land, but not in spirit or intellect: “E l’uomo ingegnere studia, rimugina. E certi popoli poveri, di terre non d’animo, s’ingegnano ‘a ben adoperare lo ingegno” (SVP 125). And the gifts of nature, in the essays “Per l’autarchia economica,” are offered precisely so that Italy might use this intellect and tenacity to achieve its aims: “E pensavo di altri doni che a noi sono stati negati perché ingegno e tenacia ci permettessero di egualmente raggiungerli” (SVP 119).

Though Italy, in the essays “Per l’autarchia economica” is subtracted from the *grande serbatoio del mondo* of “L’azoto,” the mirage of totality is nonetheless present in the form the nation’s total conquest of nature: “L’indipendenza della nazione dai rifornimenti stranieri è il risultato di una ricerca e di una lotta rivolta a conquiste molteplici, innumerevoli: e direi una conquista totalitaria, se l’aggettivo fosse mio” (SVP 119). He continues: “Nessun volume, nessuna pagina deve mancare alla enciclopedia della totalità” (SVP 119). This *totalità*, however, is not that of a nitrogen cycle that encompasses the globe, but of nature’s total subjection in service of Italy’s independence.

We have seen how Gadda’s first essay on nitrogen dwells on the stuff of squalor. And if the specter of hoarding is raised in “L’azoto,” in the image of an earth heavy with the past, the nitrogen cycle instead transforms the decomposing matter into nourishment. In the articles “Per l’autarchia economica,” England brings this specter to life by stockpiling raw materials, while Italy instead sculpts nature to serve its own ends. In other autarchic-era articles, Gadda praises investment strategies that resemble hoarding insofar as they rely on amassing raw materials, in what might be described as a wager of space against time. In “Le funivie Savona-San Giuseppe di Cairo e la loro funzione autarchica nell’economia nazionale,” for example, he describes the networks of cableways and warehouses that allow importers to profit from fluctuations in the price of coal: “Il deposito di San Giuseppe [...] permette agli importatori di effettuare gli acquisti di carbone nei momenti più opportuni” (SVP 141).<sup>37</sup> Importers can profit from buying coal at a low price only if they can find an inexpensive way to store it; the system of cableways and inland warehouses allows for transportation and storage far from expensive port space. The investment strategy made possible by the Savone-San Giuseppe di Cairo cableways entails storing goods until time passes and they become more valuable. In order for the investment to reap profit, the cost of storing must be less than the increase in the value of the goods over time. While England, in “Pane e chimica sintetica” amasses land and raw materials that will remain unused “chissà fino a quando,” the wager of space against time involved in the investment in coal is not open-ended.

### “El moment bon!”<sup>38</sup>

According to the schema that develops between “Pane e chimica sintetica” and “Le funivie Savona-San Giuseppe di Cairo,” time offers a critical lens with which to distinguish between hoarding and investing. The return of goods to the market—coal in “Le funivie Savona-San Giuseppe di Cairo”—becomes a redemptive moment of transformation so that the stockpile is verified as an investment, just as in the transmutation of decomposing matter into nitrogen compounds the framing of microbial action as engineering avoids raising negative connotations of meaningless accumulation associated with hoarding.

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<sup>37</sup> First published in *Le Vie d’Italia* on December 12, 1938.

<sup>38</sup> Gadda, “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” *Gli anni* (SGF I 233).

The way in which time might provide a criterion with which to distinguish between investing and hoarding might be garnered from contemporary medical discourse, which defines the hoarder in part by the rationales he or she provides. These rationales are plotted along three axes in *The Hoarding Handbook: A Guide for Human Service Professionals* (2011):

Those who hoard consider their possessions to have sentimental (emotional), instrumental (useful), or intrinsic (beauty) value, and in fact, most people also save things for these very same reasons. However, people who hoard assign great value to many more items (for example, outdated receipts, ordinary bottle tops, take-out food containers, parts of board games for which most pieces are missing) and they are therefore unable to discard most of them. (4)

Though it may entail a gross simplification, it is nonetheless helpful to align these three axes with distinct temporal directionalities. To save an object for its sentimental value—a ticket stub, for example—is to preserve some token of the past. An appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of an object—a shell, perhaps—is rooted instead in the pleasure its beauty affords in the present. Finally, to save an object because of its instrumental value is to imagine a future in which it might be used, as with the pile of newspapers that may eventually be read, or the comic book that might someday be worth something. Of course objects are often plotted along more than one axis: we might save a shell as a souvenir, appreciate its beauty, and plan to someday incorporate it into a necklace. Critical to distinguishing the hoarder’s forward-looking appreciation of instrumental value from the investor’s wager of space against time; however, is that, for the hoarder, the redemptive moment—when the newspapers are read, when the comic book is sold—never arrives.

These temporalities of what is now identified as hoarding—particularly the retrospective sentimental value and the forward-looking instrumental value—are critical to Gadda’s essay, “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica.” The essay scans the knickknacks at the Porta Ludovica flea market and inscribes them in networks of family relations, a move that might suggest their sentimental value. At the same time, the parodic power of the essay rests in its celebration of the redemptive moments offered by the market, when even the most broken-down and useless of objects are purchased.

Gadda begins by describing the pain of separation that such moments present: “Liberarsi da un vecchio arnese malato, da un aggeggio polveroso del bazar di nostra vita! Uno sforzo psicologico che è peggio d’una malattia” (*SGF I* 231). This difficulty might be attributed to the extent to which objects, representing or bearing traces of previous owners, are inscribed in domestic relations: “Separarci da una cornice di mògano finto, inghirlandata di peperoncini d’oro, col ritratto della moglie di primo letto dello zio dell’ex-cognato di nostro padre!” (*SGF I* 231). Long after the loss of the first wife of the uncle of our father’s ex-brother in law, it remains difficult to part with her portrait framed in fake mahogany. And the separation from such dusty gadgets as found those at the “bazar di nostra vita” is itself called a divorce: “Divorziare dal busto in gesso di Garibaldi, dal cavatappi a cui s’è sdipanato un filetto, dal piccolo ordigno regolatore (in ottone) della vecchia lucerna a petrolio andata in briciole ad opera della Cesira, domestica dalle mani di fata!” (*SGF I* 231). Like the father’s ex brother-in-law’s uncle’s first wife’s hold on the frame, Cesira’s shaky hand hovers over the only remnant of the old lantern she shattered long ago.

Though the junk of Porta Ludovica is inscribed in social and familial relationships and bears mnemonic traces of its past owners, the essay locates the urge to hold onto objects not in such sentimentality, but rather in an instinctive thriftiness:

Più che una cagione di sentimento, si direbbe quell'altro motivo, costituzionale alla persona umana, anzi fondamento dell'anima: (scusate la sincerità): quell'istinto di serbare, del ritenere, del non mollare un bottone: comunque del non averci a perdere, dell'utilizzare in un qualunque modo e fino all'ultimo centesimo ricavabile, ciò che s'è acquisto, comperato, tirato in casa, goduto, magari per anni. L'idea che, dovendo alienare un turacciolo, almeno se ne tragga il profitto ch'esso ci merita, il massimo profitto consentito dal mercato. (*SGF I 231*)

Constitutive of the “persona umana,” then, is an instinct to set aside, stash away, or otherwise hold on to even the most threadbare of things, and to extract from them every cent possible. The Porta Ludovica flea market is the product of this sense of responsibility and devotion to things that have been acquired.

In trying to extract the “massimo profitto consentito dal mercato,” the subject assesses his possessions according to the value conferred upon them by the social consensus of the market. Though the essay gawks at the knickknacks on display at Porta Ludovica, describing them in such detail as to emphasize their scant worth, the locus of wonder is not the misvaluation of the vendors, but the metropolis that matches them with buyers:

Mercato? Ma esiste un mercato dei turaccioli buchi, dei busti di Garibaldi, delle grattugie usate, delle pipe con via il bocchino, dei sellini di bicicletta maceri, delle chiavi di cui non si ricorda più l'uscio, dei clackson senza la pera? [...] C'è chi vende e chi compera tuttocì: esiste il mercato dell'impensabile. Tutto esiste a Milano.” (*SGF I 232*)

At Porta Ludovica, the religious devotion to objects finds a moment of redemption in even the most improbable of sales. The Milan of “Carabbattole” is a wondrous site of economic efficiency, as tattered wares are paired with patrons. These customers emerge from the marvelous metropolis only after the *carabbattole* spend years waiting:

C'è un sogno di risparmio e di profitto, un tentativo di resurrezione in-extremis; [...] ma anche un economia ed una certezza combinatoria—di arrivare ad accozzare il frusto con l'utile, la parte col tutto, e la pazienza infinita col momento buono: “el moment bon!” quello in cui il bischero d'un violino infranto sarà rivenduto per diciannove soldi, dopo diciott'anni d'esposizione, al mendico sviolinatore di via Mac-Mahon che gliene si era spezzato uno sotto mano tre giorni fa. (*SGF I 233*)

Like putrefying matter transformed into nitrogen compounds that sustain plant life, the *carabbattole* of Porta Ludovica are returned to circulation. The “sogno di risparmio e di profitto,” improbable or even “impensabile” as it may seem, given the utter ruin of the merchandise, is realized in the redemptive moment, “el moment bon!” Here what might seem like hoarding in contemporary discourse because of the useless decrepitude of the wares, instead finds its redemptive moment. The questionable sagacity of waiting eighteen years to earn nineteen *soldi*,

along with the use of dialect in the exclamation “el moment bon!” convey the parodic position of the essay.

The redemptive moment, nonetheless, saves the *carabattole* of Porta Ludovica from the oblivion of shipwreck:

L'incredibile relitto s'è venuto ad arenare su questa spiaggia senza frangente come nei racconti dei naufraghi le scatole di biscotto zuppo approdano all'isola di Malinconia. Non è un naufragio questo, ma il consunto costume degli umani: anche il costume, cioè l'habitus della nostra civiltà meccanica e incerottata viene a dimettersi, esausto, tra le braccia di questa rigattiera benigna, ma implacabile, che lo attende, in cima degli 'dalle parti di porta Ludovica.' Come il Petrarca sarà laureato poeta in Campidoglio, così il cavatappi, nel suo vecchio sabato, assurgerà finalmente al collaudo della Ludovica: il pitale di ferro e smalto, il mozzo di bicicletta con via tre palle: biglie, sfere. (233).

The knickknacks come to graze on the pastures of Porta Ludovica are *like* shipwrecked objects, but the essay then specifies that these they are not. Rather, to arrive at Porta Ludovica represents the a crowning achievement of the life of a thing: a testament to its having being passed down through generations and outlived its use. And unlike shipwrecked objects, which would loll about the shore in obscurity, weighing down the surface of the earth with their uselessness, the *carabattole* are transformed by “el moment bon!” and returned to returns them to the economic cycle.

By way of contrast, Carlo's *raccolte* in the short story “L'Adalgisa” see no such “moment bon.” Related by the eponymous widow, whose account is occasionally derided by an omniscient narrator's frame and footnotes, “L'Adalgisa” describes the veteran's collections: “E infatti accumulava sistematicamente, nelle scatole disusate delle scarpe e dei biscotti di Novara, doviziosi strati di pezzetti di buste ‘con tutti i francobolli del mondo’: ma non solo quelli vecchi del Venezuela o della Martinica, sì anche quelli di jeri l'altro, e del Regno d'Italia” (RR I 516). Along with stamps, Carlo collects insects, Libyan landscapes, and minerals: “Ed oltre che appassionato filatelico era un dilettante mineralogista: parlava di cassiterite e di orneblena, di chisti e di faglie: di stato crioscopico, di allotropia, di rocce peridotico-serpentinose” (RR I 516). The collections pour through house, to the embarrassment of Adalgisa:

Tutte le migliaia di pezzi di busta avevano sedimentato in ventitre scatole di ex-biscotti le quali, in cima a un armadio, guai a che le toccasse. [...] Dei ‘minerali in se stessi’ aveva riempito più d'un armadio di casa, e una credenza vecchia, dei nonni, e i tiretti della scrivania, la mensola d'un caminetto senza canna, i due tavolini della ‘sala de ricéf’ il più grande e il più piccolo. Per tutta la casa abbondavano i fermacarte (di calcite o di solfo) e, in conseguenza, le carte. (RR I 516).

The collections of landscapes of Libya, stamps, minerals, and insects become an expression of Carlo's historico-cultural and scientific understanding of the world, so that “His living room [or perhaps his entire house] is a box in the theater of the world” (Benjamin *Arcades* 19). But critically, these collections—already distinct from the *carabattole* of Porta Ludovica because they are not *used* but studied (and perhaps hoarded) reap no profit after the Carlo's death and are unsentimentally (and ungracefully) discarded:

La tromba marina della disdetta l'aveva aggirata e ravvolta verso il buio, forzandola a smaltire sui due piedi un quattro quintali di sassi: per non dire dei ricci, dei conchiglioni, e alcune lunghe stanghe di calcio, pezzi di stalagmiti: come candele smoccolate. 'E senza alcun profitto, senza poterne ricavare un centesimo!' Anzi: 'quas quasi dovevo pagargli io il trasporto....' (RR I 525).<sup>39</sup>

#### **“Frusaglia più o meno inutile”<sup>40</sup>**

In the 1949 essay “Come lavoro,” Gadda describes his own writing as shipwrecked junk washing up on the shores of consumed time: “il deflusso parallelo della mia vita e non vita ha reliquato, sì sì reliquato, frusaglia più o meno inutile, alle sponde del tempo consunto” (SGF I 427). Unlike the junk of Porta Ludovica, which eventually sees a redemptive “moment bon,” Gadda here imagines his own writing as a kind of waste that is never transformed by industry or economy. Without such a redemptive moment, his writing resembles shells that are never strung together in a necklace or mildewing stacks of newspapers that are never read. The “sogno di risparmio e di profitto,” remains, in this figuration, a *sogno*. Such cynicism is distant from “Carabattole,” in which objects return gloriously to circulation after grazing at the market, and from “L'azoto,” which sees the transformation of waste products into essential compounds. The cynicism of the 1949 essay, however, coalesces around the same constellation of themes that garner Gadda's admiration in his earlier writings: the shift is one of affect, not of interest.

This shift in affect may be most vivid in the sense of despair that permeates *La cognizione*, to which I will now return by way of conclusion. Like Gadda's writing in “Come lavoro,” Gonzalo is figured as a castaway in the novel. The directionless sea first seems to overwhelm the hidalgo when the oscillation between delirium and reason of his increasingly feverish tirade against personal pronouns is likened to the movement of a ferry: “Faceva tutte ste domande così, per il gusto di farle: (o almeno, in quell'ennesimo traghetto da delirio a ragione)” (RR I 647). Doctor Higuera believes that the social fabric might resuscitate Gonzalo's flailing soul:

In quel momento gli occhi parvero significare la certezza della povertà, guardare con dignità disperata la solitudine. Il medico e padre, tuttavia, persisteva nell'opinione che anche un naufrago, a voler davvero, lo si può ripescar fuori dai flutti, dalla ululante notte: il tessuto sociale interviene allora al soccorso: e agisce contro la cianosi del singolo col vigore non mai spento della carità; opera come una respirazione d'artificio, che ridona al prostrato, dopo il soffio azzurro della speranza, il rosso calore della vita. (RR I 622-3)

The doctor's belief that the social fabric can save the castaway fished from the crashing waves of howling night may be true of the *carabattole* of Porta Ludovica, but not of Gonzalo, whose eyes “parevano desiderare e nello stesso tempo rispingere ogni parola di conforto” (RR I 622). In his isolation, Gonzalo becomes a sort of material waste that cannot be salvaged by the social fabric of Maradagàl.

In addition to a castaway, Gonzalo is described as a cadaver, and his thoughts are likened to rancid detritus. Approaching the Villa Pirobutirro, Higuera considers the son's gloomy isolation: “Gli parve, pensandoci, che il figlio Pirobutirro stesse per troppo a rimuginar malanni,

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<sup>39</sup> See Pedullà for a luminous reading of the relationship between Carlo's collections and Gadda's poetics.

<sup>40</sup> Gadda, “Come lavoro,” *I viaggi la morte* (SGF I, 427).



chiuso in sé: malanni ormai rugginosi nel tempo: e i pensieri gli attossicavano l'anima, come una spazzatura irrancidita" (*RR I* 600). Apart from the metabolic function of the social, Gonzalo's thoughts cannot be processed and purified, and are left, instead, to poison his soul like garbage. We have seen how both "L'azoto" and "Carabattole a Porta Ludovica" thematize waste, but also the redemptive exchanges and transformations that reconstitute it for circulation. The nitrogen essays in the series "Per l'autarchia economica," on the other hand, sideline waste to focus on scientific innovations that might render processes of decomposition extraneous. The problem Gonzalo poses for the larger system of Maradagàl looks different from that presented by the waste of "L'azoto" and the useless objects of "Carabattole a Porta Ludovica," as he becomes a castaway that cannot be resuscitated by the *tessuto sociale*.

We began this chapter by noting that Gonzalo, a "bozzolo allergico," represents an autarchic model of subjectivity because of his desire for isolation and autonomy. We might also understand the character in terms of the obstacle he represents for the social fabric of Maradagàl, which is unable to resuscitate him, and hence to make "use of all its resources," to recall Por's definition of autarchy. Withdrawn from the social, with thoughts seething in isolation, Gonzalo ultimately raises eugenicist questions, which Gadda formulates explicitly in manuscript notes. Commenting on Higuera's impression that, "i pensieri gli attossicavano l'anima, come una spazzatura irrancidita," Gadda writes the following manuscript note:

O si rinuncia a quanto fu (distrarsi, dimenticare) e allora si ripudia il proprio essere: si rinuncia alla vendetta. O si accetta il passato e allora bisogna vivere. Ma il vivere nella rancura è cosa sterile (Cristo) e bisogna distruggere di sé, l'inutile. Allora il solo bene è la propagazione, la generazione (Cristo, Mussolini) l'aumento, l'incremento. Ma che cosa si aumenta, si sviluppa? Anche alle carote si può dire: 'crescite et multiplicàmini.' La sua intima e più secreta perplessità, il più secreto orgoglio affioravano in una negazione della vita non valida: come l'agricoltore e il bravo giardiniere strappano le foglie incompiute della bella pianta. (556)<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, Gadda thinks through ideas that will be central not only to the novel, but also to his transformed affect with regards to fascism and, more specifically, autarchy. The alternative to festering in isolation, he speculates, is propagation—as ordained by Christ and Mussolini. Using two horticultural metaphors, Gadda considers the implications of such propagation, first asking: "How are we any different from carrots, if we aim only to be fruitful and multiply?" The second metaphor is introduced as "la sua intima e più secreta perplessità, il più secreto orgoglio," likely because the "negazione della vita non valida" is that of Gonzalo, who takes solace in fantasizing about ordering a rope with which to hang himself: "serrò le mascelle: fantasticò disperatamente di ordinare al Canapificio una speciale partita di straforzino, carico di rottura 500 chili" (*RR I* 649). Regardless of whose negation it might be, the alternative to the unchecked propagation of carrots, in this passage, is a eugenicist project of pruning, of cutting short lives unworthy of living.

The explicit opposition in the note above between the eugenicist pruning and the pronatalism of Mussolini (and Christ), is shifted in the novel from the realm of reproduction onto that of the social. Despite this reworking, Gadda maintains the figurative economy of the manuscript note, so that the work of the gardener who carefully divests his plants of defective

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<sup>41</sup> This and all other manuscript notes from *La cognizione* cited in this chapter are from the Manzotti edition published by Einaudi in 1987.

fronds now resembles the man who becomes Lord and Prince of his own garden by refusing to participate in the social:

La sua segreta perplessità e l'orgoglio secreto affioravano dentro la trama degli atti in una negazione di parvenze non valide. Le figurazioni non valide erano da negare e da rispingere, come specie falsa di denaro. Così l'agricoltore, il giardiniere sagace m'ondano la bella pianta dalle sue foglie intristite, o ne spiccano acerbamente il frutto, quello che sia venuto mencio o vezzo al dispregio della circostante natura.

Cogliere il bacio bugiardo della Parvenza, coricarsi con lei sullo strame, respirare il suo fiato, beber giù dentro l'anima il suo rutto e il suo lezzo di meretrice. O invece attuffarla nella rancura e nello spregio come in una pozza di scrementi, negare, negare: chi sia Signore e Principe nel giardino della propria anima. Chiuse torri si levano contro il vento. Ma l'andare nella rancura è sterile passo, negare vane immagini, le più volte, significa negare se medesimo. (*RR I 703*)

The rejection of the social, in the passage above, is figured as a refusal to accept the lying kiss of Appearance, to roll with her in the hay, inhaling her stinking breath and whore's stench. The alternative to such unappealing romps is to cast Appearance away in spite, as if to throw her into a well of excrement. In short, Gonzalo's choice is much the like one Freud sets out for the little boy newly cognizant of the "anatomical distinction between the sexes": "horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her" (*XIX: 252*). While Doctor Higuera understands the salvific charity of the social fabric as a form of artificial respiration, the passage above reformulates this flow of oxygen instead as the stinking breath of whorish Appearance.

Another horticultural metaphor sets out the narrative and political stakes of the oppositions charted above. Introducing a major narrative digression—the (feigned) deafness, followed by the recovered hearing, of the night watchman, known in Lukones as Pedro Mahagones but born Gaetano Palumbo—Gadda writes:

Ma il tessuto della collettività, un po' dappertutto forse, nel mondo, e nel Maradagàl più che altrove, conosce una felice attitudine a smemorarsi, almeno di quando in quando, del fine imperativo cui sottostà il diuturno lavoro delle cellule. Si smagliano allora, nella compattezza del tessuto, i caritatevoli strappi della eccezione. La finalità etica e la carnale benevolenza verso la creatura umana danno contrastanti richiami. Se ha ragione quest'altra, una nuova serie di fatti ha inizio, scaturita come germoglio, e poi ramo, dal palo teleologico. (*RR I 573*)

In this passage, carnal benevolence, like that which the doctor imagines to act against the cyanosis of the flailing soul, "col vigore non mai spento della carità" is opposed the ethical aim of the social fabric. The latter, in this case, would require that night watchmen have "orecchi sceltissimi [...] e tutti i cinque sensi in perfetto stato: [...] il fiuto del segugio e la retina del gatto, che arriva a scorgere i topi in corsa, dicono, nel buio delle cantine" (*RR I 573*). Carnal benevolence, on the other hand, would allow for "una guardia sorda o semisorda" (*RR I 573*). Should the latter come to pass, as indeed it does—with Mahagones appointed watchman—a new bud, then branch of the teleological pole—of the narrative—springs forth.

The tension between ethical aim and carnal benevolence—and their relationship to literature—is more ominously developed in another manuscript note that attributes Giacomo Leopardi’s survival beyond infancy to this very form of charity:

Se la cosiddetta madre di Recanati, more Lacedaemonum, avesse buttato dalla rupe il suo conte-mostriattolo non riconoscendolo valido per la leva della vita, nessuna dolce e chiara notte avrebbe accolto il tacere del giorno di festa. Così i cieli futuri aspettano il procedere della carità. (558)

That Leopardi’s mother didn’t throw her sickly son from a cliff is called an act of charity, thanks to which we have the “dolce e chiara notte” of the poem “La sera del dì di festa.” Another manuscript note is somewhat less charitable toward Gonzalo—who never does “dar termine ad un suo lavoro” (*RR I* 730), a novel—and who could not bear the *dì di festa* (*RR I* 734-5): “La madre avrebbe dovuto strozzarlo, se avesse avuto la pietà e la rettitudine della pantera” (530). In the opposition between ethical aim and charity, then, the former is associated not only with the agricultural pruning, but also with the Spartan mother who throws her son from a cliff, and the panther who ruthlessly ends the life of her cub.<sup>42</sup>

The sequence of tropes above confines woman to a double bind wherein the objectionable outcome of the opposition between ethical aim and charity is not constant. In the first two passages, the gardener’s work of pruning imperfect fronds and, by extension, cutting short unworthy lives, is the preferred outcome. This is signaled by the adjectives “bravo,” “sagace,” and “bella,” and by the comparison of such pruning to a “negazione di parvenze non valide [...] come specie falsa di denaro.” In the hands of woman, however, such pruning becomes horrible, the work of a Spartan mother who would throw her son from a cliff and thus deny future generations a sweet and clear night. Opposed to ethical aim, charity, at its best, enables poetry by allowing for the survival of a sickly count from Recanati, as well as both evolution and narrative, which take the form of new buds, then branches on the teleological pole. In Gonzalo’s misogynist formulation, however, charity—and with it “la propagazione, la generazione [...] l’aumento, l’incremento”—amounts to an acceptance of the lying kiss of a whore.

The double bind that makes woman both a propagating whore and a ruthless patriot who would sacrifice her own son for some *finalità etica* is central to the vitriol of *Eros e Priapo*. Like the figures above, the critique of fascism in the postwar treatise becomes, more precisely, an attack of woman. Gadda ridicules pronatalist policy: “Si è largito il premio nuziale perché facessero figli: figli, figli, figli, tanti figli, infiniti figli, da mandarli a morire nella guerra, guerra, guerra, guerra, contro i ‘delitti delitti delitti della Inghilterra Inghilterra Inghilterra Inghilterra’” (*SGF II* 248). Sending her infinite sons off to die in war, the fascist mothers of *Eros e Priapo*, like the panther above, are: “Pronte ad offrire il figlio e il fratello a la Patria” (*SGF II* 301). While the fascist mothers of *Eros e Priapo* ready to offer up their sons to the patria are the object of contempt, the critique Gadda offers of their sacrifice rests not in an embrace of charity in place of ethics, but rather in another articulation of the eugenicist *finalità etica*. He explains: “A

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<sup>42</sup> In *Homo Sacer* Agamben writes: “The most ancient recorded forms of capital punishment ([...] defenestration from the Tarpean rock) are actually purification rites and not death penalties in the modern sense” (81). This is also the same biopolitical project at work in the second half of Mussolini’s Ascension Day Speech, dedicated to healing the social body by purging it of criminal elements. See also Esposito, *Bios*.

morire andarono dunque i più forti, i più feroci, i più belli, i più geneticamente validi” (*SGF II* 297). This theory, Gadda would maintain, is realized both in Maradagà and in Italy, when the more genetically valid siblings of the character Gonzalo and the author himself perished in war.

In *La cognizione*, the specter of such a fascist mother—one who would sacrifice her sons to the *finalità etica* of the *patria* appears to Gonzalo in a dream. During Higuera’s house call, Gonzalo indicates his concern about his mother’s health by recounting a dream that augurs her death: “Gli anni erano finiti! In cui si poteva amare nostra madre.... Carezzarla....oh! aiutarla.... Ogni finalità, ogni possibilità, si era impietrata nel buio” (*RR I* 632-3). The Signora fleetingly appears to Gonzalo in the dream as a silent, motionless figure: “Veturia, forse, la madre immobile di Coriolano, velata...” (*RR I* 633). Likened to Veturia—(named Volumnia in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*)—the oneiric Signora anticipates the fascist mothers of *Eros e Priapo*, who would send off endless sons to die for the *patria*. In Shakespeare’s play, Volumnia recalls her great pride at learning of her son’s victories in the Volcian town of Corioles. When her daughter-in-law Virgilia asks, “But had he died in the business, madam; how then?” Volumnia ruthlessly responds:

Then his good report should have been my son; I  
therein would have found issue. Hear me profess  
sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love  
alike and none less dear than thine and my good  
Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their  
country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action. (I.iii)<sup>43</sup>

Like the fascist mothers who would have “figli: figli, figli, figli, tanti figli, infiniti figli, da mandarli a morire nella guerra, guerra, guerra, guerra,” Volumnia would rather lose eleven dear sons to war than see one abandon his *patria*. In Gonzalo’s dream, however, the vision of the Signora as Veturia quickly fades: “Ma non era la madre di Coriolano! Oh! Il velo non mi ha tolto la mia oscura certezza: non l’ha dissimulata al mio dolore” (*RR I* 633). The apparition of Veturia—who exploits filial love to dissuade Coriolanus from leading the Volcian attack of Rome, and thus leads her son to death—gives way to a more lasting picture of grief or guilt.

Indeed, the dream presages not the Signora’s betrayal of her son, but her death, and Gonzalo’s long-awaited possession of all that remains:

“E nella casa rimaneva qualche cosa di mio, di mio, di serbato... [...] Le more della legge avevano avuto chiusura....Il tempo era stato consumato! Tutto, nel buio, era impietrata memoria.... Nozione definita, incancellabile....Delle ricevute.... Che tutto, tutto era mio! Mio! Finalmente.... Come il rimorso.” (*RR I* 633)

We have already seen that in “Come lavoro” Gadda describes his own writing as “frusaglia più o meno inutile,” washed up on the shores of consumed time. In the dream, similarly, “Il tempo era stato consumato!” We have seen how this form of time can represent—along with death—the moment when investments become hoards, when there can no longer be a redemptive “moment bon.” Along with the Pirobutirro possessions—and perhaps also Gonzalo himself, Carlo’s

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<sup>43</sup> Gadda may have used the name from Plutarch’s account, but he would certainly have read Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. *La cognizione*, (and indeed Gadda’s oeuvre as whole), is dense with allusions to Shakespeare plays—particularly *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Julius Caesar*.

collections in “L’Adalgisa,” and—in moments of greater cynicism like that expressed in the essay “Come lavoro”—Gadda’s own writing, all wash up on the shores of consumed time. In writings more optimistic about autarchy, the knickknacks of Porta Ludovica and decomposing matter can instead be processed efficiently by the system or, in the essays “Per l’autarchia economica,” eliminated entirely. In *La cognizione*, a novel that oscillates between these two poles, Gadda grapples instead with the implications of such efficiency.

## Chapter Two. After the Gaze of Another: Sexual and Aesthetic Solidarities of 'Figliation' in Giorgio Manganelli

### Between Stylistic Cholesterol and International Light Cuisine

In *Il vulcano: Scritti critici e visionari* (1999), novelist Antonio Moresco describes contemporary Italian literature as decidedly unbalanced and unappetizing fare: “Da una parte il colesterolo stilistico, dall'altra la cucina internazionale *light*. La scrittura muscolare o quella galateale. Populismo oppure intellettualismo. Marmellata romantica oppure liofilizzato. Immediatismo vitalistico o epigonaltà” (15).<sup>1</sup> In such a broad characterization of Italian literature of the *secondo Novecento*, Giorgio Manganelli's opus tastes unquestionably like freeze-dried cholesterol, his writing reads like *intellettualismo galateale*. The editors of the 2006 Marcos & Marcos volume dedicated to Manganelli sketch a similarly polarized topography of contemporary Italian literature: “Probabilmente è giusto dire che il nostro sarebbe stato un paese (non solo letterariamente) più vivibile, più divertente senz'altro, se l'icona dello Scrittore, nei trent'anni di loro vita parallela, fosse stata più simile a quella di Manganelli che a quella di Moravia” (4). Their hypothesis suggests the enormous cultural capital of Manganelli's cerebral confections, as does the snub they extend to neophyte readers:

Ma non possiamo fare a meno di chiederci se, esaurito il conformismo che anteponeva non ci stia toccando, ora, un conformismo uguale e contrario: e molto più sottile, molto più insidioso forse. Se, insomma, i tanti che solo ora 'scoprono' Manganelli, lo facciamo per le ragioni giuste. (4)

Manganelli's opus lends itself particularly well to such schematization (and such snobbism) in part because it is both vast and homogeneous.<sup>2</sup> As critic Francesco Muzzioli notes in *Teoria e critica della letteratura nelle avanguardie italiane degli anni Sessanta* (1982): “Non ci sono infatti sostanziali modificazioni passando da *La letteratura come menzogna* (1967) a *Angosce di*

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that the objects of Moresco's scorn, in the *Scritti critici e visionari* are numerous, and his culinary categorizations shifty. Furthermore, as a contemporary novelist, Moresco likely has his own axe to grind. For him, the Neo-Avant-Garde represents “colesterolo stilistico,” while Alberto Moravia and Italo Calvino—“modello di italiano perfettamente digeribile, *light*” (11)—embody the “cucina internazionale *light*.” These categories however, are flexible, as is evidenced in his rejection of Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose writing might be described as both “muscolare” and “intellettualismo.” Similarly, while Calvino in this passage represents *cucina internazionale light* (and thus *populismo* rather than *intellettualismo*) in the following chapter he is contrasted to Pasolini as *intellettualismo* to *vitalismo*:

[...] Calvino e Pasolini come Scilla e Cariddi della letteratura italiana di questa fine secolo e fine millennio, [...] riproducono in maniera visibilissima i due tipici, opposti e, a mio parere speculari e intramontabili modi con cui la letteratura italiana si pone di fronte a se stessa: intellettualismo e vitalismo, per dirla banalmente. (32)

<sup>2</sup> In her *Bibliografia degli scritti di Giorgio Manganelli* Pulce lists 1,727 entries—a number that has further increased since the publication of the *bibliografia* in 1996. By bestowing his papers and manuscripts as well as his personal library of over 18,000 volumes upon the *Centro di ricerca sulla tradizione manoscritta di autori moderni e contemporanei* (also known as the *Fondo manoscritti*) in Pavia, Manganelli facilitated the study of his works and publication of posthumous articles, fragments and collections.

*stile* (1981), e nello stesso tempo, ogni singolo brano può contenere validamente tutta la posizione teorica dell'autore" (169). Though this chapter may demonstrate that Muzzioli's point is somewhat overstated, there is indeed remarkable consistency in Manganelli's ornate and often obscure prose.

Despite the uniformity of his texts and the prestige of his *intellettualismo*, Manganelli's writing makes frequent use of a graphically corporeal register, one that might instead evoke Moresco's category of "scrittura muscolare," if not "cucina internazionale *light*." Indeed, this chapter proposes that the use of such vivid carnality problematizes not only Moresco's categories, but also those Manganelli uses to characterize his own writing. Furthermore, Manganelli uses fragmented and exposed bodies to forge a misogynist aesthetic that Graziella Pulce dresses, with great delicacy, as follows: "Con vesti e termini femminili l'immagine della letteratura coincide sistematicamente con l'immagine della donna, con tutte le ambiguità e le lacerazioni di cui questa metafora è carica" (2004: 14). Indeed, though it may have been the promise of such *intellettualismo galateale*, of such rich and exquisitely prepared fare, that first drew me to Manganelli's writing, it was the terrible realization that—to stretch this metaphor beyond the limits of good taste—it had been prepared with my own flesh that made me recognize the urgency of understanding such a *convivio* and its implications.

A short biographical anecdote, ubiquitous in Manganelli scholarship, may serve to contextualize this *convivio*. Soon after the publication of *Hilarotragoedia* in 1964, Manganelli, alone amidst the "tumultuoso disordine" of his attic apartment, receives two unexpected visitors.<sup>3</sup> The first is Gadda, aggrieved by what he recognizes as a parody of his own novel in the *trattatello*: "disse che *Hilarotragoedia* [...] fosse in realtà un dissacrazione de *La cognizione del dolore*."<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter arrives Manganelli's daughter, Lietta, who, by some accounts,

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<sup>3</sup> The anecdote first appears in Maria Corti's "Un manierista in lambretta," published the year of the death of the *manierista*. Lietta Manganelli relates the episode in a "Fotobiografia" of her father, published in *Il caffè illustrato*, an interview published in *Il giornale*, and essays in the volumes *Le foglie messaggere* and *Il delitto rende ma è difficile*. The anecdote also appears in Pulce's *Giorgio Manganelli: Figure e sistema* and Maurizio De Benedictis' *Manganelli e la finzione*. Two of the essays in the Marcos y Marcos volume *Giorgio Manganelli* include the episode: "Madri/Inferni" by Gilda Policastro and "Milano/Roma," by Andrea Cortellessa. *Giorgio Manganelli* also contains a one-act play based upon the scene, Tiziano Scarpa's "Il Professor Manganelli e l'Ingegnere Gadda."

The quotation is from the interview "In quella selva oscura," in which Laura Lilli finds Manganelli seated on an armchair "che emerge dal tumultuoso disordine del suo studio" (88). In "L'hilarotragoedia di Giorgio Manganelli," Patrick Mauries describes a visit to the writer's house and similarly emphasizes the cluttered atmosphere:

Tutti i muri, i corridoi, senza dubbio una parte delle camere, sono coperti da scaffali, che traboccano di libri d'ogni sorta, in più lingue, dal greco all'inglese, talora nei loro involti, un modesto settore riservato a bottiglie d'alcolici diversi e internazionali.

Invisibile sotto la massa, un tavolo basso sta di fronte al solo posto praticabile della stanza, un piccolo canapè giallo che contempla minaccioso una pila di opere in attesa. (147)

<sup>4</sup> See "Mio padre era come un orso impaurito."

Several critics have stressed similarities between Gadda and Manganelli; most take the anecdote above as a point of departure.

In his 1959 essay "I nipotini dell'ingegnere" Arbasino forges a gay genealogy by naming himself, Pasolini, and Testori indirect heirs to the literary legacy of "l'ingegnere." Since at least that time, Italian writers have been evaluated in terms of their stylistic—and, in some cases, biographical—proximity to Gadda.

appears before her father for the first time since he relocated to Rome in 1953, six years after her birth. Maria Corti describes the scene:

Aprì, si trovò davanti Carlo Emilio Gadda. Lo fece entrare, lo ascoltò con meraviglia: Gadda incredibilmente si era sentito preso in giro da quel libro. Mentre Manganelli si prodigava a negare, suonò di nuovo il campanello. Ma chi c'è ancora perdio! Pensò mentre apriva la porta. Vide una bella ragazza che lo fissava. Scusi, lei è il professor Manganelli? Sì, sono io. Ciao papà, sono tua figlia. Non la vedeva dagli anni milanesi: Scusa, cara, devo farti aspettare in terrazza. (Corti "Un manierista" 32)

Corti writes of the episode: "Aneddotta, d'accordo, ma così le minime cose della vita possono essere specchi segreti delle più grandi" (32). For her, the larger idea that the anecdote quietly reflects is as follows: "Manganelli fu un uomo del nostro secolo che non accondiscese mai al banale, all'ovvio, al mediocre; fu un uomo d'ingegno che per di più era saggio" (32). While the logic that produces such a *sententia* from such an *exemplum* is at best opaque, I too consider the episode (and, more importantly, the frequency of its retelling) a mirror of something larger: an indication both of the role Manganelli plays in the historiography of contemporary literature, and a symptom of the texts I discuss in this chapter, "La letteratura come mafia" (1968), "La letteratura come menzogna" (1967) and *Hilarotragoedia* (1964).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I read the anecdote as

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Manganelli, in such considerations, fares well, in part because of his shared geographic biography with "L'ingegnere": both were raised in Lombardy and relocated to Rome. In addition, both write in a style characterized by baroque multilingualism and elaborate digressions. On Gadda and the baroque, see Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements* and Ezio Raimondi, *Barocco moderno*. For Manganelli and the baroque see Federico Francucci, "Barocco."

In *Giorgio Manganelli: Figure e sistema*, Pulce describes both *Hilarotragoedia* and Gadda's *La cognizione* in terms of "il rapporto opprimente con il personaggio della 'madre,' una certa 'furiostà' del protagonista, una narrativa disarticolata, il ricorso a un linguaggio particolarissimo, fastoso e sorvegliatissimo" (101). In *La neoavanguardia italiana*, Renato Barilli attributes Manganelli's success as a writer and prominent position in the neoavanguardia to a resemblance to Gadda: "La rapida ascesa della stella di Manganelli, nell'orizzonte della neoavanguardia, era senza dubbio facilitata dall'apparente prossimità del suo caso con quello di un padre nobile come Gadda" (237).

In addition to broad biographical and stylistic similarities, the claim made by Gadda of the anecdote is evinced in Manganelli's writing by figures such as the "Mamma cattolica," a "femmina paradigmatica" who "amava notturnare per cloache, e defecava in piedi, leggendo settimanali illustrati" (*Hilarotragoedia* 26-27); who evokes *La cognizione's* barefoot *pescivendola* Beppina, "notissima in tutto il territorio di Lukones e delle vicine ville [...] per il suo modo sbrigativo e piuttosto amazònico di far la piscia" (*RR I* 580) and other embodiments of the Gaddian topos of a woman urinating while standing, and the print offering Gonzalo makes to his mother. Manganelli also writes of "...genitali coperti di spinaci" (39), which may represent a gloss on the spinach that slides suggestively off a platter at Liliana Balducci's luncheon in Gadda's *Pasticciaccio* and a similar scene in his short story "Socer gerunque." In addition, the sections of *Hilarotragoedia* dedicated to grammatical shifters, particularly the personal pronoun "io," evoke Gonzalo's famous diatribe on the same subject. The focal point of discussions of the similarities between the two texts, however, is a section of *Hilarotragoedia* that will be discussed later in this chapter: the "Aneddoto propedeutico," which relates an annual visit by the narrator's mother that ends in a scene of violence and self-loathing.

<sup>5</sup> "La letteratura come menzogna" was first circulated at the October 1963 convention in Palermo at which the Gruppo '63 was formed, then published in an eponymous volume in 1967.



a symptom of the illegibility of Manganelli's texts.

Such a reading harmonizes with Roland Barthes' seminal essay "The Death of the Author" (1967), which figures the text as a profoundly disorienting space: "... Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (142). For critics confronted with such a "neutral, composite, oblique space," Barthes writes, the author functions as a point of origin, bestowing a certain legibility upon the text. At the conclusion of his essay, the death of the author and the sacrifice of origin it represents gives way to a birth: "... We know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148). Like Barthes, Manganelli figures his readers in terms of procreation; though, as we shall see, his progeny are aborted or otherwise never-born. As such, Manganelli impedes the birth Barthes celebrates, and thus creates—according to the premise of the latter's essay—an almost necessary critical dependence on the figure of the author. Importantly, though they settle at distinct endpoints, contemporaries Manganelli and Barthes both figure writing as a disorientingly desubjectivizing space and understand the relationship between writer, text and reader in terms of generation and its failures.<sup>6</sup> Understandably, then, of the few biographical sketches that recur in critical studies of Manganelli, this one is both ubiquitous and particularly significant because it places the author of avowedly "illegible" texts in legible literary, biological and narrative genealogies.<sup>7</sup> Because, as we shall see, Manganelli's own understanding of "illegible" is defined in part by a refusal of such genealogies, the anecdote represents both an antidote to and symptom of Manganelli's illegibility.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of illegibility as Manganelli sets it out in "La letteratura come mafia." I then examine two other terms that have become inseparable from studies of his writing and that, like illegibility, he defines in part through generation and its failures: *disimpegno* and *menzogna*. I propose that in "La letteratura come menzogna," the poem "ta ta tapum" and a posthumously published *appunto critico*, Manganelli binds these terms to bodies in general and reproductive organs in particular, using a series of misogynist *topoi* to develop his literary dogma. I then examine the graphic figurative economy of *Hilarotragedia*

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<sup>6</sup> In "What is an Author" (1969), Michel Foucault sets aside such a reproductive schema to instead underscore the influence authorship continues to exert, despite declarations (like that of Barthes) of its death. He proposes the category of the "author function," which he distinguishes from the real individual generally considered to inhabit that role. He then turns more broadly to the field of humanistic authorship, and urges us to ask not *who* produces a given discourse but: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions?" (120). As Albert Ascoli points out in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, this approach thus brings together questions of authority and authorship—questions that, as Belpoliti and Cortellessa's editorial note and Corti's exegesis of the biographical anecdote she relates demonstrate, are central to the reception of Manganelli's writing. See Ascoli 21-29 for cogent analyses of Barthes' and Foucault's essays, and their relation to another seminal text on authority, Hannah Arendt's "What is Authority?" (1958).

<sup>7</sup> The narrative genealogy forged by the anecdote rests in the moment of remarkable anagnorisis it produces. Corti's account of the episode accents its Oedipal echoes by describing Lietta first anonymously, as "una bella ragazza." In addition, Lietta likens her father to a lover. In "Mio padre era come un orso impaurito" she explains: "Non lo vedevo dal 1955. Per mia madre era un tabù assoluto, perciò quando andavo da lui dicevo a mia madre che andavo da Teresa, da una mia compagna di studi. Ci vedevamo di nascosto, come due amanti."

and find in the text an expression of fury and frustration at what it figures as the condition of man: squandered sperm and fallen erections.

This discontent is expressed in part through the use of metaphors that either fail to effect the transport suggested by the figure's etymology, or that bridge no difference with the copular "to be," and thus achieve tautology rather than analogy.<sup>8</sup> I argue that it is in part through his idiosyncratic use of metaphor that Manganelli develops an autarchic model of both literature and male subjectivity. I propose, however, that this autarchy is structured by its own impossibility insofar it is built upon an insistence on corporality and upon a series of misogynist *topoi* that themselves forge an intertext that collapses the dichotomies of legibility and illegibility, engagement and disengagement, and mimesis and *menzogna*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, I argue that it is precisely through the frustration with tumescence and detumescence and with the impossibility of parthenogenesis that *Hilarotragoedia* addresses—however indirectly—its historico-cultural context and thus becomes (obliquely) engaged, legible and even mimetic. As anticipated by the protagonists of the anecdote above, I find this *impegno* in part in Manganelli's implicit engagement with two novels by Gadda: *Quer pasticciaccio* and *La cognizione*. Through this analysis, then, this chapter shifts the critical terrain mapped by Manganelli's oppositions between

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Rule of Metaphor* Paul Ricoeur describes the copular verb 'to be' as the very 'place' of metaphor: "The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like.' If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally 'tensive' sense of the word 'truth'" (6). It is, as we shall see, the 'is not' that is absent in some of Manganelli's idiosyncratic uses of metaphor. In other instances, Manganelli reverses or suspends vehicle and tenor, creating a profoundly disorienting effect.

The distinction Ricoeur makes between a "tension theory" and a "substitution theory" of metaphor, with the former suggesting a concern with the production of meaning in the sentence as a whole and the latter focusing instead on individual words, adds nuance to the two distinct forms of metaphor I find in Manganelli's writing. While the reversal of vehicle and tenor involves the former, the absence of difference in the terms substituted suggests the latter.

<sup>9</sup> Cesare Segre takes on the long-opposed terms 'mimesis' and '*menzogna*' in "Divagazioni su mimesi e menzogna." He begins by making the somewhat obvious point that however plausible the reality presented in narrative, it is fundamentally fictive: "Ma se è indubbio che, a una valutazione empirica, ci sono testi più o meno rispettosi delle possibilità [...] del reale, dal punto di vista della costituzione dell'opera la finzione come menzogna è un punto di partenza ineliminabile" (179). Using Segre's analysis as a point of departure, Silvia Pegoraro, in the chapter "La danza del linguaggio: mimesi e menzogna" in *Il 'fool' degli inferi* proposes a suspension—or "dance"—of mimesis and *menzogna* in Manganelli's opus rooted in his use of paradox and in his elaborate ambiguities:

Ai fini di mettere in atto questo smascheramento del reale, l'ironia di Manganelli elegge la forma del paradosso, elaborando una nozione di menzogna che non esclude affatto la presenza della mimesi, ma si apparenta con alcuni primari (e originari) significati della mimesi stessa. (14)

This suspension of mimesis and *menzogna*, for Pegoraro, represents an alternative to the use of narrative to give form to the amorphous abundance of experience. She writes that Manganelli: "fa deflagrare le contraddizioni del reale: rifiuta la funzione terapeutica del 'narrare storie,' che affonda le sue radici in una concezione del mito come ciò che può dar ordine al caos della realtà, chiudere in una forma l'informe dell'esperienza vissuta" (13). She might have quoted *Hilarotragoedia* in which Manganelli writes: "Ho in odio le nasali lamentazioni autobiografiche, i corrucci lirici e allusivi" (62) at the outset of the section entitled "*Testimonianza di un giovane solitario*." My own analysis instead proposes that it is in the very realm of metaphor that mimesis and *menzogna* are multiply grafted onto bodies. Experience is ultimately the experience of the genitals, which are at once metaphorical, mimetic, and emphatically not.

legibility and illegibility, engagement and lack thereof, and mimesis and *menzogna*, as well as Moresco's opposition between *intellettualismo* and *immediatismo*.

This chapter departs from previous studies of Manganelli insofar as I proceed, (perhaps “against the grain” of authorial intention), as though the texts I study—particularly *Hilarotragoedia*—were legible. Adopting such a critical stance, I frequently find myself in a role that Manganelli imagines for his *lettore*, that of “onesto masochista” (61), who willfully suffers the rigorous read. Such a critical strategy aims to problematize the mystification of his writing, occasionally endowed with preternatural powers by contemporary critics like Carlo Rafele, who begins an interview with the author: “Lei si aggira per la letteratura italiana depositando qui e là oggetti misteriosi che si chiamano romanzi ma in realtà sono anti-romanzi, il cui scopo segreto è di non esistere, di annullarsi, di contribuire al silenzio definitivo della letteratura” (51).<sup>10</sup> Reading Manganelli's writing as through it were legible (the only way I know to read), I strive to understand the rhetoric and poetics that produce such “oggetti misteriosi.” Such a reading strategy aims less to demystify the text than to isolate the elisions that invite such critical responses and the violent misogyny they often involve.

### The Question of Illegibility

The question of illegibility is the subject of some debate amongst members of the *Gruppo '63* and their contemporaries. In 1966 *Trerosso* featured “Avanguardia tra leggibilità illeggibilità o no—dibattito aperto,” to which fifteen well-known writers contributed.<sup>11</sup> The issue became particularly charged in a written exchange between Moravia, a perennial target of the *neoavanguardia*'s disdain, and Manganelli.<sup>12</sup> In “Illeggibilità e potere,” published in *Nuovi argomenti* in 1967, Moravia takes a review by “un critico” as the occasion for a denunciation of illegibility. Manganelli, recognizing himself in the anonymous *critico*, responds with the vitriolic “La letteratura come mafia,” which appears in *Quindici* the following year. Most basically, Moravia had proposed that illegibility is an instrument of (a conventional notion of) power. He offered as examples the thousands of characters illegible to Chinese peasants and the Latin of lawyers and priests incomprehensible to the “plebi del nostro meridione” (8). Manganelli, who dedicates a great deal of “La letteratura come mafia” to sneeringly quoting Moravia, goes on to describe writing illegible texts as an act that: “si concentra su di una tematica linguistica e strutturale; domina la coscienza dell'atto artificiale, anche innaturale della letteratura; e si celebra la fastosa libertà, l'oltraggiosa anarchia dell'invenzione di inedite strutture linguistiche” (209). While for Moravia, then, unreadability establishes a relationship between reader and writer; for Manganelli, whose readers are “imprecisi, nascituri, destinati a non nascere, già nati e morti, e anche lettori impossibili” (219), it is characterized by the isolated and, as we shall see, masturbatory act of writing.

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<sup>10</sup> Rafele's claim that Manganelli's writings are called *romanzi* is itself problematic, as the interviewee's haughty response confirms: “[...] certamente quello che scrivo non si può classificare come romanzo né vuole essere tale. Sono anche certo che oggi il romanzo, nel senso tradizionale che si è trasmesso fino a noi dall'Ottocento, è un impaccio alla letteratura, è un modo di non fare letteratura pur scrivendo” (51).

<sup>11</sup> For detailed analysis of the *dibattito aperto* and the subsequent developments of the debate, see Grazia Menechella, *Il felice vanverare* 63-76.

<sup>12</sup> On the disdain of the *Gruppo '63* for Moravia, see, for example Barilli's *La neoavanguardia italiana*, as well as “L'avanguardia adulterata,” in which Angelo Guglielmi writes: “...Moravia non sa leggere con libertà e forse a causa del tono pratico della sua mente tende a ridurre tutto ciò che legge ad una misura per così dire bignamesca...” (19).

The most important aspect of the exchange between Moravia and Manganelli, however, is the way in which legibility and illegibility are made to participate in a gendering of reader, writer, and text, and in the development of a reproductive economy. In “Illeggibilità e potere” Moravia describes young, illegible writers who have potential to become “davvero scrittori,” rather than continuing to tyrannically wield texts that oppress like Chinese characters or erudite Latin:

Come certe donne che non hanno ancora incontrato l’uomo capace di procurare loro l’orgasmo e credono in buona fede che l’amore sia un rapporto puramente meccanico, gli scrittori dei testi illeggibili si illudono di esprimersi soltanto perché la loro pseudo espressione gli procura tutte le soddisfazioni mondane che essi ritengono debbano spettare a chi si esprime. Purtroppo essi non si rendono conto che, come si dice, manca il meglio; cioè che il loro successo è un piccolo vortice che gira intorno il vuoto. (11)

Moravia, who seems to think that women can only experience orgasm at the hands (figuratively) of capable men, compares young writers of illegible texts to those women who have not yet found such a fellow. While the “meglio” missed by such women is an orgasm; for the writers of illegible texts, who already enjoy “le soddisfazioni mondane” (including, presumably, sexual satisfactions), Moravia suggests instead some vague spiritual fulfillment. Yet if it is the “uomo capace” who procures the “meglio” for the “donna ignara,” the corresponding agent of transformation in the case of the writer would be the reader. While Moravia’s comparison of illegible writer to woman without an adept man thus seems to represent a reversal of a gendering fundamental to Western literature in which a male writer either seduces a female reader or inseminates a blank page—[and the latter is exemplified vividly in Manganelli’s *Nuovo commento* (1969), where the writer, “Casto, dunque, e gelido, punta l’asessuato sesso dell’ingegno a ingravidare del suo morto seme lo sterile e vergine testo” (8)], there is, of course, nothing new in taunting an opponent by feminizing him.

Manganelli responds to Moravia’s metaphor above with a rhetorical move that, as we shall see, is typical of his poetics: “[...] non sarà sfuggita la bella similitudine della donna ignara di orgasmo, sebbene a mio avviso il Moravia un poco sopravvaluti l’importanza filosofica e pedagogica di un buon coito” (“La letteratura come mafia” 208). With this response, Manganelli does not object to the compatibility of tenor (writer), and vehicle (woman), but rather refuses an element of the vehicle (the benefits of a good lay) in order to critique the corresponding detail of the tenor (the transformative effect of legibility upon a young illegible author). Though he seems to speak Moravia’s figural language because he employs the very terms of the metaphor, Manganelli reverses the tenor and vehicle and thus diminishes a certain semantic stability. But if this reversal alienates the argumentative aim of the metaphor, it simultaneously fortifies the figural economy through repetition.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> What, we might ask, are the political implications of such a reversal of tenor and vehicle? Does the fortification performed by the repetition of Moravia’s terms outweigh the subversive potential of the reversal? At issue is a much larger question—one that is well beyond the scope of this chapter: what are the political implications of metaphor?

Agamben addresses this question in the final section of *Stanzas*. He begins the section by discussing the “originary doubleness of the metaphysical concept of signifying,” which manifests itself variously as an opposition between proper and improper, signifier and signified, and manifest and latent content. This rift, he emphasizes, far from incidental, is the very basis of signification: “Only because

Manganelli's model of illegibility, instead, makes the reader both a figure that the writer strives to invent and a witness to some mystical process, suspecting that the text hides the untreatable and nocturnal trauma of birth:

D'altro canto, esistono scrittori che non coltivano una programmatica affabilità; non lusingano il lettore, anzi non senza protervia aspirano a inventarselo da sé: provocarlo, irretirlo, sfuggirgli; ma insieme costringerlo ad avvertire, o a sospettare, che in quelle pagine oscure, velleitarie, acerbe, in quei libri faticosi, sbagliati, si nasconde una esperienza intellettuale inedita, il trauma notturno e immedicabile di una nascita. (209)

For Manganelli, the illegible text represents not anorgasmic coitus, but infecund generation.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the “morto seme” and “sterile vergine testo” of *Nuovo commento* are unlikely to produce offspring; and the “esperienza intellettuale inedita” and “il trauma notturno e immedicabile di una nascita” accent the agonizing experience, rather than the product of childbirth. Furthermore, this “nascita” remains hypothetical and hidden, a mere suspicion of a reader who is himself an invention by the writer.

### **Illegibility, Masturbation, Autarchy**

If, for Moravia, the illegible text represents anorgasmic coitus, for Manganelli it becomes a writer's masturbatory output or some other sexual, parthenogenic or phantasmatic issue that does not develop into progeny. Manganelli rejects this inchoate issue and the exertion that

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presence is divided and unglued is something like ‘signifying’ possible” (136). He elaborates, explaining that whether the barrier is conceived as “a conventional substitution” or “the amorous embrace of form and signified”; “What remains obscured is precisely the abyss of the original division of presence over which signification installs itself” (137). Agamben continues: “The origin of this dissimulation—effected by the expressive unity of signifier and signified—of the fracture of presence was prefigured by the Greeks in a mythologeme [Oedipus and the sphinx] that has always held a particular fascination for our culture” (137). It is this “ancient Oedipal prejudice” (148) that structures the relationship between signifier and signified, proper and improper, and manifest and latent content, and necessitates a privileging of one term—be it proper, signified or latent content. Most of what we call metaphor, Agamben explains, adheres to this *a posteriori* interpretive scheme, though what he considers *true* metaphor instead “point[s] toward that ‘barrier resistant to signification’ in which is guarded the original enigma of every signifying act” (149). An authentic metaphor, for Agamben, would be one in which ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ are held in suspense so that neither term is privileged, ontologically or semiotically. He distinguishes between metaphors “crystallized by usage” and “originary” and asserts that it is only in the case of the former that a proper term can be discerned: only the “ancient Oedipal prejudice,” he writes, “makes us discern a substitution where is nothing but a displacement and a difference within a single signifying act” (148).

Silverman's theorization of analogy in *Flesh of My Flesh* constitutes a similarly equitable alternative to the privileging of the “tenor” or the “proper” term inherent to metaphor:

A metaphor entails the substitution of one thing for another. This is a profoundly undemocratic relationship, because the former is a temporary stand-in for the latter and because it only has a provisional reality. In an analogy, on the other hand both terms are on equal footing, ontologically and semiotically” (173).

<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Manganelli offers strong praise for Gabriele D'Annunzio in the essay “Splendide larve,” which first proposes a need for a fresh approach that might subtract the writer from the “inefficienti trame” of extant scholarship, then explains: “La lingua di D'Annunzio è non solo morta; non è mai esistita; è totalmente artificiale, anzi risolutamente falsa: una ‘splendida larva’” (74).

produces it in the posthumously published “ta ta tapum,” written before the publication of *Hilarotragoedia*. In the poem, Manganelli first conjures the insatiate image of:

[...] quella donna  
che non porta mutande  
quella calda femmina  
dalla fregna umida  
vogliosa di lingua e sperma (*Poesie* 198)

Then concludes, likening his testicles to inkwells and his penis to a plume:

[...] Oh i miei testicoli  
miei calamai della svettante penna,  
o aigrette di rosea carne—  
tutto tutto tutto  
sempre indica come conclusione  
la demenza, la demenza totale  
io non scrivo, non studio, non leggo,  
ma solo sussulto  
alla divinità sinistra  
di quella figa inesauribile  
che mi affascina distrugge—  
io non coiti, ma solo queste  
deserte, ilari, dementi, infuriate  
masturbazioni (199)

Although the poem seems to oppose masturbation to writing, the chiasmic structure suggests that “ta ta tapum” instead sets up two forms of writing and two forms of sexual activity. Indeed, by rendering parallel “Io non scrivo, non studio, non leggo,” and “io non coiti,” the poem implies that there could be some writing that would resemble “coiti,” rather than “deserte, ilari, dementi, infuriate masturbazioni.” As such, the poem illustrates the modern understanding of an aesthetic of masturbation like the one that Laqueur describes in *Solitary Sex*:

Whether some literature—or a certain way of living—was “masturbatory” or caused by masturbation, the new vice had become an adjective and would live on as such through the nineteenth and into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: always pejorative, always pointing to an excess of imagination, to a lack of seriousness, to a retreat from reason and from proper, polite behavior. (62)

The poem represents a literalization of the metaphor performed by the adjective “masturbatory.” And, like the uses of the adjective Laqueur cites, the frustration Manganelli expresses in “ta ta tapum” suggests a pejorative understanding of the aesthetic. His subsequent writing—particularly *Hilarotragoedia* and “La letteratura come menzogna,” concomitantly suggests a gentler judgment of the aesthetic and weightier implications for male subjectivity.

In *Solitary Sex*, Laqueur traces modern discourses on masturbation that begin with the publication in 1712 of *Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self Pollution, and all its Frightful*

*Consequences, in both SEXES Considered, with Spiritual and Psychical Advice to those who have already injured themselves by this abominable practice...*, a quack doctor's anonymous tract sold in conjunction with costly remedies. *Onania* and derivative eighteenth-century medical writing on masturbation intermittently ground their denunciations in a model of bodies characterized by a sort of economic autarchy, insofar as the threat masturbation poses to men rests in its profligate waste of sperm. Laqueur notes, however, that the discourse of modern masturbation that begins with *Onania* is equally concerned with the dangers of solitary sex for women:

[...] in the eighteenth century, there was clearly a whole imaginative world of masturbating women that was well outside a seminal economy. And the existence of such a world should suggest to us that the danger of masturbation is not dearth—not running out of something—but excess. (204)

Accordingly Laqueur proposes, in his remarkable theory of the modern preoccupation with solitary sex, that the “autarchic” model—or, more precisely, an understanding of masturbation in which the threat it poses rests in its effects on a body characterized by the economic autarchy necessitated by a limited supply of bodily fluids—becomes negligible as denunciations come to focus primarily on the imaginative excess, secrecy and isolation of the practice. He explains:

Three things made solitary sex unnatural. First, it was motivated not by a real object of desire but by a phantasm; masturbation threatened to overwhelm the most protean and potentially creative of the mind's faculties—the imagination—and drive it over a cliff. Second, while all other sex was social, masturbation was private [...]. Sex was naturally done with someone; solitary sex was not. And third, unlike other appetites, the urge to masturbate could be neither sated nor moderated. Done alone, driven only by the mind's own creations, it was a primal, irremediable, and seductively, even addictively, easy transgression. Every man, woman, and child suddenly seemed to have access to the boundless excesses of gratification that had once been the privilege of Roman emperors. (210)

These three characteristics of modern masturbation—its secrecy, isolation and imaginative excess—Laqueur proposes, suggest that the practice emerges as a frightful *doppelgänger* of the qualities that define Enlightenment individualism and, more specifically, the development of a credit-driven market in which desire is not bound to finite resources (as in the model based in an economic autarchy of bodily fluids) but must be essentially insatiable.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This model of desire is precisely that which motivates the collectors of Malerba's *Il serpente*, and is, in many ways fundamental to the desires of the collectors we shall study in the next chapter. The narrator describes stamp collectors as follows:

Se uno ha cento francobolli vorrebbe averne mille, se ne ha mille vorrebbe averne centomila. Il numero dei francobolli esistenti è un numero finito eppure se un collezionista riuscisse a avere nella sua collezione tutti i francobolli esistenti non sarebbe felice, di questo sono sicuro. (40)

Philately thus emerges as being based primarily on a desire not to possess all stamps, but rather to possess ever more. The collection, then, is defined by its tendency towards infinity. Though a collector could never possess infinite stamps—or even all extant stamps—his desire must be articulated in a formula that is asymptotic.

What Laqueur never makes explicit—likely because his interest rests in tracing the contours of the discourse of masturbation rather than those of an autarchic model of subjectivity—is that masturbation is consistently understood in terms of the autarchic threat it poses, though the locus of the autarchic threat shifts from the physical to the psychical. Closer consideration might suggest that such a shift also necessitates a redefinition of autarchy, since initially the autarchy of masturbation rests in its depletion of a limited supply of sperm, and then it rests in the isolation resulting from its boundlessness. The shift from physical to psychic thus involves a transformed concept of autarchy—first characterized by an economy in which there is limited reservoir, then by the isolation that results from infinite stock.

The discourse in and around Manganelli's writing translates almost seamlessly into Laqueur's figuration of the threat posed by modern masturbation as based in the triad of secrecy (illegibility), solitude (lack of *impegno*) and imaginative excess (*menzogna*). Indeed, though he disparages "queste deserte, ilari, dementi, infuriate masturbazioni" in "ta ta tapum," with "La letteratura come menzogna," Manganelli advocates an aesthetic that coincides surprisingly well with the modern discourse of masturbation that Laqueur isolates. In particular, it is the "imaginative excess" of modern masturbation—the anxious notion that the practice is motored not by any real object but by fantasy—that resonates with the rhetorical extravagance Manganelli equates with literature in "La letteratura come menzogna."<sup>16</sup> Most basically, a semiotic analogue to modern masturbation would involve a departure from the referential function in language; such a departure is integral to the aesthetics Manganelli proposes and practices in the essay. More specifically, the *mise-en-abîme*, which in "La letteratura come menzogna" Manganelli uses to characterize literature itself, suggests infinite reflexivity rather than referentiality. In the 1967 essay he describes the literary work as follows: "L'opera letteraria è un artificio, un artefatto di incerta e ironicamente fatale destinazione. L'artificio racchiude, ad infinitum, altri artifici" (222).<sup>17</sup> Like the most fearsome of the molds in which masturbation has been cast since the publication of *Onania*, the *artificio* Manganelli describes refracts endlessly in its infinite isolation. Though "ta ta tapum" and "La letteratura come menzogna" adopt distinct attitudes, the two texts coincide in their representation of masturbation (or an analogous aesthetic) in accordance with the modern discourse Laqueur discerns in *Solitary Sex*.

Unlike "ta ta tapum" and "La letteratura come menzogna," Manganelli's *Hilarotragoedia* at times suggests the earlier understanding of the autarchic threat of masturbation because of its

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Just as no stamp could ever sate the collector's desire in *Il serpente*, the threat posed by modern masturbation rests in the insatiability of imagination. Laqueur explains, "Eighteenth and nineteenth-century observers talked about masturbation with the same combination of moral repulsion and grudging sympathy with which we now view drug addiction. Their point is that there were no natural limits to this vice; unlike other desires—for food, for drink, even for heterosexual intercourse—this one produced only more desire, not its fulfillment" (239).

<sup>16</sup> This correspondence is already implicit in a reading of *Solitary Sex* with Goux's *Symbolic Economies*, which proposes a structural homology between the dematerialization of wealth and the differential (rather than referential) sign.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, in his preface to Torquato Accetto's 1641 *Della dissimulazione onesta*, Manganelli imagines the treatise on dissimulation in terms of a sort of spatial translation of the autarchy of literature described above. He likens Accetto's *trattatello* to a complex architectural rendition of an artifice that encloses, *ad infinitum*, other artifices—a haunted house, a vast estate with secret passageways, labyrinths full of echos, peopled by silences, constructed from yellowing blueprints and from ideas that now-deceased architects never sketched (146).



figuration of a body characterized by limited and unsustainable reproductive resources. Indeed, in the section of *Hilarotragoedia* entitled “*Chiosa sulla donna infedele*,” Manganelli describes heterosexual sex as a religious rite involving the sacrifice of sperm. He explains the process by which woman is deified: “A indiarla basterà che tu la ami” (48), and continues to describe the sacrifices she requires: “Divinità ingannevole: unica possibile. Capricciosa, sleale, incostante, a sé ignara; per cui necessitano propiziazioni di sangue e sperma, esercizi di insonnia e sperma, monotonia di lamentazioni e sperma. Occorre la sevizia a fare un dio” (48). Heterosexual sex, in the “*Chiosa sulla donna infedele*” emerges here as an onanistic act propelled by a masochistic fantasy involving the religious sacrifice of sperm. The section continues:

Ti si libro addosso la irridente, nuda in infernica levitazione; il fiore della fregna.  
Compila liturgie, fa' processioni e tridui della folla devota delle tue membra: muscoli,  
inguine, prepuzio, incolonnati in questua sessuale, con sventolare di pii testicoli, sotto a  
baldacchini di scroto, dietro a ciborio di vulva (48).

Sperm is figured as a limited resource, its sacrifice as a kind of torture. Although the passage is not explicitly concerned with solitary sex, it does suggest an autarchic model of the male body, like that which informs early condemnations of masturbation.<sup>18</sup>

### **Hilarotragoedia**

*Hilarotragoedia* is a strange little book—something between a collection of fragments and a treatise—though in the jacket note Manganelli dubs it a “libretto,” a “trattatello” and a “manualetto teorico-pratico.”<sup>19</sup> In a letter to Gastone Novelli, Manganelli calls the text “quel mio

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<sup>18</sup> Manganelli’s *Chiosa sulla donna infedele* employs much of the same religious terminology as the final two chapters of Georges Bataille’s pornographic novella “Story of the Eye,” which was first published in 1928 under the pseudonym “Lord Auch,” then revised and republished under the same name in 1940 and 1941, and posthumously under the writer’s name in 1967. The novella relates episodes of an intense sexual relationship beginning in early adolescence between the narrator and Simone. In the final erotic episode of the novella, set in a church in Seville, Simone’s confession excites the young couple and their voyeuristic patron, Sir Edmund, to rape and murder her confessor, subjecting him to an elaborate, pornographic martyrdom. After unlocking the tabernacle, Sir Edmund finds the Eucharistic ciborium and chalice:

“Look,” he explained to Simone, “the Eucharistic hosts in the ciborium, and here the chalice where they put white wine.”

“They smell like come,” said Simone, sniffing the unleavened wafers.

“Precisely,” continued Sir Edmund. “The hosts, as you see, are nothing other than Christ’s sperm in the form of small white biscuits. And as for the wine they put in the chalice, the ecclesiastics say it is the *blood* of Christ, but they are obviously mistaken. If they really thought it was the blood, they would use *red* wine, but since they employ only *white* wine, they are showing that at the bottom of their hearts they are quite aware that it is urine.” (76)

Both Bataille and Manganelli use the Eucharist to interrogate the relationship between metaphor and the obscene. For Sir Edmund, the wafer and wine maintain an indexical relation to the body of Christ, though rather than embody his flesh and blood they embody his sperm and urine. For Manganelli, on the other hand, the apparatus is figurative: it is not a narrative about the Eucharist, but a metaphoric economy that elaborates a relationship between the betrayed man and his lover.

libercolo tanatocentrico” and describes it as a touristic guide to the underworld: “Un Baedeker che intendeva, con ragionevole modestia, additare e in parte chiosare talune bellezze dell’Ade, aggiungendo notizie atte ad invogliare il turista.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, though it ostensibly concerns itself with Hades and repeatedly suggests that “the aim of all life is death,” and that all relations end in “addio,” *Hilarotragoedia* strays from a trajectory that might be described as descending. Instead, the text produces a dizzying mass of auto-annotation, repeatedly frustrated textual trajectories, aborted exegesis, diverted glosses and other non-sequiturs that render its itineraries—as well as the Hades it sometimes describes—exasperating to map.

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<sup>19</sup> In *Manganelli e la menzogna* Mariarosa Bricchi finds a titular precursor to *Hilarotragoedia* in a play entitled *Rubenus. Hilarotragoedia satyropastoralis* by a Bolognese Jesuit named Mario Bettini. The play was produced in Italian in Piacenza in 1607 and published in 1617 in Latin (11).

<sup>20</sup> The letter was included in a flyer that was associated with an exhibit of Novelli’s paintings at the *Galleria del segno* in Rome, in April 1965. The original letter is at the *Fondo manoscritti* in Pavia and is reproduced in both Mariarosa Bricchi’s *Manganelli e la menzogna* (125) and in *Le foglie messaggere* (13).

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I Relitico  
eperna

II Argoszi  
e oddei

III dicesa

↓  
Ade

**Figure 1:** Outline of *Hilarotragoedia*. Reprinted in Bricchi 26.

The following attempt to summarize these textual itineraries will illustrate the difficulties inherent in doing so. In the jacket note, Manganelli asserts a bipartite structure: “il libro si divide in appunto in due parti, che potremmo denominare *Morfologia ed Esercizi*”—though this categorization is thrown into question not only by the text, but also by a sketch he drew while writing (see Figure 1). The sketch, which resembles a fiber-optic wand, is divided into vertical sections labeled “balistica esterna” “angosce e addii” and “discesa.” Beneath the fiber-optic wand-like figure, an arrow points downward towards the word “Ade.” Following this sketch and other handwritten notes now at the Fondo manoscritti in Pavia, critic Mariarosa Bricchi divides the text into three parts, the first of which consists primarily of an exploration of the concept of descent, the second a description of various types of anguish, and the third a representation of Hades. These three parts, Bricchi maintains, are made up of twenty-nine sections, (twenty-five of which bear titles), which range in length from one sentence to twelve pages. Of these twenty-nine sections, Bricchi designates only four as narrative excursions, in part because their titles suggest narrative genres: *testimonianza*, *aneddoto*, *storia* and *documentazione*. Most of the other titled sections are called postulates, glosses, hypotheses, introductions, notes, inserts and treatments; though several elude such generic labels. These divisions are, in many ways, permeable and dubious—many of the “non-narrative” sections—particularly “(*docens loquitur*)” and the “*Postilla sul cervo suicida*”—contain anecdotal moments and many of the sections contain internal hypotheses or glosses that might be catalogued separately.

The treatise could be characterized as semi-autobiographical insofar as it offers fleeting glimpses of lives marked by timid isolation and self-loathing that call to mind Manganelli’s simultaneously grandiose and self-deprecating figuration of himself: “Sì, sono io, il Manga; lo spregevole, il dappoco, il marginale” (Letter to Luciano Anceschi 83). Notwithstanding these autobiographical themes, the text is more explicit in its concern with the journey to and topography of the underworld. The representation of Hades, however, is also discontinuous, as the following, more detailed summary of the treatise will demonstrate.

The *trattatello* begins by introducing the concept of descent, then continues, with “*Nota sui verba descendendi*,” to catalogue a spattering of verbs that suggest downward directionality: *discendere*, *chinare*, *calare*, *digradare*, *dirupare*, *piombare* and *atterrarsi*. After sections that purport to gloss amoebae and sewer-rats, the treatise proceeds to the second part, the “*Trattato delle angosce con inserto sugli addii*,” which isolates three types of anguish (*titillante*, *disruptiva* and *conclusiva o estatica*) then deals with various *addii* in sections entitled “*Chiosa sulla donna infedele*,” “*Chiosa su abbandono di casa ingrata*” and “*Testimonianza di un giovane solitario*.” The *Testimonianza* is narrated by a solitary youth whose embodied form is described as follows: “Corpo di ragno o granchio, compresso, largo, confinato in crosta gelida e ruvida” (61). Like the first two parts of *Hilarotragoedia*, the third part follows an idiosyncratic trajectory, moving from a “*Postilla sul cervo suicida*,” to an untitled section that studies the *periferia* of Hades, to the “*Aneddoto propedeutico*,” which relates an annual maternal visit that leads to a scene of maybe-matricidal violence. Another section, the *Storia del non nato* consists of a brief autobiographical fragment related by a never-born narrator. The *Documentazione detta del Disordine delle Favole* reads something like Vladimir Propp and Carl Jung with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—a procession of fairy-tale elements and archetypes that remain unfixed by narrative mortar. As this brief introduction to the text suggests, the subject of *Hilarotragoedia* is radically unconventional and largely inaccessible.

Despite the intermittent concern with Hades, I find in the treatise a more pronounced and personal descent that is no less ubiquitous though it may be more stealthily encoded. In the

jacket note, Manganelli describes the text as a *manualetto teorico-pratico*, which, like a horticultural manual or a vintner's dictionary, results from painstaking scrutiny of the material. However, the subject of *Hilarotragoedia*, rather than flowers or wine, is "levitazione discenditiva," which, in the context of the treatise, could be translated as "tumescence detumescent." Indeed, in a style that aims to be "barocca ma freddina, neoclassica ma drammatica, solenne ma [and this is no exaggeration] oscena," the text reflects upon tumescence detumescent, expressing fury and frustration at what it figures as the male predicament: squandered sperm and fallen erections.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, *Hilarotragoedia* repeatedly voices exasperation at man's inability to understand or control desire, and at the impossibility of parthenogenesis. Rather than babies, *Hilarotragoedia* produces withered fetuses and wasted sperm.

Though readers might consider *Hilarotragoedia* illegible because of its use of specialized vocabularies, including medical, horticultural and zoological terminology, dialect words and archaisms, its emphatic use of argumentative markers without the logical connections they denote, or because of its absence of spatial and temporal coordinates, the treatise also conforms to Manganelli's own understanding of illegibility because of its thematic concern with generation and incomplete or interrupted processes of reproduction.

### **Disimpegno, or Hilarotragoedia in Context**

Despite—or perhaps because of—this illegibility, *Hilarotragoedia* was immediately considered a critical contribution to the burgeoning *neoavanguardia*. Pulce notes that the *trattatello*: "suscitò grande interesse e fu avvertito come uno degli esiti più significativi della neoavanguardia" (2004: 100). With *Hilarotragoedia*, Italo Calvino claims, parroting the text's own concern with parthenogenesis, parturition and all their floundering forms: "Si può dire infatti che Manganelli sia uscito come Minerva dal cervello di Giove, maturo e armato di tutte le sue doti" ("Introduzione" 9). As Calvino's praise implies, *Hilarotragoedia* represents an important text for the *neoavanguardia*, in part because it is a sort of exception or limit case. This notion is also exemplified by Guido Almansi's figuration of Manganelli as a mystical otherworldly presence: "Negli anni Sessanta apparve sulla scena letteraria italiana Giorgio Manganelli, il quale non soltanto andava controcorrente, ma sembrava risalire le acque di un fiume appartenente a un altro mondo" ("Nulla più che un'inezia" 185). Celebrating a similar mysticism, Agamben calls Manganelli a "grande visionario" (39). Renato Barilli introduces him belatedly and begrudgingly in *La neoavanguardia italiana* as "una presenza, massiccia anche nella dimensione corporea," (233) who, uncongenially "si rafforzava in una insularità cocciuta, orgogliosa della propria diversità" (233).

For Barilli, this *diversità* is rooted in Manganelli's complete rejection of "la necessità di un impegno della letteratura e delle arti in genere verso l'altro, verso la realtà" (233). He proposes that the *neoavanguardia* on the whole, on the other hand, repudiates only "le false nozioni di impegno" (233). These false notions of commitment, "di chi credeva di aver stabilito in partenza cosa fosse la realtà," rest in part in the belief in a limpid capacity of language to represent such an uncomplicated reality. In Barilli's formulation, then, *impegno* is an aesthetic attitude towards reality—one that, in the theoretical debates of the *Gruppo '63* and (well) beyond, becomes conflated with mimesis.

Manganelli first articulates what is generally understood as a resolute resistance to the

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<sup>21</sup> Manganelli is certainly not the first to figure the descent into hell erotically: I thank Sara Russell for reminding me of Boccaccio's novella of Alibech, *Decameron* III.10.

concept of *impegno* (and accordingly mimesis) in “La letteratura come menzogna.” The essay begins by deracinating an ongoing literary debate launched by the publication of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1947 “What is Literature” and gaining increasing momentum in Italy, and planting it in an indeterminate time, between two anonymous interlocutors: “Qualche tempo fa, durante una discussione, qualcuno citò: ‘finché c’è al mondo un bimbo che muore di fame, fare la letteratura è immorale.’ Qualcun altro chiosò: ‘Allora, lo è sempre stato’” (215). With “Qualche tempo fa” and “Lo è sempre stato,” Manganelli positions first the debate, then literature itself in an unbounded time—a move that in itself tacitly endorses the position of “qualcun altro.”

Indeed, pages later in “La letteratura come menzogna” Manganelli flatly rejects the notion of *impegno*, understood as a *gesto sociale*, which here emerges as a function of the reader: “Scrivere letteratura non è un gesto sociale. Può trovare un pubblico tuttavia, nella misura in cui è letteratura, esso non ne è che il provvisorio destinatario” (219). For Manganelli, *letteratura* becomes a *gesto sociale* through its relationship with a *pubblico* with distinct historico-cultural coordinates.<sup>22</sup> It is the provisory nature of the *destinatario*, in the passage above, that sustains the declaration that writing literature is *not* a social act. Manganelli continues to characterize the writer by his refusal to address any historico-cultural specificity: “Assai imperfetto è il suo colloquio con i contemporanei. È un fulmineo tardivo, i suoi discorsi sono inintelligibili a molti, a lui stesso. Allude ad eventi accaduti tra due secoli, che accadranno tre generazioni fa” (219). The antisociality of writing—its lack of *impegno*—then, rests in its timelessness and resultant inaccessibility—illegibility, even—to readers. As such, Manganelli’s understanding of the unengaged text shares the theoretical underpinnings of Moravia’s characterization of the illegible one. That is, for Moravia the text is illegible because of a barrier between the reader and writer; for Manganelli, similarly, a text is unengaged because it refuses to address a contemporary reader.

In these two related dichotomies—that of legibility and illegibility and that of engagement and lack thereof—Manganelli understands the concepts he rejects—legibility and engagement—as communicating with a contemporary reader. The terms he associates with his own writing—illegibility and lack of engagement—on the other hand, are characterized by the solitary act of writing and its suspension or complication of reproduction. As we have seen, because of its association with the discourse of modern masturbation, the third term, *menzogna*, similarly suggests a literary style and semiotics rooted in an isolated body.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, *letteratura*,

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<sup>22</sup> In “Araldica e politica,” Agamben finds a political thread in Manganelli’s writing by establishing a continuity, a “filo segreto” between two posthumously published pieces: his thesis, entitled *Contributo allo studio delle dottrine politiche del ‘600* and *La palude definitiva*. This *filo segreto* consists in the baroque signifying practices of Manganelli’s poetics and by the political structures of the *Seicento* the thesis explores: “La logica del Barocco non è teologica, ma politica: la sua cifra non è la trascendenza, ma l’eccezione” (39). Agamben concludes: “La politica è per lo studente quello che la letteratura sarà per lo scrittore; una pura intensità insostanziale, ma coestensiva all’universo’ come la letteratura” (43). Agamben reads the question that emerges in *La palude definitiva* of whether there can be any distinction between city and *palude* as fundamentally a question about the possibility of literature: “La domanda ‘vi è differenza fra città e palude?’—cioè: ‘esiste o no la politica’—è, dunque, per Manganelli, la domanda decisiva, poiché ne va in essa della possibilità stessa della letteratura” (40).

<sup>23</sup> Since the publication of “La letteratura come menzogna,” Manganelli’s writing has become virtually inseparable from a critical lens of lies. Numerous recent titles attest to the extent of this inextricability. The most obvious example is Bricchi’s *Manganelli e la menzogna*. In addition, *La penombra mentale* includes the interviews “È la letteratura vera se dice bugie” by Mirella Serri and “La critica? Una

in the deceptively straightforwardly titled essay is structurally analogous to the discourse of modern masturbation insofar as it corresponds to an imaginative excess whose infinite reflexivity precludes the referential function of language. Furthermore, the ornate rhetoric Manganelli produces thematizes sexual fantasy as literature is figured as a series of duplicitous whores who become indistinguishable from their rhetorical construction. This suspension of a textual reality and its representation characterizes *menzogna*, and suggests the stakes of the corporeal aesthetic integral to *Hilarotragoedia*.

The tension between mimesis and *menzogna* takes on ulterior significance when we return to the biographical anecdote with which the present chapter begins. Indeed, a coda to the anecdote demonstrates the way in which Manganelli's "impegno verso la realtà" is mediated by that of Gadda. In the coda, Manganelli responds to Gadda's accusation and deflects the choice between the almost-contemporaneous arrival of a literary father (Gadda) and a biological daughter (Lietta) by turning instead to a cultural mother. As L. Manganelli recalls: "Come giustamente diceva mio padre: se in quell'epoca le madri matte abbondavano, non era colpa di nessuno; per caso ne avevano una per uno, lui e Gadda, così i libri si somigliavano" ("Fotobiografia" 53). Manganelli's response not only concretizes his association with Gadda, but also roots it in a specific (if fictional) historico-cultural context—Italy in the epoch of *madri matte*—that corresponds to Manganelli's own understanding of both legibility and *impegno*. Furthermore, it concretizes his relationship through another literary father, his analytic psychologist Ernst Bernhard (who is better known for having treated Federico Fellini), whose most widely known work in Italy, "La Grande Madre," deals precisely with the cultural *madri* of the Mediterranean. As such, in embracing a sort of mimetic reality and cultural mother, he forges a bond between Gadda and another literary father: his literary lineage is inscribed in a rejection of that lineage.

Indeed, rejecting Gadda's accusation by locating the origin of the texts' similarities in a shared cultural mother, Manganelli ultimately reinforces the association between himself and Gadda by anticipating a fictional dialogue by "L'Ingegnere" entitled "L'Editore chiede venia del recupero chiamando in causa l'Autore," which prefaces the 1970 edition of *La cognizione del dolore*. In the dialogue, the Editor rethinks the "grido-parola d'ordine 'barocco è il G.!' " which, he proposes, "potrebbe commutarsi nel più ragionevole e più pacato asserto 'barocco è il mondo, e il G. ne ha percepito e ritratto la barocaggine'" (*RR I 760*). Both Gadda's "barocco è il

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menzogna di secondo grado," by Antonio Debenedetti. Pulce's *Giorgio Manganelli: Figure e sistema* includes a section entitled "Esercizio e menzogna" and Menechella's *Il felice vanverare* contains "Le menzogne dei 'viglietti' d'Amore." The first part of de Benedictis' *Manganelli e la finzione* is entitled "La finzione come rappresentazione e come menzogna" and Pegoraro's *Il 'fool' degli inferi* includes a chapter entitled "La danza del linguaggio: mimesi e menzogna." Mirko Zilahy de Gyurgyokai's *Vademecum manganelliano* is divided into sections "Psicoanalisi," "Linguaggio," "Letteratura," and "Menzogna," each of which concludes with a chapter entitled, respectively "Psicoanalisi come menzogna," "Linguaggio come menzogna," "Letteratura come menzogna," and finally, "Menzogna come letteratura."

Critical understandings of Manganelli's work in terms of *menzogna* gain strength from the writer's famous declaration that his Jungian therapist, Ernst Bernhard "È l'uomo che mi ha insegnato a mentire" (*Il vescovo* 142). On the influence of Bernhard on Manganelli's formation as a writer see *Il vescovo e il ciarlatano* and Rebecca West's review of it, entitled "Manganelli and Niccolai: The Unlikely Bond between a Jungian 'Bishop' and a Buddhist Nun." See also Bricchi's *Manganelli e la menzogna*, Menechella's *Il felice vanverare*, Pulce's *Bibliografia* and *Figure e sistema* and Zilahy de Gyurgyokai's *Vademecum manganelliano*.

mondo” and Manganelli’s ‘matte sono le madri’ fortify their respective texts with what J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis call a “defense by reality” (7). In “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” they describe a patient who has been adopted and relates elaborate fantasies about his birth mother: “In the course of our ‘phenomenological reduction’ we should no longer make any distinction, except to interpret, as a ‘defense by reality,’ the documents which the patient brings to prove his adoption” (7). Rebuffing Gadda’s accusation of plagiarism or parody, the Manganelli of the anecdote forges a bond between their works on the basis of a shared affirmation of mimesis: each writer, Manganelli claims, merely mirrors the world in which he finds himself. Between his repeated celebration of *menzogna* and the anecdote above, Manganelli destabilizes the dichotomous relationship between *menzogna* and mimesis.<sup>24</sup>

### Woman, Letteratura, Menzogna

In the essay in which he maps out the relationship between *menzogna* and mimesis, “La letteratura come menzogna,” Manganelli presents a gendered understanding of the former by figuring literature as a duplicitous whore who, even when presented with offers from men who would make of her a virtuous wife, ends up walking the streets:

Taluno—tra i quali non rari grandi scrittori—meditò di togliere di mezzo affatto la letteratura. Deliziosa lite con le proprie entragne. Altri, liberale e umanista, volle e vuole rieducarla. Periodicamente, taluno sogna un definitivo Ottimo Pastore, un Regno ove addottrinati gentiluomini con voce nasale educeranno la letteratura a nobili missioni. Oppure, con avvocatesco fervore e astuzia da casista, scoprono che tutta la letteratura già collabora alle migliori sorti dell’uomo, è illuminante e servizievole. Ne raschiano l’epidermide di metafore finché ne vien fuori lo Spirito del Tempo, ed un liquame molliccio, biancastro, che è la Weltanschauung. Ma essa, cortigiana di vocazione, rifiuta di farsi moglie virtuosa, onesta e schietta compagna. Vanamente la insidiano a farsi educatrice di figli sani ed eterosessuali, consorte indaffarata ed elegante. Da cortigiana si farà prostituta dei porti, puttana da camionisti. A noi mortali, oppone la sua predilezione

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<sup>24</sup> Manganelli wields a similarly apotropaic (and parodic) claim that his is a mimetic art in the jacket note of *Hilarotragedia*:

E se taluno troverà codesti documenti inconditi e affatto notarili, non dimentichi che il loro pregio è da ricercare nella minuziosa, accanita fedeltà al vero; e pertanto, essi vengono qui proposti come esempi di quel realismo, moralmente e socialmente significativo, di cui il raccoglitore vuol essere ossequioso seguace.

Though critics remain impervious to this sardonic avowal of “fedeltà al vero,” Manganelli’s protest of the widespread presence of *madri matte* spawns biographical inquiries resulting in such questionable statements as that with which Policastro’s short essay “Madri/Inferni” begins: “Giorgio Manganelli odiava sua madre, si sposò per farle dispetto, una volta, pare, cercò di ammazzarla” (378). *Costruire ricordi* deals more subtly with Manganelli’s difficult relationship with his mother, as it is evidenced in a series of letters Manganelli writes to his lover, Giovanna Sandri. For example, in a letter of December 26, 1955, he writes: “Non sono tranquillo: rivedere i miei è stato un trauma non indifferente” (71); and a year later, on December 22, he writes: “L’incontro con mia madre meno doloroso del prevedibile. Giro per la casa e ritrovo fluttuanti i residui delle angosce che vi ho depositato lo scorso anno” (77). In a letter of March 28, 1956, he writes: “C’è mia madre: non riesco a guardarla negli occhi. Forse la odio. Forse odio me stesso come suo figlio” (73), anticipating the “Aneddoto propedeutico” of *Hilarotragedia*, where he writes: “Mia madre ed io abbiamo dignitosamente atteso ad un reciproco dovere; odiosi l’uno all’altra, siamo fatti della stessa orribile pasta” (108).



per la morte, insostituibile figura di retorica (217).

What, one might ask, is the difference between literature when great writers consider doing away with her, when humanists attempt to educate her or when astute men scratch the skin of her metaphors and the spirit of the times oozes out, and when she, “cortigiana di vocazione” deserts them to walk the streets as a truck-drivers’ whore? Though the answer may not be found in this passage, the question itself points to a fundamental tension in the metaphor: while literature becomes one entity, a woman—sculpted, albeit by the diverse Pygmalion-like men she encounters, the *grandi scrittori* and others less great presumably work with particular texts—each of which is also, abstractly, literature, and thus woman.

In addition to figuring literature abstractly as woman who may step into more specifically defined roles as pupils, partners and prostitutes, “La letteratura come menzogna” shares the epistemological stance endemic to Western literature and philosophy that equates female beauty with artifice and ugliness with truth. Manganelli characterizes literature as follows:

Corrotta, sa fingersi pietosa; splendidamente deforme, impone la coerenza sadica della sintassi; irreal, ci offre finte e inconsumabili epifanie illusionistiche. Priva di sentimenti, li usa tutti. La sua coerenza nasce dall’assenza di sincerità. Quando getta via la propria anima trova il proprio destino. (217)

Imposing the sadistic coherence of grammar to cover her splendid deformity, literature above embodies the topos of a beauty turned hag: the ugly, naked truth of literature’s corruption, formlessness and unreality is disguised by her artful impersonation of piety, the sadism of her syntax, and the epiphanies she conjures.<sup>25</sup> While the influential essay created a stir at the Palermo convention at which the *Gruppo* ’63 was formed, primarily because of its denial of a politically instrumental and subversive potential of literature, it presents little novelty in its use of a gendered body—and its artful disguise—as the vehicle for a dichotomy between truth and representation.<sup>26</sup> Manganelli thus seems to set up the old ideological rift that Paolo Valesio describes in “That Glib and Oily Art: Cordelia and the Rhetoric of Anti-rhetoric,” in which “rhetoric” is opposed to “plain speech,” with the former being considered artifice and in this case, likened to wily woman, and the latter, truth, unveiled.<sup>27</sup>

Understood as such, transgender moments that punctuate Manganelli’s writing emerge as a logical consequence of his celebration of artifice, or *menzogna*. This is the case, for example, in *Discorso dell’ombra e dello stemma* (1982) where he writes: “Morendo, noi cambiamo sesso. Questo spiega e la difficoltà e l’imbarazzo dei colloqui con i morti, e la stretta parentela dello scrivere e del morire” (40). Sex change—or, more consequentially, woman—for Manganelli, is

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara Spackman isolates this topos in “Inter musam et ursam moritur: Folengo and the Gaping ‘Other Mouth.’”

<sup>26</sup> The jacket of “La letteratura come menzogna” describes the sensation the book when it was first published: “È accaduto perciò a questo libro, in breve tempo, qualcosa di simile a quello che avviene a tanti bei libri in tempi più lunghi. Nascere come scandalo e sorpresa, e vivere poi tranquillamente con la forza silenziosa dell’evidenza.”

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida interrogates the way in which this dichotomy structures Nietzsche’s writing in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*. He writes: “Because woman is (her own) writing, style must return to her. In other words, it could be said that if style were a man (much as the penis, according to Freud, is the ‘normal prototype of fetishes’), then writing would be a woman” (57).

the common ground of death and writing. Similarly, in the posthumously published *Dall'inferno* (1998) the male narrating voice becomes pregnant with a *bambola* and experiences a series of other labors in his journey through the infernal space of the text.

Also present in Manganelli's writing—though less prominent, is another mode of celebrating artifice in which, rather than queer the writer, he evokes the Early Modern commonplace figure for seizing *Occasio* and proposes that the writer grab Truth by the hair and drag her into a realm in which she can claim no advantage over falsity: “Bisogna assolutamente che lo scrittore [...] prenda la sua verità e la trascini per i capelli, in una regione in cui la verità come tale non ha alcun privilegio sul falso” (Battisti 28).<sup>28</sup> Here the embrace of artifice rests not in queering the writer but in a male writer's violation of the gendered figure of *verità*. Though the celebration of *menzogna* in these two examples may vary considerably, it is, in each case, bound to an epistemological paradigm in which truth and invention are inseparable from a gendered body. As such, Manganelli's writing about *letteratura* reads something like a misogynist's guide to ornate writing in which, however varied the techniques presented, the underlying theoretical stakes remain constant.

### Woman and Metaphor

Like the passages from “La letteratura come menzogna” above, an *appunto critico* written before the publication of *Hilarotragoedia* and published posthumously suggests a gendered model of truth and invention ideally suited for such a misogynist's guide:

Bisogna arrivare a parlare di cultura come si parla di figa: diciamolo chiaro, se la cultura, se il pensare, non è vitale, se non impegna *le viscere* (e non metaforica-mente, perché il pensare è cosa totale come il morire, è un ‘fatto,’ un vero e tangibile oggetto), se non ha anche addosso qualcosa di sporco, di fastidioso, di disgustoso, come è di tutto ciò che appartiene *ai visceri*, se non è tutto questo, non è che vizio, o malattia, o addobbo: cose di cui è bene o anche necessario e onesto, liberarsi (spogliarsi) totalmente. (76)

Most basically, the passage excludes woman from conversations about *cultura*. Her body, because it is mutilated and made metaphor, thus becomes unavailable to the speaking subject. In addition, that the regionally inflected and vulgar register from which “figa” is drawn contrasts markedly from the rest of the passage suggests a catachresis—as though it were an *Ersatz* for something for which no appropriate Italian term exists. Along with (and partly because of) these substitutions, the passage is characterized by a remarkable ambivalence towards metaphor. Indeed, the *appunto* first parenthetically repudiates metaphor, then, echoing the parenthesis with “spogliarsi,” it participates in a metaphoric economy whose very existence belies the earlier rejection. That is, specifying that “il pensare” has something “addosso” suggests an external layer from which it could be liberated or stripped and thus anticipates the “vizio, o malattia, o addobbo” with which it is contrasted. Contradictions thus emerge on two levels: on the one hand, Manganelli both uses and rejects metaphor. On the other hand, through metaphor, he links the concepts he sets out to oppose. In addition, the two forms of *viscere* used in the passage, the masculine and feminine plural, forge another layer of figuration and ambivalence: it is precisely when he uses “le viscere,” the figurative form, that Manganelli voices his resistance to

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<sup>28</sup> I thank Albert Ascoli for identifying and contextualizing this figure.

metaphor.<sup>29</sup>

As in the passage above, in “La letteratura come menzogna,” Manganelli uses metaphor to forge a somatic *letteratura*. He first proposes that the very bodies of certain animals compose a language:

Vi sono animali capzioso pelame, sui cui volti aguzzi e astratti deretani splende un dizionario di miniate immagini. Il loro corpo è saldato e assistito da una sintassi di segni; una rete di avventurose isoglosse, sgargianti e silenziose, fa di membra casuali un discorso, un estro artificiale. (215-216)

Such an animal, Manganelli affirms, is man: “Non diversamente, l’uomo porta attorno questo inutile e prestigioso stendardo, manto e sudario che non coincide col corpo, guaina inesatta e fastosa” (216). For animals, the body itself forms a complex language. Despite the claim of similarity advanced by “non diversamente,” for man, unlike animal, literature is external—a useless standard, a cloak and funeral veil that does not correspond to the body. But though it is external to man’s body, the “manto e sudario” of literature is nonetheless inextricable from it: “Come il mandrillo non può mortificare la retorica delle sue chiappe policrome, così non potremo toglierci di dosso, deliziosa maledizione, questo pieghevole vello di verbi” (216). Although “uomo” in this passage appears in a universal guise, that language is figured as a veil, cloak or “guaina inesatta e fastosa” anticipates the gendering of invention in the essay. Indeed, the use of “*guaina*,” which derives from the Latin *vagina*, suggests that the inexact and irritating sheath of language is gendered. Language—and accordingly literature—in this layered metaphor, is inherent to man and inextricable from him. At the same time, however, it is an inexact and irritating sheath. What is critical, then, is that the metaphor represents a concomitant denial and asseveration of the inextricability of language and man and that the two terms are distinguished only insofar as the former is made female.

This “guaina inesatta e fastosa,” of language and literature is figured in the essay as an

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<sup>29</sup> In “Araldica e politica” Agamben finds a similar resistance to figuration in Manganelli’s writing. He labels this ambivalence “allegoria quadratica” and notes that in *La palude definitiva* Manganelli insists upon an utter transparency of language while concomitantly rendering it impossible. Agamben writes:

Convorrà piuttosto parlare, per la palude, non semplicemente di allegoria, ma, con un gesto tipicamente manganelliano, di *allegoria quadratica*. Se definiamo, cioè, allegoria al quadrato quella in cui l’allegoria coincide esattamente con la lettera del teso, si potrebbe dire che la palude definitiva non è altro che la lingua, la lingua stessa in cui *la palude* è scritta; e che, in questo modo il libro invero puntualmente l’intenzione più propria di ogni allegoria quadratica, che è di rendere durevolmente impossibile la stessa distinzione fra allegoria e tautegoria. La lingua—come la palude—non è stessa né altra, né dice sé né dice altro da sé: è compiutamente allegorica nel suo essere integralmente tautegorica (38).

Similarly, in “Towards the Millennium: Update on Malerba, Manganelli, Celati” West locates Manganelli’s poetics at the threshold of tautology and tropes the writer’s own visceral figuration of language:

Manganelli endows literature with an autonomy that is absolute in nature; nothing, neither reality nor authorial fantasy, has power over the God of his universe: rhetoric. His “passione formale” is, of course, reflective of one of the strong trends of neoavantgardistic thought, but it far surpasses this dubious etiology, reaching instead into the very viscera of language’s all-consuming body where we and our experience of the world are inevitably digested (65).

evil that exacerbates the world's ills: “Una piaga purulenta si gonfia in metafora, una strage non è che un iperbole, la follia un'arguzia per deformare irreparabilmente il linguaggio, scoprirgli moti, gesti, esiti imprevedibili” (216). In this sentence, the ailing world and the rhetoric that aggravates it are rendered indistinguishable through the folds of metaphor. Take, for example, the pussing wound that swells in metaphor: if the pussing wound is the vehicle of a metaphor whose tenor is some ill of the world, then the swelling would suggest some worsening of the situation. But its swelling *in metaphor* confounds the vehicle and tenor. Similarly, in the second part of the sentence above, “una strage non è che un iperbole” renders proper and improper terms indistinguishable. The reader is left uncertain whether a massacre is nothing but a hyperbole, or whether it becomes nothing but hyperbole in literature. This is the same rhetorical move that Manganelli makes in his response to Moravia in “La letteratura come mafia,” when he writes, “[...] a mio avviso il Moravia un poco sopravvaluti l'importanza filosofica e pedagogica di un buon coito.” Such a rhetorical move is, most simply, profoundly disorienting for the reader. Through such metaphors, characterized by the suspension of vehicle and tenor and by their refusal to transport, Manganelli complicates the ideological opposition Valesio isolates between “rhetoric” and “plain speech” and thus, to some degree, the gendering associated with the dichotomy. That is, by suspending metaphors midway through the regularly requisite transport, Manganelli renders indistinguishable the literal from figural. Such a signifying practice corresponds to modern masturbation insofar as, like the discourse Laqueur isolates, which figures solitary sex in terms of its boundless imagination, it is characterized by endless oscillation between tenor and vehicle or by the utter destabilization of tenor and vehicle, so that there is no apparent referent.

In the discussion of “La letteratura come menzogna” and the *appunto critico* above, we have noted two similar approaches to metaphor. In the *appunto critico*, Manganelli reveals a critical ambivalence toward metaphor by both denying and deploying figurative language. The metaphors of “La letteratura come menzogna,” on the other hand, are characterized by the suspension of vehicle and tenor and by their refusal to transport. The suspension of a textual reality and its representation achieved by such metaphors, and by the critical attitude towards them demonstrated in the *appunto critico* are integral to the corporeal aesthetic of *Hilarotragoedia*.

### **Hilarotragoedia and Descent**

The concern with ascent and descent is the very axiom upon which *Hilarotragoedia's* labyrinthine edifice of notes, postulates, glosses, hypotheses, anecdotes and other fragments is erected. The treatise begins: “Se ogni discorso muove da un presupposto, un postulato indimostrabile e indimostrando, in quello chiuso come embrione in tuorlo e tuorlo in ovo, sia, di quel che ora si inaugura, prenatale assioma il seguente: CHE L'UOMO HA NATURA DISCENDITIVA” (9).<sup>30</sup> Given that the axiom is compared to an embryo in a yolk in an egg, “*muove da*” might be substituted with “*nasce da*.” And yet, central to the axiom is the very notion that the egg does not hatch—the metaphor with which the textual tenet is introduced itself announces the thematization of generation and its myriad alternatives, which will include sperm languishing on sweat-soaked sheets, hysterical pregnancies, senile fetuses, aborted words, a

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<sup>30</sup> Bricchi points out that the opening of *Hilarotragoedia* resonates with Manganelli's analytic psychologist, Bernhard's understanding of the originary symbol. The doctor writes in *Mitobiografia* (published posthumously in 1969): “Il simbolo originario è, ad esempio, l'uovo cosmico, in cui entelechialmente ‘tutto’ è contenuto” (192).

fellow-abortion (“conaborto”), mocking abortions, economized genitals, an infecund vagina, phosphorous fetuses, the never born, and many others.

In his explanation of the axiom Manganelli leaves little doubt that the descending nature of man is rooted in detumescence:

Intendo e chioso: l’omo è agito da forza non umana, da voglia, o amore, o occulta intenzione, che si inlâtebra in muscolo e nerbo, che egli non sceglie, né intende; che egli disama e disvuole, che gli instà, lo adopera, invade e governa; la quale abbia nome podestà o volontà discenditiva (9).

Specifying that man is stirred by a non-human force, by desire or love or occult intention, which seeps into his muscles and nerves, Manganelli designates the descendent nature of man a corporeal—indeed, phallic—matter. As such, the text problematizes the metaphor with which it opens. The postulate, we might say, works as metaphor insofar as it compares man to an oviparous animal. More generally (or anthropocentrically), however, if we note that detumescence is hardly unrelated to the fertilization of an egg, the axiom represents something more like metonymy masquerading as metaphor. That is, likening the rule of detumescence to an embryo is not, as Aristotle would have it, the transport of an extraneous noun, but something more like a reconfiguration of the logics that binds the two terms—an exploration into alternative reproductive practices, perhaps.

This departure from Aristotelian poetics becomes more pronounced when Manganelli redundantly uses the male body to illustrate the axiom:

Si noti come questa vocazione discenditiva si esempla nel nostro corpo, fusiforme verso i piedi come si addice a ordigni di scavo, i quali sono le talpe dei talloni, con che a noi medesimi scaviamo la tomba in amica argilla; a trivella ci attorcigliamo dall’ombelico in giù, con quel breve e autonomo cavicchio del membro. (10)

Using a male body to illustrate detumescence, the text displays a rhetorical infecundity; rather than generate new meaning through a transport, the figure statically repeats. Furthermore, the male body is itself described as a sort of *mise-en-abîme*—a phallus for drilling (“tapered towards the feet, as is suited for devices for excavating, which are the moles of the heels, with which we ourselves excavate the tomb in our clay friend”) with a phallus for drilling (“to drill we wind ourselves from the navel down, with that brief and autonomous wooden pin of the member”).

The section of *Hilarotragoedia* entitled “(*docens loquitur*),” a theatrical classroom monologue, explores this repetition by considering the nature of *levitazione discenditiva*. The lecturer begins by writing “MORTE” on a blackboard and drawing a series of dots and arrows in red, green and white chalk. He lists symptoms of levitation: “La levitazione, si dice, comincia a manifestarsi per segni minimi, una grossolana e vergognosa impazienza pomeridiana un singhiozzo tra digestivo e morale nel mezzo del sonno [...]” (30). At issue in the lesson, however, is not just the nature of *levitazione discenditiva*, but a pressing, repetitive desire to write clearly about it. The docent conveys a sense of urgency; declaring first “Io, io scriverò un testo chiaro, competente, ordinato” (30-31); then “Io sono onesto docente, voglio essere chiaro, chiarissimo” (31); and “Io, io, nessun altro, scriverò il testo chiaro, efficace, didatticamente aggiornato...” (31). Writing clearly about *levitazione discenditiva*, it seems, can only begin with the (male) body: the docent places the blackboard on the floor, undresses, lies down on the slate,

and asks his students to trace his form. Not surprisingly, the students respond uproariously to the lesson, and the section ends as the professor laments the “DISORDINATISSIMAAAA!” (32) school. In this passage, then, the question of *levitazione discenditiva*—and of representing and understanding it—is addressed through an indexical relation to a male body.

This struggle to understand and represent *levitazione discenditiva* persists until the penultimate paragraph of the treatise, which poses three questions:

Infine, affrontando il medesimo problema per altro verso, come si concluderà la levitazione discenditiva? In quale forma dobbiamo pensare l’Ade affinché sia idoneo a dar soddisfazione alla esigente angoscia degli adediretti? Quale qualità e guise avrà la letizia ad essi fornita da quel luogo geometrico, animale, macchina, escremento, non essere, buco? (142-43)

The phallic understanding of *levitazione discenditiva* developed throughout the treatise persists in these final questions, which might be rephrased so as to reflect a concern with post-ejaculatory detumescence: “How does descendent levitation conclude?”; the physical forms suited to satisfy the anguish of arousal: “In what form must we consider Hades so that it is suited to satisfy the exigent anguish of the Hades-bound?”; and the nature of orgasmic bliss: “What qualities and manners will the joy have that is furnished by that [...] non being, hole?” *Hilarotragoedia* responds to these questions with: “In proposito, si potrebbe avanzare la seguente ipotesi:” (143), concluding with a colon followed only by the emptiness of the remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  or so of a page.

In the “*Aneddoto propedeutico*,” Manganelli sets out the stakes of the punctuation mark that represents the final keystroke of the treatise:

Ecco, scrivo due punti: e la domestica interpunzione, appena incarnata in brevissima goccia d’inchiostro, ancheggia, ammicca, in sé prosciuga la malizia e lascivia dell’intera pagina. Sfiurare quei due punti oggettivamente viziosi equivale a commettere atti impuri, adulterio, incesto. (103)

To brush against the colon, Manganelli writes, is equivalent to committing impure acts, adultery, incest. Concluding the treatise with so licentious a symbol, the text sets out a prohibition that it forces the reader to transgress, thus incorporating him into a shared, transgressive (insofar as incestuous) erotic experience.

The discourse that may develop from the axiom of descent, (understood as detumescence), which is illustrated by a body (shown to be male), is itself addressed to a reader who is also, it seems, male:

Dalla guglia, dalla garguglia della tua testa d’osso, amico, mia proprietaria di genitali, mio complice in distillazione d’orina, fratello in escremento; e tu anche, preventivo cui faticosamente mi adegua, modello di teschio, mio niente scricchiolando ed ottuso, mio conaborto, conversevole litopedio; della infima cima sporgiti, abbandónati al tuo precipizio. Sii fedele alla tua discesa, homo. Amico. (10)

What seems like an emphatic gendering of the reader—addressed here as “homo,” “amico,” and “fratello” and elsewhere as “diletto Calibano” (73), “Mio passionale e disperato amico” (73), “uomo da suicidio se mai altri” (73), “l’innervosito lettore” (20), “tortuoso lettore” and “grave,

onesto masochista” (61)—does, however, admit some critical ambivalence. Indeed, “mia comproprietaria di genitali,” suggests a more ambiguous gendering, since the co-owner of genitals is female. In the first draft of the *trattatello*, Manganelli includes the even more unusual construction, “Mio comproprietaria di genitali,” which he emends in pencil; crossing out the ‘o’ of ‘mio’ and substituting it with an ‘a’. This glitch in the otherwise vehemently male gendering of the treatise’s opening suggests that the adamant redundancy may shield the threat of its undoing.

### **Lithopedia from the Archive**

Like “mia comproprietaria di genitali,” the epithet “conversevole litopedio” suggests an ambiguous gendering. With the address, Manganelli introduces a term quite likely unfamiliar to most readers: *litopedio*, or lithopedion. A lithopedion is a calcified fetus, or stone (*litho*) baby (*pedion*). The extremely rare petrification is produced when a fetus dies during an ectopic pregnancy and is calcified, rather than reabsorbed by the body. As in “La letteratura come mafia,” where Manganelli describes the reader as an invention of the writer and witness to what is suspected to be the trauma of birth, and “La letteratura come menzogna,” where he ordains that literature “Viene creata per lettori imprecisi, nascituri, destinati a non nascere, già nati e morti; anche, lettori impossibili” (219), the reader, calcified, joins the ranks of the writer’s unborn progeny: composed of textual artifacts and addressees alike.

In addition to representing both a fascinating medical phenomenon and one of numerous alternatives to generation in the text, the lithopedion belongs to the vast symbolic economy of the Medusa, most basically because it is a petrification of a human being. Furthermore, the lithopedion is petrified by a female—or, at least pregnant, figure, (who is, in this case, the male narrating voice). Like the figurations of the reader in “La letteratura come mafia” and “La letteratura come menzogna”—but unlike most victims of the Gorgon—the *conversevole litopedio* is *within* the Medusan narrating voice. Indeed, if the lithopedia-producing writer seems ill-suited to such a Gorgonic guise, it is because the petrified victim is thus unable to gaze upon it. As Freud writes in his essay “Medusa’s Head,” “The terror of the Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the *sight* of something” (18: 273, emphasis mine).

But while the terrifying gaze may be absent from the scene of petrification, it is present in the first draft of the treatise, in a paragraph that precedes the one quoted above, that names the reader both “conversevole litopedio” and “mia comproprietaria di genitali.” Stressing the detumescent nature of descent and daring the reader to look at that which spares “no male human being [...] the fright of castration” (Freud 21: 154), Manganelli writes: “Ascolta la letizia del tuo corpo che discende, dello sperma che scatta e s’abbandona; usa una lampada (comprala da stand) di honghekonghe, a illuminare questo pallido abisso, questo verticale taglio verticale,—ti fermerai forse al pubepallido dei primissimi licheni?” Figuring the reader as a post-coital male who is detumescent after the *letizia* of spermatic release, Manganelli urges him to examine his partner’s genitals, “this pale abyss, this vertical cut vertical.” In addition, by doubling “verticale,” Manganelli lends vision further prominence in the passage by creating a rudimentary calligram in which the adjectives surrounding “taglio” resemble labia. That this passage suffers gravely at the reviser’s hand—Manganelli crosses out each line, draws an ex across the entire passage, and writes “NO” in the margin—need not vitiate its petrifying effect on the reader in the next paragraph.

In addition to urging a petrifying, Medusan gaze that suggests the threat of castration, the excised passage includes a cultural specificity at odds with the *disimpegno* of Manganelli’s literary project as articulated in “La letteratura come menzogna.” Indeed, exhorting the reader to

use a *lampada* purchased “da standà,” Manganelli names a specific *grande magazzino* and thus introduces a legible cultural referent. Stipulating that the *lampada* be “di honghekkonghe,” he refers to global flows of capital, using an exaggeratedly Italianized phonetic spelling to further bind the light to a time and place. The specificity of this looking, then, counters the literary project Manganelli details in “La letteratura come menzogna.”

In addition to—and more importantly than—suggesting a historico-cultural referent in global flows of capital, the Medusan gaze the narrator dares the reader to take forges a literary intertext whose specificity counters Manganelli’s avowed rejection of *impegno*, which, as we have seen, he understands in terms of a text’s ability to forge a relationship with a *pubblico* bound to distinct historico-cultural coordinates. Indeed, “questo verticale taglio verticale,” evokes two specific scenes of horrific visual apperception in Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio*. In the first scene, Francesco Ingravallo enters the dining room and sees Liliana Balducci’s corpse, “quella cosa orribile,” (*RR II 58*) sprawled between the credenza and the table. In one of the most famous passages in Italian literature of the *secondo Novecento*, the detective surveys her body, following the intricacies of her expensive undergarments and admiring the lilac silk elastic of her garters, “quel tono che pareva dare un profumo, significava a momenti la frale gentilezza e della donna e del ceto, l’eleganza spenta degli indumenti, degli atti, il segreto modo della sommissione” (*RR II 58*). Reaching “[...] le gambe un po’ divaricate, come ad un invito orribile” (*RR II 59*) Ingravallo lifts his eyes, displacing, as Rushing points out in *Resisting Arrest*, the *taglio verticale* toward which Ingravallo’s gaze had been advancing. His gaze, (and Gadda’s description), then pans down from her eyes: “Oh, gli occhi! dove, chi guardavano?” (*RR II 59*) to the horrible *taglio* of her neck: “Un profondo, un terribile taglio rosso le apriva la gola” (*RR II 59*), “un orrore! da nun potesse vede” (*RR II 59*). Rushing writes of the horrific description of the *taglio*: “The wound is described as if it were a repulsive horizontal vaginal aperture, a symbolic compensation for the immaculate and impenetrable ‘candore affascinante’ of Liliana’s undergarments” (138). This gaze, then, like that which Manganelli urges his reader to take, produces a horrific encounter with difference—one that leads, in *Hilarotragoedia*, to a Medusan petrification: the *conversevole litopedio*.

The second Gaddian scene of horrible visual apperception evoked by “questo verticale taglio verticale” is that which concludes the novel, as Ingravallo looks at the furled forehead of Annunziata: “Egli non intese là pe llà [sic], ciò che la sua anima era in procinto d’intendere. Quella piega nera verticale tra i due sopraccigli dell’ira, nel volto bianchissimo della ragazza, lo paralizzò, lo indusse a riflettere: a ripentirsi, quasi” (*RR II 276*). Maurizio De Benedictis notes that Annunziata’s furled forehead evokes the earlier description of Liliana: “La ‘piega’ della ragazza, alla fine del *Pasticciaccio*, sembrava evocare una somiglianza riguarda alla zona intima, coperto appena dalle mutandine, della donna assassinata” (144). Looking into the *piaga nera verticale*, Ingravallo recognizes his own guilt (almost)—one linked, as Rushing points out, by the word “pentirsi” to the detective’s misogynistic methodology, described in the first chapter: “E poi si soleva dire, ma questo un po’ stancamente, ‘ch’i femmene se retroveno addó n’i vuò trovà.’ Una tarda riedizione itatica del vieto ‘cherchez la femme.’ E poi pareva pentirsi, come d’aver calunniato e femmene, e voler mutare idea” (*RR II 17*). But the misogyny for which Ingravallo repents is more specific than this “tarda riedizione itatica” of ‘cherchez la femme’ and more relevant to the representational project of *Hilarotragoedia*—which, as we have seen, is characterized by an obsessive attention to generation and its failures—since it is bound to its setting: Rome in 1927, the year of Mussolini’s Ascension Day speech, which announces the new embrace of pronatalist policy in Italy.



Indeed, the novel underscores new demographic policies as virtually all leads in the search for Liliana's murderer grow fruitlessly from her empty womb. This investigative itinerary is not unique to Ingravallo, but inseparable from *Quer pasticciaccio*'s overall understanding of the fascist culture of Rome in 1927. For example, at the luncheon at the Balduccis' home in the first chapter of the novel, Ingravallo deciphers Liliana's almost imperceptible sighs, her subtle melancholy: "Aveva creduto d'intuire: non hanno figli" (RR II 21). The addition of: "'eccetera eccetera,' aveva poi soggiunto una volta, al parlare col dottor Fumi, come alludesse a una fenomenologia ben nota, a una esperienza certa e di comune dominio" (RR II 21), brings Ingravallo's intuition into line with the text's understanding of contemporary ideology. According to this *comune dominio*, Ingravallo considers "La personalità femminile" (RR II 106), to be "tipicamente centrogravitata sugli ovarii" (RR II 106): "Mancandole i figli, sentenziò Ingravallo, il marito cinquantottenne decade [...] a mera immagine ovvero cioè manichino di marito: e l'uomo in genere (nel di lei apprendimento inconscio) è degradato a pupazzo" (RR II 106). Not only does the husband become a shell of his former self in eyes of the woman without children; she too transforms: "È allora che la povera creatura si dissolve, come fiore o corolla, già vivida, che renda al vento i suoi petali. L'anima dolce e stanca vola verso la crocerossa, nell'inconscio 'abbandona il marito': e forse abbandona ogni uomo in quanto elemento gamico" (RR II 107). This understanding of female subjectivity guides Ingravallo's investigation and is repeatedly associated with the ideology of a time in which condoms have become "Relitti d'un'epoca andata al nulla, con le 'frasi,' e i suoi preservativi" (RR II 72).

That "questo verticale taglio verticale" that the Medusan narrator of *Hilarotragoedia* urges the reader to examine evokes the "terribile taglio rosso" of Liliana's wound and the "piega nera verticale" of Annunziata's furled forehead—both linguistically and thematically—lends a historico-cultural specificity to Manganelli's *trattatello* that is at odds with his disavowal of *impegno* in "La letteratura come mafia" and "La letteratura come menzogna." Indeed, the gaze undermines such determined *disimpegno* because it associates *Hilarotragoedia* with a precise moment in Italian literary history, forging what we might call "*figaliation*."<sup>31</sup>

Although Manganelli urges the reader to examine "questo verticale taglio verticale," only in the first draft of the treatise, the dare nonetheless establishes a firm bond—or *figaliation*—between the horrifying objects of Ingravallo's gaze and the Medusan narrator of *Hilarotragoedia*. Indeed, by donating his library, manuscripts, correspondence and diaries to the Fondo manoscritti in Pavia, Manganelli authorizes and encourages such connections. But my reading aims less to recover the writer's intention than to trace the text's rhetoric, in which the early drafts are integral because they are inscribed in the same discourse of generation and its failures. In *Ombre dal fondo*, an account of the development of the Fondo manoscritti, Corti describes the early drafts of *Hilarotragoedia* themselves as aborted fetuses:

Ogni ombra si muove in cerca dei suoi feti, delle sue incompiute, che arrischiano invano di emergere tra il disordine delle varianti a penna all'interno degli armadi-cassaforte, simili a spirali di insetti sulle foglie. C'è della bellezza in queste creature abortite, in questi personaggi non ancora condotti a compimento e abbandonati ai margini del niente. Metti certi exempla dell'*Hilarotragoedia* rifiutati da Giorgio Manganelli in un momento di insoddisfazione (8-9).

<sup>31</sup> I thank Daniel Boyarin for coining this word, which encapsulates the manifold bonds between Manganelli and Gadda and expresses the way in which *Hilarotragoedia* forges a textual alliance with *Quer pasticciaccio* through the shared gaze at horror-inducing "*figa*."

These “feti,” “creature abortite,” and “personaggi non ancora condotti a compimento e abbandonati ai margini del niente” are themselves critical to *Hilarotragoedia* and, as we have seen, to Manganelli’s own understanding of illegibility—not only in abandoned drafts, but also in his published writing. In “Odio tanto le mie pagine,” he explains:

Ho una specie di odio paterno nei confronti dei miei libri, una volta che siano pubblicati e quindi anche di quest’ultimo [*Sconclusionone* (1976)]. Lo considero come un mio organo e debbo anche dire che come un feto dispettoso, ha riluttato alla pubblicazione. (32)

Even when published, the texts remain fetal for Manganelli. Indeed, that the exhortation to the reader discussed above, which ultimately undermines Manganelli’s own project of *disimpegno* and *menzogna* by forging a *figaliation* with passages of *Quer pasticciaccio* that highlight Gadda’s figuration of fascist demographic ideology, is “aborted” through the process of revision itself suggests an oblique *impegno*. Manganelli’s studied *illeggibilità*, insofar as it proceeds through an abortive process, constitutes a response—albeit indirect and mediated—to a particular understanding of fascism.

In addition to the passage discussed above, in which the narrating voice urges his male reader to examine “questo verticale taglio verticale,” and thus develops an *impegno verso*...if not *la realtà*, then at least a certain representation of it in Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio*, the first draft of *Hilarotragoedia* presents a challenge to the literary dogma voiced in “La letteratura come mafia” and “La letteratura come menzogna” when, after the opening axiom “CHE L’UOMO HA NATURA DISCENDITIVA,” and a brief discussion of the phallic nature of the “operazione agevole” of descent, the narrator anticipates the response by Catholics and Marxists alike: “Questo dirà il cattolico subtilis, il marxista sparagno e austero, questo è argomentar astratto, impreciso, generico, svagato, dattizio, metaforico—I’hai detto—metaforico.” As when he specifies that the reader “usa una lampada” to examine his partner’s genitals, this passage establishes a cultural specificity inconsistent with Manganelli’s celebration of *disimpegno* and *menzogna* because it introduces terms that are extraneous to the ubiquitous *soma*.

The critique that the narrator attributes to the Catholics and Marxists is that “questo”—the redundant constellation of phallic images that emerges at the outset of the treatise—is *metaforico*. By “metaphoric,” then, the draft’s “cattolico subtilis” and “marxista sparagno e austero” contend that the textual concern with tumescence detumescent refers to some reality external to the male body. Of course, this is precisely what the draft does with the very act of naming the specific agents of critique. Through a conceptual contortion achieved through the hypothesized critique of the “cattolico subtilis” and the “marxista sparagno e austero,” then, Manganelli aligns metaphor itself with *impegno* and mimesis. Indeed “*metaforico*,” as it is imagined on the tongues of the text’s Catholics and Marxists, is characterized by the way in which it would introduce a specificity and referentiality at odds with the literary dogma Manganelli iterates in “La letteratura come mafia,” “La letteratura come menzogna,” and in the *appunto critico*. This understanding of metaphor is markedly different from the way in which I have been using the term to discuss Manganelli’s writing throughout the present chapter. Rather than anchor the tenor in a historically specified reality, as the fictive Catholics and Marxists imagine Manganelli to do, the metaphors that pervade “La letteratura come mafia,” “La letteratura come menzogna,” the *appunto critico* and *Hilarotragoedia*—as we have seen—are characterized by a suspension of tenor and vehicle or by a failure to effect the transport required

by the etymology of “metaphor.”

Another passage from the first draft lends to the concept of detumescence a metaphoric clarity like that envisioned by the text’s “cattolico subtilis” and the “marxista sparagno e austero.” Immediately after addressing the reader, “mio confeto, mio con aborto, mio conversevole litopedio,” Manganelli writes: “La discesa è la nostra patria.”<sup>32</sup> Though the claim is underlined with a squiggly pencil mark and eliminated in subsequent drafts, the reference to a specific reality outside the male body nonetheless represents a *gesto sociale* according to the understanding of the concept developed in “La letteratura come menzogna.” Indeed, the line links the national identity and ideological belonging suggested by the word ‘*patria*,’ to detumescence itself and thus contends that the nationally inflected subject is necessarily male. At the same time, the etymology of *patria*, of course, suggests that the aphorism “La discesa è la nostra patria,” like the “prenatale assioma” with which the *Hilarotragoedia* opens, “CHE L’UOMO HA NATURA DISCENDITIVA” (9) is something more like metonymy masquerading as metaphor.

In addition to this excised equation of *patria* with descent, the “*Storia del non nato*,” which remains in the treatise throughout the process of revision, identifies subjectivity itself with *patria*. In the section, the titular never-born narrating voice describes its subject position as follows: “Questo solo ho chiaro: che nei cieli, e negli inferi, non c’è altro percorso cui possa dedicare le mie forze. Non ho nome, né luogo, né sangue, non mi è dato né nascere, né morire: ma qualcosa mi dice che ho una patria” (120). For the *non nato*, then, subjectivity is defined in terms of *patria*. In both passages, *patria* represents an expansive category that coincides with subjectivity itself, though the statement “La discesa è la nostra patria” limits that subjectivity to one that is necessarily male.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the generating figure is necessarily male: it is the *fatherland*, rather than the mother, that the unborn knows it has.

As we have seen in the examples above, the revision of *Hilarotragoedia* is, to a great extent, a process that involves eliminating a series of references that endow the text with a specificity that counters Manganelli’s dogmatic avowal of *disimpegno* and *menzogna*. At the same time, such textual trimming, because it participates in the rhetoric of generation and its failures—as Corti illustrates in *Ombre dal fondo* and Manganelli corroborates in “Odio tanto le mie pagine” and less explicitly throughout his *oeuvre*—itself coincides with Manganelli’s understanding of illegibility. On the other hand, because the discourse of reproduction is given a historical valence in *Hilarotragoedia* through the engagement with Gadda’s writing and, even more indirectly, with Gadda’s representation of Fascist Rome, the textual process of abortion can be read as an oblique sort of *gesto sociale*.<sup>34</sup> But it is not only in the excised passages of *Hilarotragoedia* that Manganelli uses what is figured as a horrific encounter with femininity to

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<sup>32</sup> In the draft from which I quote here, “*con aborto*” is presented as two words, though in the published version quoted at the beginning of this chapter it appears as “*conaborto*.”

<sup>33</sup> In the essay “Potere” Manganelli defines *patria* as an eccentric and haggard mother: “Ho scritto Patria con la maiuscola perché ho l’impressione che sia un nome proprio, una donna mamma, vestita un po’ da matta, esibizionista e con un carattere impossibile” (162).

<sup>34</sup> Manganelli does deal explicitly with abortion in the short piece “Aborto,” written in response to Pasolini’s “Il coito, l’aborto, la falsa tolleranza del potere, il conformismo dei progressisti.” In *Resurrection of the Body*, Armando Maggi describes Pasolini’s project in *Petrolio* and *Salò*: “*Petrolio* and *Salò* are premised on the same concept of giving birth to a form, form, where *form* means not only a new narrative form, but also the form of a schizophrenic space closed off from the world, and the mute form of a stillborn fetus” (256).

forge an intertextual specificity that counters his understanding of *disimpegno*. Indeed, in addition to the horrifying gaze that aligns *Hilarotragoedia* with *Quer pasticciaccio*, Manganelli engages with Gadda's writing in the section entitled "*Aneddoto propedeutico*," which, notwithstanding the title, appears roughly two-thirds of the way through the treatise, and is included only in the final draft.

The *Aneddoto* describes an annual visit by the narrator's mother that ends in a scene of self-loathing and violence that recalls Gadda's *La cognizione*, with its volatile and possessive son and the specter of matricide raised at the novel's close.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the *Aneddoto* suggests a link to Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio* because it deals in part with a vision that provokes horror, in this case a "*macula radiosa*."<sup>36</sup> But if the "verticale taglio verticale" of *Hilarotragoedia* and the "terribile taglio rosso" and "piega nera verticale" of *Quer pasticciaccio* represent terror-inducing confrontations with the perception of sexual difference and of a certain complicity with the misogynist ideology that pervades Gadda's Fascist Rome, the *Aneddoto propedeutico* instead depicts a more ambiguous encounter with sexual difference and a more emphatic sense of self-loathing.

Like the jacket note of *Hilarotragoedia*, which asserts that the treatise follows a bipartite structure, the *Aneddoto* begins with an *incipit* that describes the stakes of the anecdote, presenting the *gravitas* of the *macula radiosa*. The *incipit* addresses the reader directly, instructing him to sit carefully and remain guarded—presumably to avoid contact with a *macula radiosa* like that with which the *Aneddoto* is concerned: "Lettore, bada alla tua sedia; non sfiorare senza cauta pietas il bottone della tua giacca" (102). The *incipit* takes a tone more personal than much of the treatise as the narrator introduces his own corporality: "È ben vero che io dispongo di un corpo, una rudis compagine carnale, che mi fa estrinsecamente simile ai confratelli mondani: ma il mio destino, di cui ora terrò conciso e gelido discorso, fu, da sempre, provocatorio e mostruoso" (101). The body of which the narrator finds himself in possession—one that makes him similar to his worldly fellow brothers—is thus defined in terms of the sense of solidarity between men that it both signifies and creates.

In addition to this male solidarity, the *incipit* presents the narrator's quotidian existence as being characterized by a tormented relation to language that recalls the corporeal figuration of literature as an "araldico pelame di belva" (223) in "La letteratura come menzogna" insofar as language becomes utterly inseparable from—here not bodies, but time:

Gli uomini vivono una facile vita sgrammaticata e anacolutica; a me è imposta la consapevolezza sintattica. Di quali indulgenze dialettali è fatta la tua giornata lettore! Ma

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<sup>35</sup> Philological considerations suggest that Manganelli may well have read *La cognizione* before writing the "*Aneddoto propedeutico*." Although *La cognizione* was first serialized in *Letteratura* in seven non-consecutive issues between 1938-1941, it was not published as an independent volume until 1963. The final section of the novel, in which the Signora is found moribund after a violent attack, however, was not included in the serialized version or the 1963 version, but was first published in the 1969 English translation by Weaver, then in Italian only in 1970. *Hilarotragoedia* was published in 1964; but dates on the manuscripts in Pavia verify that it was first drafted between December 13, 1960 and January 19, 1961. This chronology would seem to rule out influence—though the "*Aneddoto propedeutico*" was only included in the fifth, and final draft of *Hilarotragoedia*. See Bricchi, *Manganelli e la menzogna* and the manuscripts at the *Fondo manoscritti* in Pavia.

<sup>36</sup> I understand *macula* to ambiguously comprise a generic spot, as well as the oval yellowish area surrounding the fovea near the center of the retina in the eye (the region of greatest visual acuity).

io sono un esigente purista. Le mie ore sono sempre state declinate secondo leggi di una vessatoria e privilegiata morfologia. (102-3)

The de-grammatical and anacoluthic life of the narrator—his (male) body, his tense linguistic existence and the relationship between the two—are shattered by the confrontation with both the *macula radiosa* and the mother of the narrating voice.

The *macula radiosa* is first introduced as the object of a horrible gaze: “Arrendo l’anima al sacro sgomento, cerco con gli occhi l’oggetto di insuperabile orrore... cerco la ‘macula radiosa’” (103), one that affects the narrator profoundly: “Tu non hai i miei occhi, lettore, e nessuno ti potrà avvertire, se quella che stai per sfiorare, che già tocchi, non è macchia, ma spiraglio sul male universale; il male allegro, caldo, affamato” (104). Ultimately the nature of the *macula radiosa* is left ambiguous in *Hilarotragoedia*, though the figuration of the *male universale* accessible through the *spiraglio* as “caldo, affamato,” evokes the “fregna” “calda” and “vogliosa di lingua e sperma” in the poem “ta ta tapum.” But in addition to a vagina, the *macula radiosa* can be linked to menstrual blood, ink, semen and canine excrement: in short, bodily and writerly excreta bound up in processes of reproduction and decay.<sup>37</sup>

Following the *incipit*, the narrator introduces the paradigmatic conclusion of the anecdote, a visit from his mother: “Ma a rendere didattica questa storia, occorre darne la paradigmatica conclusione” (104). The *conclusione* begins: “Io ho, credo ancora per breve tempo, una madre, cui ho sempre esteso la solenne avarizia che regola i miei rapporti con i miei dissimili simili” (104). Describing women as “*dissimili simili*,” the narrator evokes the presentation of his own body as, “simile ai confratelli mondani” and suggests an understanding of sex in terms of similarity and dissimilarity rather than absolute difference. Prior to his mother’s approach of the *macula radiosa* and resulting violence, the narrator understands his own relationship with his mother in terms of a difference rooted in hatred: “Oscura cosa è questo rapporto che insieme ci lega e ci oppone; scendendo, di strato in strato, di membro in membro, si alternano correnti di odio, volta a volta gelido e sanguigno, di riserbo, cautela, schifo e occulta solidarietà” (105).

When the narrator’s mother visits, the *macula* of the *incipit*, the “spiraglio sul male universale” becomes a more specific spot: a stain on a green armchair: “infine, con indicibile orrore avevo scoperto che la mia vecchia e onesta poltrona verde, unico luogo ospitale della mia cordialissima dimora, si era contaminata di una gigantesca macula radiosa” (106). The specific embodiment of the *macula radiosa* as a stain on an armchair evokes a passage from the section “*Chiosa su abbandono di casa ingrata*,” which disjointedly addresses the narrator’s abandonment of his home: “Si presuppone che la casa di cui si discorre sia, per giacimento, o memorie affettive, o valore simbolico, dolorosa a chi si appresta a lasciarla: diciamo, tra cloaca, prigione e famigliola; orribile” (50). This family home—something between a sewer, a prison and a nice little family—is punctuated by the furniture and objects that disgust and anger the narrator: “Guardate l’uno o l’altro di questi oggetti vilissimi; armadio con tela a rose; o sedia con bellurie vegetali, in rilievo, ove va il culo” (50). In addition to provoking the narrator, furniture comes to be a part of the metonymic chain that defines the shifter “io”:

Da questo punto di vista, dunque, l’io è un luogo, un hic: [...] luogo trascendentale, metafisico segno d’unghia, e anche meno, astuzia del discorso (come dire: Signore e

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<sup>37</sup> In short, substances associated with abjection, as Julia Kristeva defines it in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*.

Signori) o della sragione, sede del delirio, poltrona della demenza, trono della balbuzie, bara del formicolio. (52)

Subjectivity becomes part of a metonymic chain, “io” is defined first as a presence, but soon gives way to a series of elisions, moving from “sede” to “poltrona” to “trono” and ultimately, “bara.”

Throughout the mother’s stay, the narrator attempts to keep her from approaching the tainted armchair. When she first moves closer to it, he furiously orders her to stay away: “Le gridai che la poltrona era vecchia, fragile, rotta, sporca, brutta e altrui; che in nessuno caso doveva sedervi; che altrimenti... e feci un gesto, come a scongiurare orrende possibilità” (107). Finally: “Mangiammo: ed ecco, sparcchiata la tavola, mia madre dirigersi verso la poltrona. Le urlò di non muoversi; la vecchia matta non si ferma! Le sono addosso, la butto da parte, mia madre cade a terra! La miserrima vecchia! Io sento le sue ossa che scricchiolano...” (107). The narrator is prompted by the *macula radiosa*—and his mother’s proximity to it—to acknowledge his own connection to his mother. Indeed, the scene of maybe-matricidal violence concludes with an expression of mutual hatred based in self-loathing: “Mia madre ed io [...] odiosi l’uno all’altra, siamo fatti della stessa orribile pasta. [...] Non c’è limite all’orrore che ci attende” (108). In the economy of the *Aneddoto*, then, the intrusion of the mother forces the narrator to grapple with his own similarity and dissimilarity to woman. Such an acknowledgment of the complicity of being similar and dissimilar to his mother and by extension other “dissimili simili” in the *Aneddoto* shatters the linguistic and bodily balance that defines the narrator’s existence prior to his horrific confrontation with the *macula radiosa*.

In the short essay “Elogio dell’odio,” Manganelli considers the role of hatred in forging sexual difference and language. The essay sheds some light on the narrator of the *Aneddoto*’s confrontation with his mother, a “dissimile simile,” and the horror provoked by the confrontation. He proposes that, though love may bind him to a woman, a particular form of hatred is also necessary in order to distinguish himself from her:

C’è un odio sano, giusto, necessario: tutti noi sappiamo che per star bene l’odio è necessario come l’amore. [...] È l’amore che mi lega a una donna, ma è una sorta di odio delicato, trattenuto ma del tutto cosciente, che mi ingiunge di sapere ‘sempre’ che io sono una cosa diversa dalla donna—che me ne protegge, sempre. (127)

Hatred, Manganelli affirms, protects him by ensuring that he remain “una cosa diversa dalla donna.” The violence of the *Aneddoto*, then, represents a response to the threat posed by the realization the narrator’s mother provokes, that: “siamo fatti della stessa orribile pasta.” In “Elogio dell’odio,” however, it is not only the corporeal existence, but language itself that comes to be predicated upon such hatred. Manganelli writes: “Dell’odio facciamo un uso quotidiano, domestico, facile, ogni volta che ci mettiamo attorno quella delicata faccia di silenzio che permette alle nostre frasi di darsi una sintassi, un delicato legame, un robusto cuore” (128). In addition to the hatred that sustains silence, allowing sentences to present themselves with a syntax, Manganelli proposes a more universal hatred that enables language itself: “Ma al di sopra di questo odio che consumiamo di ora in ora, c’è una specie di odio universale, una volontà di dire di no, di rifiutare qualcosa, che non è altro che il fondamento del linguaggio, dell’ordine delle cose” (128). Hatred, or more specifically, a perception of sexual difference, becomes the basis of language itself.

This chapter, which began by noting the polarization Moresco finds in contemporary Italian literature between the “immediatismo vitalistico” and “epigonaltà,” isolates in Manganelli’s abstruse writing an emphatic corporality that problematizes such categories. I propose that the resolute avowal of illegibility, *disimpegno* and *menzogna* both in Manganelli’s texts and in the critical discourses surrounding them gives way to a more complex meditation on historico-cultural specificity and a sustained consideration of generation and its failures. Through the *figaliation* with Gadda’s *La cognizione* and *Quer pasticciaccio*—one that involves an oblique engagement that is, to some degree, excised through an abortive process of revision—Manganelli forges a relationship between his own writing and a particular kind of misogyny—one that comes to be associated, in Gadda, with fascist pronatalist policy. I thus contend that, despite Manganelli’s repeated disavowals, *Hilarotragoedia* forges an *impegno* by participating in a misogynist tradition that takes on a specific historical valence in Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio*. Through the particular combination of signifying practices that emerges from these texts Manganelli forges an autarchic model of both literature and male subjectivity. Such autarchies prove to be structured by their own impossibility, insofar as they are built on an insistence upon a corporeality and upon a series of misogynist *topoi* that themselves forge an intertext that collapses the dichotomies of legibility and illegibility, engagement and disengagement, and mimesis and *menzogna*. Through this analysis, then, this chapter shifts the critical terrain mapped by Manganelli’s oppositions between legibility and illegibility, engagement and lack thereof, and mimesis and *menzogna*, as well as Moresco’s opposition between *intellettualismo* and *immediatismo*.

In a journal entry written before the publication of *Hilarotragoedia* and published posthumously in the Marcos & Marcos volume, Manganelli writes: “Certo la politica è più importante delle donne” (97). This chapter verges on troping such an aphorism, insofar as my own consideration of the oblique *impegno* in *Hilarotragoedia* becomes the direction and culmination of my analysis the misogyny of Manganelli’s writing. Indeed, as we have seen, the *impegno* forged by *Hilarotragoedia* and other writings is rooted in a sense of solidarity between men sharing in the frustration of their bodies, especially the impossibility of parthenogenesis and what is figured as the irrational tedium of *levitazione discenditiva*.

### Chapter Three. After the *Giallo*: Hoarding, Contagion, and the Boundaries of Genre in Luigi Malerba's *Il serpente*

#### These Are Not Pipes

In the second chapter of this dissertation, we noted the concomitant denial and asseveration of figurative language in an *appunto critico* by Giorgio Manganelli:

Bisogna arrivare a parlare di cultura come si parla di figa: diciamolo chiaro, se la cultura, se il pensare, non è vitale, se non impegna le viscere (e non metaforica-mente, perché il pensare è cosa totale come il morire, è un 'fatto,' un vero e tangibile oggetto), se non ha anche addosso qualcosa di sporco, di fastidioso, di disgustoso, come è di tutto ciò che appartiene ai visceri, se non è tutto questo, non è che vizio, o malattia, o addobbo: cose di cui è bene o anche necessario e onesto, liberarsi (spogliarsi) totalmente. (76)

Repudiating metaphor on the basis that thought is a “cosa totale, come il morire, è un ‘fatto,’ un vero e tangibile oggetto,” he nonetheless produces a rich figurative economy that problematizes the visceral referentiality he champions. In a style vastly different from that of Manganelli, Malerba sets out a similar ambivalence toward figuration. And as in the *appunto critico* above, this ambivalence frequently manifests itself in the act of imagining words, images, or ideas as things. Most broadly, these repudiations of metaphor, and the equation of words, images, or ideas with things must be understood as participating in the theoretical dialogues now generally labeled “structuralist” and “post-structuralist,” which develop (directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly) from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (published posthumously in 1916), which posits the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.<sup>1</sup> For Manganelli, Malerba, and other writers associated with the *Gruppo '63*, these elaborations represent a manifest backdrop: if both Manganelli and Malerba seem to refuse such an insuperable rift, their painful ambivalence and playful repudiation begin from theoretical discussions that isolate and problematize it.

In my discussion of his 1964 treatise *Hilarotragedia*, I contend that Manganelli's ambivalence toward figuration participates in the development of autarchic models of literature and male subjectivity. This chapter instead considers the ways in which a problematization of the relationship between words and things functions in Malerba's 1966 *Il serpente*. I examine challenges the novel poses to conventions of the *giallo* and propose that it does so through its treatment of objects: by foregrounding collecting and signifying practices that today might fall within the diagnostic category and, more broadly, the discursive formation of hoarding, *Il serpente* necessarily departs from what Ginzburg calls the “evidential paradigm,” the epistemological foundation of the conventional *giallo*. I argue, furthermore, that with its introductory chapter set during the invasion of Ethiopia, *Il serpente* gestures toward an ideology that links collecting to fascist imperialism by isolating structural similarities between autarchy and hoarding, and between expansionism and acquiring.

Several critical responses to Malerba's writing grapple with the relationship he develops between words and things. In “To Know Is to Eat: A Reading of *Il serpente*,” Marilyn Schneider

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<sup>1</sup> See Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, for an overview of the way in which de Saussure's *Course* propels structuralist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic elaborations of language, subjectivity, and the relationship between the two.

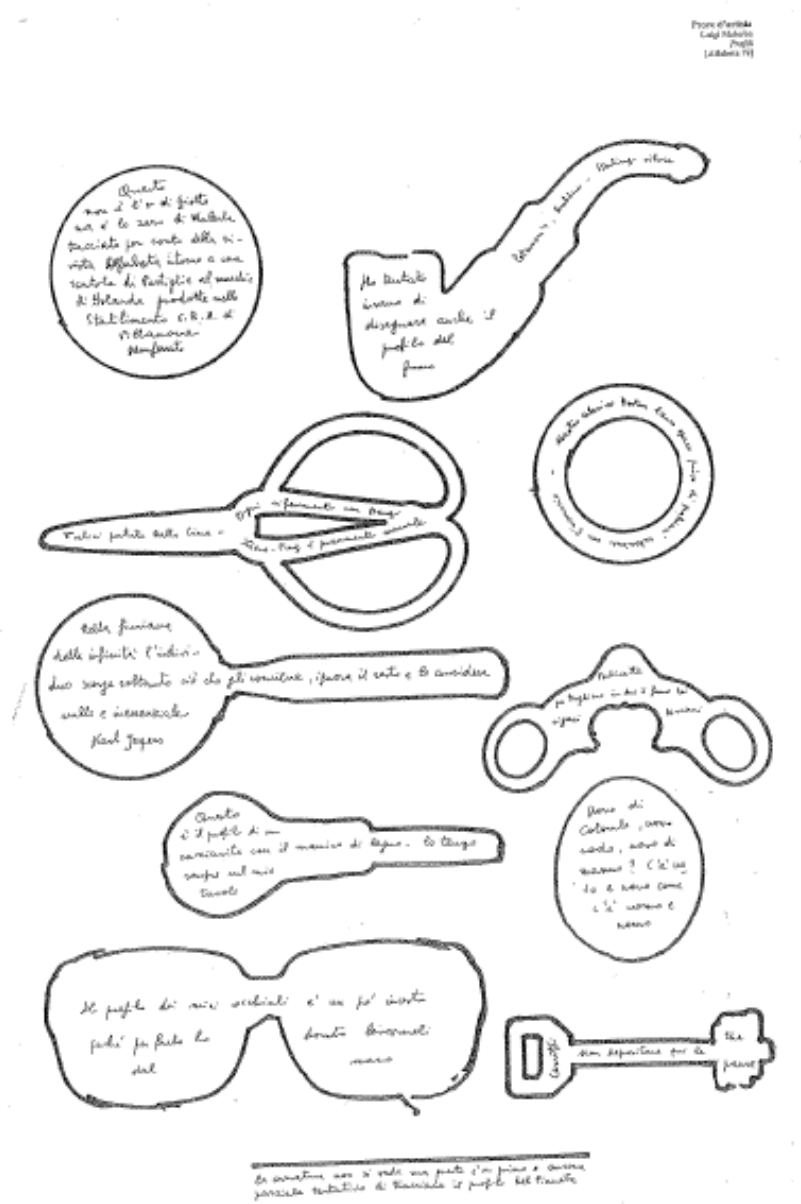


notes the physicality of words in several of his works: “Words are wondrous not only for the wily meanings they conjure, like a witches’ brew, but also to be gazed upon, ‘held’ and ‘sniffed’ by all the senses, like a precious object” (72), while in “Il problema del linguaggio nel primo Malerba,” Marco Colonna describes a perplexing process in which an unmediated reality emerges in the text: “la parola malerbiana, cioè, fallisce il tentativo di porsi come realtà oggettuale, come verità; ed è piuttosto la realtà stessa, nella sua significazione non mediata, a farsi parola” (33). In “Malerba and the Art of Storytelling,” Almansi explains the way in which the equation of words and things produces a textual world free of figuration: “This ametaphorical world exists literally, as if the ancient fracture between words and things had never been invented; and its inhabitants are often terrified victims of this literalness” (163). Almansi continues to suggest that because of this conflation of words and things, Malerba’s writing might substitute René Magritte’s painting *La Trahison des images* (1929) (see Figure 2) in Michel Foucault’s essay “This Is Not a Pipe” (1973) as a point of departure for the consideration of a *coupure épistémologique*. Almansi writes: “He could just as well have used the example of Pinocchio, who tries to cook his dinner in a painted pot simmering on a painted fire; or of Malerba, who wants to ‘feed us with the very name of meat,’ as Kate says in *The Taming of the Shrew*” (163).



**Figure 2.** René Magritte, *La Trahison des images*. (1929). Oil on Canvas. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

**Figure 3.** Luigi Malerba, “Profili.”



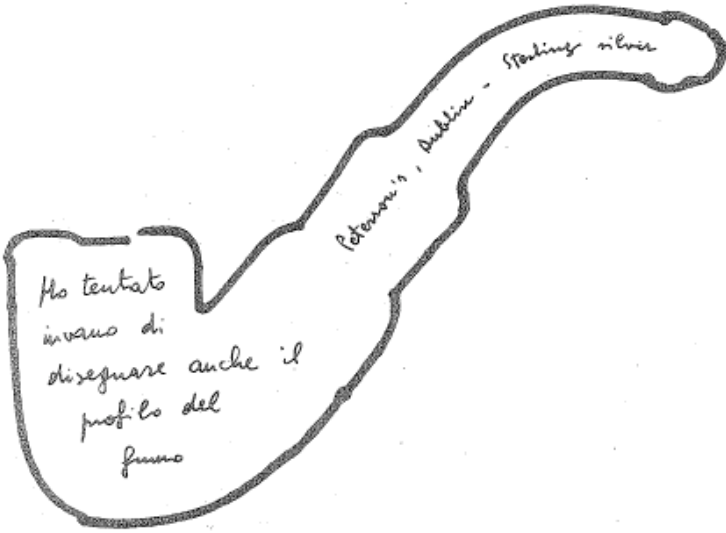
A series of eleven “Profili” by Malerba, published in the journal *Alfabeta* in 1985 and today included in the dossier containing the manuscript of *Cina Cina* (1985) at the Fondo manoscritti in Pavia, constitutes an indirect response to Almansì’s analysis (see Figure 3). In particular, the second image evokes the article, because like Magritte’s painting, it represents a pipe whose ontological and aesthetic status is put into question. In the *profilo*, Malerba traces the form of a pipe and writes within its bowl, “Ho tentato invano di disegnare anche il profilo del fumo” (see Figure 4). Introducing the vain attempt to trace the outline of smoke, the *profilo* playfully assumes a naïve pose, feigning incomprehension of relevant differences between gasses and solids or images and things. At the same time, the drawing affirms such distinctions, since the attempt to trace the smoke is presented only in its futility. The sketch thus makes a claim not of realism but of an indexical relationship to reality. That is, rather than *represent* reality faithfully by adding smoke to the sketch, Malerba leaves out the untraceable substance and proposes instead a deictic aesthetic in which the picture points to reality by bearing its traces. Yet if the words “Ho tentato invano di disegnare anche il profilo del fumo” suggest an embrace of a deictic relationship between image and reality, their very presence within the outline of the pipe’s bowl vitiates the aesthetic stance the words announce. Lest this tension be lost to the viewer of the *profilo*, a second inscription, “Peterson’s Dublin—sterling silver,” which runs along the stem, further problematizes the position detailed above by adopting a realist aesthetic, *representing* reality with a detail that, like the smoke, could not be produced through the deictic technique used to trace the pipe itself. To summarize, the sketch contains three primary signifying elements: the outline of the pipe, the words written within the bowl, and the inscription that runs along the stem. Each element problematizes the others, so that the image outlines a complex and inconsistent signifying system. Words, images and things, in the *profilo*, point to each other but never arrive at semiotic or aesthetic consensus.

The image also signifies in a number of other important ways, including the following: as the second in a sequence of eleven *profili*, as a phallic symbol, and in reference to Almansì’s article, Foucault’s essay “This Is Not a Pipe,” and two of René Magritte’s paintings discussed in the essay: *La Trahison des images* and *Les Deux mystères* (1966) (see Figure 5). If Malerba’s *profilo* evokes *La Trahison des images* because like the painting it represents a pipe whose ontological and aesthetic status is put into question, the dialogue between the *profilo*’s two inscriptions and its outline of a pipe suggest the second of Magritte’s paintings, *Les Deux mystères*. Foucault imagines a classroom scene around this second painting, which I quote at length because of its momentous outcome, and because it is particularly amusing:

Everything is solidly anchored within a pedagogic space. A painting “shows” a drawing that “shows” the form of a pipe; a text written by a zealous instructor “shows” that a pipe is really what is meant. We do not see the teacher’s pointer, but it rules throughout—precisely like his voice, in the act of articulating very clearly, “This is a pipe.” From painting to image, from image to text, from text to voice, a sort of imaginary pointer indicates, shows, fixes, locates, imposes a system of references, tries to stabilize a unique space. But why have we introduced the teacher’s voice? Because scarcely has he stated, “This is a pipe,” before he must correct himself and stutter, “This is not a pipe, but a drawing of a pipe,” “This is not a pipe but a sentence saying that this is not a pipe,” “The sentence ‘this is not a pipe’ is not a pipe,” “In the sentence ‘this is not a pipe,’ *this* is not a pipe: the painting, written sentence, drawing of a pipe—all this is not a pipe.”

Negations multiply themselves, the voice is confused and choked. The baffled master lowers his extended pointer, turns his back to the board, regards the uproarious students, and does not realize that they laugh so loudly because above the blackboard and his stammered denials, a vapor has just risen, little by little, taking shape and now creating, precisely and without doubt, a pipe. “A pipe, a pipe,” cry the students, stamping away while the teacher, his voice sinking ever lower, murmurs always with the same obstinacy though no one is listening, “And yet it is not a pipe.” (30-31)

For Foucault, the result of this burlesque classroom scene is not inconsequential: “So, on its beveled and clearly rickety mounts, the easel has but to tilt, the frame to loosen, the painting to tumble down, the words to be scattered. The ‘pipe’ can ‘break’: the common place—banal work of art or everyday lesson—has disappeared” (31). If the painting breaks the pipe and eschews the commonplaces of art and school, this takes place only when it is accompanied by a monologue that tries, with language, “to stabilize a unique space” for the discordant elements. A teacher lecturing on Malerba’s *profilo* might find herself similarly mocked, as each aesthetic and hermeneutic posture mandated by the drawing gives lie to another. At issue in these images is not the equation of words and things, which characterizes Malerba’s writing for Almansi, but the creation of a visual representation that eludes logical coherence when translated into an aesthetic or hermeneutic stance.



**Figure 4.** Malerba, "Profilo 2."



**Figure 5.** René Magritte, *Les Deux mystères*. 1966. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

### **Taxonomic Troubles: Toward an Aesthetic of Hoarding**

The way in which the images discussed above elude logical coherence when their components are assembled into an aesthetic or hermeneutic stance puts them into dialogue with another text by Foucault, *The Order of Things*, which Almansi also discusses in “Malerba and the Art of Storytelling.” Foucault begins the preface with a lengthy quotation from Jorge Luis Borges’ essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I first read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a far way off look like flies.” In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehended in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. (xv)

In his analysis of Borges’ “Chinese encyclopaedia,” Foucault understands the enumeration of animals to be bound to its medium. As in Malerba’s *profilo*, entries in the taxonomy above suggest broader conceptual apparatuses at odds with each other, so that the categories seem untenable except in the abstract “non-place” of language. Foucault writes:

What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. The animals ‘(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’—where could they ever meet, except in the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language? (xvi-xvii)

If animals that are frenzied, innumerable and drawn with a very fine camelhair brush cannot meet except in the non-place of language, it is because, like Malerba’s *Profilo* whose elements point to conflicting aesthetic and hermeneutic attitudes, (i), (j), and (k), represent individual entities within incongruous broader categories of animals: those that are, respectively, alive, abstract ideas, and represented in art. Though these incongruities may eschew the common place, the “banal work of art or everyday lesson,” or, in this case, stock animal taxonomy, they are also typical of surrealist and absurdist art and literature; they partake in the tradition of “the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

In “Malerba and the Art of Storytelling,” Almansi uses the distinction Foucault draws between the *incongruous* and the *heteroclitite* to parse Malerba’s writing. He likens the former, which Foucault defines as “the linking together of things that are inappropriate” (xvii) to Ionesco and the latter to the Marx Brothers. Foucault understands the latter to be “a worse kind of disorder than the incongruous.” He continues:

I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all. (xvii)

After examining several examples, Almansí abandons his efforts to designate Malerba's writing incongruous or heteroclite, and tentatively concludes: "Malerba in particular seems to waver between the incongruous and the heteroclite, between the Ionescoian and the Marxian. It remains true however that Malerba is a writer of the absurd" (161).

Though absurdity is the bottom line for Almansí, the preface to *The Order of Things* develops further analysis of the heteroclite that will be critical to my discussion of Malerba's *Il serpente* because it resonates strongly with contemporary understandings of hoarding. Foucault proposes that heterotopias, places of the heteroclite, have a radically destabilizing effect on language:

*Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together.' (xviii)

Evidencing the way in which the heterotopia of Borges' Chinese encyclopedia entry secretly undermines language, Foucault points out that certain aphasiacs experience homologous taxonomical troubles and are unable to create an effective system for arranging skeins of wool on a tabletop:

It appears that certain aphasiacs, when shown various differently coloured skeins of wool on a table top, are consistently unable to arrange them into any coherent pattern; as though that simple rectangle were unable to serve in their case as a homogenous and neutral space in which things could be placed so as to display at the same time the continuous order of their identities or differences as well as the semantic field of their denomination. Within this simple space in which things are normally arranged and given names, the aphasiac will create a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets' in one corner, they will place the lightest-coloured skeins, in another the red ones, somewhere else those that are softest in texture, in yet another place the longest, or those that have a tinge of purple or those that have been wound up into a ball. But no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again, for the field of identity that sustains them, however limited they may be, is still too wide not to be unstable; and so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety. (xviii)

For Foucault, the common locus of these two examples of troubled taxonomies rests in their shared abstention from what is commonplace: “The uneasiness that makes us laugh when we read Borges is certainly related to the profound distress of those whose language has been destroyed: loss of what is ‘common’ to place and name. Atopia, aphasia” (xviii-xix). But the two examples share a more specific structure that suggests not so much an incongruity arising from the broader concepts—i.e. animals that are alive, abstract ideas, and represented in art, or the aesthetic and ontological approaches advanced by Malerba’s *profilo*—but rather too narrowly-defined categories.

Indeed, in addition to the incongruity of the alphabetical listing of animals “(i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush” Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia entry involves a related but different sort of tension: that between “(e) sirens, (f) fabulous” and “(h) included in the present classification.” Sirens, juxtaposed with two categories of which they are a subset, like the red skein that is also small and soft, augur the dissolution of the classificatory system. Such narrow category definitions also characterize contemporary understandings of compulsive hoarding, like that set out by Randy Frost and Gail Steketee in their chapter “Hoarding: Clinical Aspects and Strategies,” in *Obsessive Compulsive Disorders: Practical Management*.

Frost and Steketee describe an “information-processing deficit” wherein obsessionals “define category boundaries too narrowly,” a feature they call “underinclusion.” For Frost and Steketee, this information-processing deficit translates into hoarding behaviors in three ways. First, each possession seems unique, and thus irreplaceable. As such, the hoarder is generally unwilling to discard the object. Second, and again resulting from a perception of the uniqueness of each possession, the hoarder is unable to part with a category of objects—such as old newspapers—before carefully examining each one. Finally, because the hoarder is unable to categorize his possessions, he is unable to organize or arrange them. This third consequence of underinclusion bears critical implications for narrative theory because of the way in which it results in a reordering of space along temporal, rather than thematic lines. Frost and Steketee explain this process—which may seem uncomfortably familiar to many academics:

An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the arrangement of a hoarder’s books. The hoarder begins to read a book but must stop to do something else. The book cannot be returned to the shelf because it is now in a different category—books being actively read. It is placed on the coffee table. Next, a cookbook is consulted for dinner and it too cannot be returned to the shelf because it is being used. It is deposited on the back of the couch. The dictionary used next cannot be reshelved, lest the person forget the word he looked up. This process is repeated until there are books everywhere, none of which can be returned to its shelf because they are all different in their own category. Their new position in the room has meaning because each position represents a different category, and an idiosyncratic sort of organization exists, but the ultimate result is clutter and chaos.

The finite amount of space available means that possessions must be piled on top of one another until there are large mounds of unrelated objects. From this chaos, a sort of temporal organization emerges. The hoarder may have a sense of where things are placed based on when they entered the pile. Hoarders trying to sort through a pile often pick up a possession and, not being sure what to do with it say, “I’ll set it here for now” placing it somewhere nearby. This is repeated until the piles are so large and numerous



that they begin merging (or collapsing) into one large pile. With each new attempt to organize and discard, everything in the pile is examined and moved to the new pile or repositioned in the old pile. The end result is that the pile has been “churned” but no real progress has been made. (538)

The hoarder that emerges from contemporary medical discourse, then, is one characterized by taxonomical troubles of great consequence for narrative, as objects are reorganized temporally rather than thematically. The temporal organization; however, is both subjective and unstable: things are arranged not according to their date of manufacture or of acquisition, but according to their most recent contact with the hoarder.

The information-processing deficit of the contemporary hoarder is one that has long preoccupied collectors. In “Collecting Paris,” Naomi Schor notes a similar problem of categorization that is pervasive in books about postcard collecting: “A frequent theme [...] is the bewilderment of the novice when confronted with the multiplicity of categories into which postcards are by convention divided” (258). She continues: “The lists of categories are arrayed before the fledgling collector read like some Borgesian encyclopedia entry gone wild” (258). Mark Singer’s *New Yorker* profile of “polymath book and ephemera collector” Michael Zinman suggests a similar concern with categorization at the boundaries between hoarding and collecting. Singer draws attention to the “critical-mess theory,” developed by Zinman and his friend William Reese:

“The most intriguing thing is how a collection like Michael’s gets built,” Reese said, by way of explaining the practical ramifications of the critical-mess theory. “When you start on something like this, you say, O.K., here is a genre, here is a field. And I’m just going to buy it, whatever it is that I’m collecting—signs from homeless people, imprints from before 1801. You don’t start off with a big theory about what you’re trying to do. You don’t begin by saying, ‘I’m trying to prove x.’ You build a big pile. Once you get a big enough pile together—the critical mess—you’re able to draw conclusions about it. You see patterns.” (66)

The critical-mess theory might be understood as a declaration that, to be a collector, you must first be a hoarder: the categories—here “patterns”—develop only when the accumulated mass becomes a “critical mess.”

Mess itself is also critical to contemporary understandings of hoarding. The proposed entry for the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, “Hoarding Disorder,” is defined as: “Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of the value others may attribute to these possessions,” which results in “the accumulation of a large number of possessions that fill up and clutter active living areas of the home or workplace to the extent that their intended use is no longer possible.” One of the measures used to diagnose the disorder and assess its severity—the Clutter Image Rating—is a series of nine photographic images of staged interiors of increasing levels of clutter.<sup>2</sup> Mimesis occupies a unique position in this measure, as the reality of the diagnosis derives from a visual representation of a visual representation of a hypothesized likeness to the real level of clutter in the hoarder’s dwelling. And in the very recent torrent of documentary films and reality television

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<sup>2</sup> See R. Frost, G. Steketee, D. Tolin, and S. Renaud, “Development and Validation of the Clutter Image Rating.”

programs dedicated to hoarding, the pathology often is signalled by detailed attention to squalid domestic spaces.

Contemporary hoarding discourse, then, might be understood to participate in a process that Benjamin isolates beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when “the private individual makes his entrance on the stage of history” (*Arcades* 8-9). This entrance, for Benjamin, brings a new attention to the interior spaces of the private dwelling:

For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of allowing his commercial considerations to impinge on social ones. In the formation of his private environment, both are kept out. From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world. (*Arcades* 8-9)

In this process, the domestic interior comes to represent the individual’s unique perspective, his “box in the theater in the world.” This shift may represent a critical precursor to contemporary hoarding discourse in which the dwelling itself becomes the the stuff of pathology.<sup>3</sup>

But as important to my analysis of Malerba’s *Il serpente* as the hoarder’s information processing deficit and the pathologization of private dwellings that propels contemporary hoarding discourse, is the disavowal of mortality that appears to propel hoarding behaviors. In *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (2010), Frost and Steketee note a critical tradition that considers collecting a means to manage fears about death by creating a form of immortality. “This is consistent with a popular theory in social psychology called the terror management theory (TMT)” (55). They describe one patient, Debra, who imagines herself as a sort of preservationist: “Debra’s efforts to preserve ‘the time in which we live’ seemed to me to fit the terror management theory as some sort of attempt to achieve immortality—to produce something that would outlive her” (105). They go on to note, however, that Debra has no specific plan or evident interest in what will become of her possessions after her death, and thus conclude that TMT is not germane to the case. Their abandonment of this line of reflection suggests, perhaps, the limits of their discipline: what may be obvious to a literary scholar versed in psychoanalytic theory—i.e., Perhaps Debra needn’t worry about what will become of her possessions after her death precisely because the objects enable her to disavow that possibility!—eludes Frost and Steketee. The authors of *Stuff* thus forgo the terror management theory where they see no conscious concern with posterity. Yet, as some who have gazed upon a hoard might aver, the masses of objects—broken furniture, machinery and instruments someday

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<sup>3</sup> The path that began in France under Louis Philippe leads, for example, to the garbled analysis American actress and tabloid personality Lindsay Lohan offers of her cluttered residence in an episode of *CBS*’ “The Insider,” dedicated to her “Celebrity Hoarding”:

LOHAN: It makes you feel like, the unorgana—...like how disheveled some of it is, and how much there is? Yes, the clutter. Um, it’s...It takes up a lot of space, you know? Mentally.

NIECY NASH: Emotional space too!

LOHAN: “Yeah, yeah, yeah! ...And it’s...It becomes hard to focus sometimes, it gets very distracting, and yeah, I agree with that.

to be repaired, and books, newspapers, and magazines someday to be read—suggest a future so vast it allows no place for death.<sup>4</sup>

Debra's project of preservation is so vast as to be Sisyphean, and as such, it evokes Benjamin's famous allegorical reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) (see Figure 6):

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-8)

Though Benjamin does not explicitly liken the Angel of History to a collector, hoarder or accumulator, its desire to "make whole what is smashed" and to salvage debris from an ever-growing pile resonates strongly with contemporary figurations of hoarders.

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Susan Falkoff for recognizing this aspect of hoarding and bringing it to my attention.



**Figure 6.** Klee, *Angelus Novus*. (1920).  
India ink, colored chalk, and brown wash  
on paper.

This resemblance is obviously not lost on Silvia, a hoarder and the subject of the short video by Ann Silvio entitled “Too Much Stuff,” an online companion piece for the *Boston Globe* article “When Clutter Turns to Crisis,” by Stephanie Schorow. In the video, Silvia pauses to point out her self-portrait, which clearly evokes Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (see Figure 7 and Figure 8). Benjamin, too, concretizes the analogy between the collector and the Angel of History in *The Arcades Project*, where he writes: “Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found” (211).



**Figure 7.** Still from “Too Much Stuff” by Silvio, *The Boston Globe*. Silvia looks up at her self-portrait.



**Figure 8.** Still from “Too Much Stuff” by Silvio, *The Boston Globe*. Close-up of the self-portrait.

### China, China: “Altrove Letterario,” “Site of Space,” “Mondo Parallelo”

Before turning to *Il serpente*, it is necessary to consider a final point that Foucault makes about Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia: that is, that it is Chinese. For Foucault, the provenance of Borges’ encyclopedia participates in a tradition in which the idea of China as a “site of space” enables “a kind of thought without space.” He writes:

Yet our text from Borges proceeds in another direction; the mythical homeland Borges assigns to that distortion of classification that prevents us from applying it, to that picture that lacks all spatial coherence, is a precise region whose name alone constitutes for the West a vast reservoir of utopias. In our dreamworld, is not China precisely this privileged *site of space*? In our traditional imagery, the Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal space of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls. Even its writing does not reproduce the fugitive flight of the voice in horizontal lines; it erects the motionless and still-recognizable images of things themselves in vertical columns. So much so that the Chinese encyclopaedia quoted by Borges, and the taxonomy it proposes, lead to a kind of thought without space, to words and categories that lack all life and place, but are rooted in a ceremonial space, overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places and unexpected communications. There would appear to be, then, at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think. (xix)

For Foucault, the mythical point of origin of Borges’ classificatory system participates in a tradition that imagines China as vast site of space and renders it a repository of indecipherable contradictions. This is, of course, but one instance of the discursive formation Edward Said isolates in *Orientalism* (1978), proposing: “Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object, which was also produced by the West” (22). Said distinguishes himself from Foucault—to whom he nonetheless acknowledges a great intellectual debt—insofar as he maintains “the determining imprint of individual writers upon the collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism” (23).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It seems important to acknowledge two things: first, Said’s *Orientalism* deals with the Western discursive tradition that produces its object of study, the Orient, as well as a body of knowledge about it. In the third and final part of *Orientalism*, entitled “Orientalism Now,” however, Said does distinguish between the latent and the manifest: “The distinction I am making is really between an almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity, which I shall call *latent* Orientalism, and various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literature, history, sociology, and so forth, which I shall call *manifest* Orientalism” (206). Because neither Borges—nor Malerba, as we shall see, aims to achieve knowledge about the Orient, but rather to use China as a backdrop, a repository for their playful machinations, they are better matched to the former category. Though the result may arguably be similar, the distinction is worthy of note. Second: Said’s intellectual debt to Foucault results not from the latter’s formulation of China as a site of space in the preface to *The Order of Things*, but to his theorization of the way in which discourse produces its object.

Malerba may be one such writer, though his “China” shares much with that of Borges. In *Fantasmî romani* (2006), for example, the character Giano, architect and founder of the enormously influential school of “Decostruzione Urbanistica,” presents a conference paper proposing that the “Città Futura” be shaped like a star. He concludes the paper by imagining China as a sort of vacant lot upon which to realize such plans: “Più facile realizzare il mio progetto in Africa, dove spesso le città sono agglomerati informi di baracche che aspettano soltanto la demolizione e il rifacimento su modelli razionali. O in Cina, dove le città si inventano dal nulla” (34).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, two of Malerba’s volumes are set in China. The novel *Le rose imperiali* (1974) takes place during the regime of Che Huang-ti, “In quell’impero remoto, immobile, governato dalle leggi misteriose e implacabili della gerarchia e della gerarchia e del protocollo,” while *Cina, Cina* is an account of the author’s travels in China as part of a delegation of Italian writers that included Vittorio Sereni and Arbasino (Gaeta and Pedullà 79).

Malerba’s figuration of China in the travel narrative shares much with that of Borges. At the outset of the text, he presents China as a “Literary Elsewhere,” something like a screen on which to project his own inventions: “Nella mia idea Cina voleva dire Oriente, l’altra metà del mondo, ma soprattutto un Altrove Letterario dove potevano depositarsi le mie invenzioni, favole e mitologie inevase” (13). He continues, designating China a parallel world: “[...] il volo è l’unico modo adeguato di approdare a questo mondo parallelo dove da secoli noi occidentali abbiamo preso l’abitudine, e il vizio, di depositare le nostre immaginazioni letterarie e le nostre fantasie sedentarie” (20). This figuration of China is critical to understanding texts by Malerba, in part because it analogous to his repeated discussions of both literature and dreams as parallel realities—sites of space in which to problematize the relationship between words and things.

### Parallel Realities and the “Atteggiamento di Concretezza”

Malerba theorizes the complex and inconsistent signifying system demonstrated in the *profilo* above in *Diario di un sognatore* (1981), *La composizione del sogno* (2002), and in a series of related interviews and articles. In these texts, Malerba elaborates an aesthetic dogma in which dreams constitute an isolated realm that, like China—for him a “mondo parallelo”—he calls a *realtà mentale parallela*.<sup>7</sup> Rather than consider dreams as coded representations of unconscious wishes of the waking world, he calls them a “realtà mentale parallela,” whose elements, “...esistono solo lì e non hanno alcun riscontro nella realtà” (*Diario* 3). This understanding of dreams as parallel realities becomes the basis of a hermeneutic approach he calls an “atteggiamento di concretezza”: “L’interpretazione di fatto deve procedere sul fatto e non sulla fuga nei simboli. Il mio è un atteggiamento di concretezza” (Cannon 235).<sup>8</sup> He sets up

<sup>6</sup> Giano’s statement resonates with the tropes Christopher L. Miller isolates in *Blank Darkness*, and with Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili*.

<sup>7</sup> He describes dreams and literature as parallel mental realities in *Diario di un sognatore*, *La composizione del sogno*, interviews by Cannon and Menechella, and in a piece in *Il caffè illustrato* entitled “La psicoanalisi dell’angelo” (which is reproduced in *La composizione del sogno*).

<sup>8</sup> Both West and Clayton Koelb deal with the aesthetic and hermeneutic position Malerba takes in *Diario di un sognatore* in some detail. In “Nietzsche, Malerba, and the Aesthetics of Superficiality,” Koelb challenges Malerba’s professed anti-Freudianism by providing a more complex reading of Freud. He finds in the *Diario*’s “atteggiamento di concretezza” not an insistence on referentiality but an affirmation of ambiguity:

What lies at the heart of Malerba’s project is the desire to use dreams as evidence, not of the ‘real’ or ‘underlying’ structure of the human mind, but of the essential uncertainty and ambiguity



this formulation as contrasting with facile “Freudian” analysis, which would allow no cigar to be just a cigar, revealing that the stance is ultimately apotropaic, staving off the threat of castration. Citing the apocryphal words of Carl Jung, he explains: “Altrimenti arriviamo al paradosso junghiano per cui il pene è soltanto un simbolo fallico” (235).<sup>9</sup> The theory of signification voiced in the *Diario* and repeated elsewhere, then, functions apotropaically, protecting the penis from becoming a symbol. The logic suggests that if the integrity of referentiality remains protected in dreams, then reality is as it seems. What emerges from the *Diario* and the related writings is something like a philosophy of signification without semiology, in which objects are unmediated by signs. Because he bars a semiological bond between waking and dreaming worlds, Malerba, claiming that “Una barca è una barca,” proposes not that a dreamed boat denotes a real boat, but that a dreamed boat *is* a dreamed boat. What emerges, then, is a tautological mode of signification based upon the immediacy of objects.<sup>10</sup>

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of the world. Over and over again he stresses that dreams are the locus of “contradictions and ambiguities,” that their images are ‘without foundation,’ that they are best characterized as “*opus incertum*.” (123)

Koelb points out that such ambiguity is in no way at odds with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, since ultimately for Freud the essence of a dream is not the latent dream thought, but in the dreamwork itself. Koelb cites a footnote of 1925 in which Freud clarifies: “At bottom dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep” (5: 505-7n).

In “The Poetics of Plenitude: Malerba’s *Diario di un sognatore*,” West begins by emphasizing the materiality of language: “Language, man’s most abstract tool, is, for Malerba, as material as flesh, food, or physical discomfort” then proposes that in the *Diario* “proliferation battles the nullity that lurks beyond the abundance of all of Malerba’s texts” (202). The impetus for this reading derives in part from Corti’s discussion in *Il viaggio testuale: le ideologie e le strutture semiotiche*, which designates Malerba as one of the neo-experimentalist writers—along with Paolo Volponi and Carlo Villa—for whom “Il livello costruttivo e dominante [...] appartiene al piano tematico, cioè alla forma del contenuto” (134). West follows Corti in declaring naming the “forma del contenuto” to be “the level at which Malerba’s work is most profitably analyzed,” but understands it to be, in the *Diario*, “radically problematized by the fact that the ‘contenuto’ is itself completely uncertain” (202). My analysis in this chapter is much indebted to that of West, though while she finds in the *Diario*, as well as in *Il Pataffio* (1978), a “poetics of plenitude,” I explore a fullness that results from the thematic and structural collecting and hoarding of *Il serpente*.

<sup>9</sup> Malerba reiterates this position in the more vulgar, but also more complex aphorism included in the *Omaggio a Luigi Malerba*, published by the Comune di Roma: “Per gli junghiani arrabbiati il pene è soltanto un simbolo fallico. Per altri una metafora: testa di pene, no, scusate, testa di cazzo” (20).

<sup>10</sup> In the interview with Cannon, Malerba denigrates symbols on the following grounds:

La conoscenza che procede attraverso i simboli rischia di riportarci a epoche primitive quando, non conoscendo una spiegazione di fenomeni naturali come il fulmine o il tuono, se ne dava una interpretazione simbolica e si creavano le personificazioni mitologiche” (235).

Interestingly, Malerba bases this characterization of “primitive” modes of signification on the same primal scene as Giambattista Vico. In *Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*, Vico traces the development of language in pagan peoples through three phases. In the first, “divine” stage, mute people, responding to thunder and lightning, express themselves through *atti*, *cenni*, and *corpi*, which have a “natural relationship” with the ideas they signify (§225). Because of its employment of iconic and indexical, (rather than symbolic), forms of representation, this stage most closely resembles Malerba’s figuration of the semiology of dreams. While for Vico, then, signification through *atti*, *cenni* and *corpi* is the most primitive; for Malerba such a signifying practice counters primitive modes of signification, which would involve the symbolic interpretation of *atti*, *cenni* and *corpi*.

Though Malerba is adamant in his denunciation of the symbolic interpretation of dreams—which he understands primarily as facile “Freudianism,” but also as any hermeneutic act that links the “*realtà mentale parallela*” of dreams to realities of the waking world—he also privileges interpretation in a way that can only be understood to counter his denunciations. Describing the reader of the *Diario*, Malerba writes: “Il lettore si troverà nello stesso disagio del pittore che vuole dipingere un fiore basandosi sulla descrizione di chi questo fiore lo ha visto con i propri occhi” (8). Likening the reader to a painter with no direct experience of his subject, Malerba, on the one hand, strengthens his claim that the *Diario* represents a transcription of his own dreams free from editorialization or censorship: “Mi sono fatto scrupolo di trascrivere tutti i sogni, si intende compatibilmente con il ricordo, anche quelli che dentro di me ‘disapprovavo’ o che comunque non mi piacevano, e ho resistito alla tentazione di operare qualsiasi tipo di censura” (18). On the other hand, the analogy suggests that it is in the interpretive work of the reader that the art of the *Diario* rests.

Like dreams, Malerba describes literature as a “*realtà parallela*.” In response to a question about his frequent use of unreliable narrators, he explains to Cannon: “La letteratura si può considerare un corpo autonomo e autosufficiente, una realtà parallela che, confrontata all’esperienza, appare come menzogna” (227). According to this formulation, it is not the narrators who are deceitful. Rather, falsehoods derive from attempts to understand texts in relation to reality. In literature, as in dreams, Malerba imagines a sort of absolute referentiality that is tenable only in the shadow of a colossal barricade that isolates the parallel realities. The resulting isolation and self-sufficiency of literature and dreams—as well as China—parallels the understanding of autarchy that develops from my reading of *Il serpente*.

Such a figuration of dreams and literature as a “*realtà parallela*” evokes theoretical propositions by members of the *Gruppo* ’63. In “Avanguardia e sperimentalismo” Angelo Guglielmi distinguishes between avant-garde movements, which strive to break with established literary conventions, and experimentalist ones—specifically, the *Gruppo* ’63—which should aim to revive the very language of literature. Figuring his cultural context as one in which, “si tratta di una confusione che esce dal fatto che nella nostra area culturale tutto è permesso” (329), and affirming a belief in an insuperable rift between signifier and signified—“Ogni ponte tra parola e cosa è crollata” (331)—Guglielmi proposes that literary production act not as a traditional mirror of reality, but that it seek to mirror reality from within, employing a diversity of angles and/or using funhouse-mirror effects to forge a fuller representation. Although Guglielmi’s figuration of experimentalism may share a disdain for mimesis with Malerba’s description of texts and dreams as *realtà mentali parallele*, Guglielmi uses the rift between signifier and signified to suggest that language must find new means to contort itself to better approximate a reality it can never unproblematically represent; while Malerba instead implies that there is no rift between signifier and signified in literature or in dreams, but that neither can make any claim to represent reality.<sup>11</sup>

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At the base of Malerba’s analysis, however, is a blindness to the parallel narrative structures of “una spiegazione di fenomeni naturali come il fulmine o il tuono” and “una interpretazione simbolica.”

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the description of *Cina, Cina* included in the *Omaggio a Luigi Malerba* reiterates the semiotic stance Guglielmi announces, rather than that consistently articulated by Malerba: “La Cina si converte in allegoria di una realtà in cui i segni sono scompagnati dai significati, le parole divaricate dalle cose” (103).

## On the Parallel Reality of a “Denarrated” Text

This understanding of literature as a parallel world in which signifier and signified are felicitously united but bear no relation to reality is central to *Il serpente*. A crime novel without a crime, told by a narrator who repudiates his narrative, the text undoes itself on the level of plot, like (not coincidentally) a serpent swallowing its own tail. As the book jacket boasts, “Il romanzo diviene la negazione di sé,” systematically dismantling its narrative. The text thus participates in the narrative strategy Richardson terms “denarration,” which often emphasizes the extent to which the fictional world comes into being only through its iteration. He writes: “One salient facet of these denarrated episodes is that they draw attention to what could be called, after J. L. Austin, the performative nature of the articulation of a fictional world” (91). Like Malerba’s understanding of literature, dreams, and China as *realtà mentali parallele*, the “denarrated” text, by confounding or repudiating its own propositions, undermines any claim to a referential relationship to reality, suggesting instead an alternate space in which contradictions occur that would be untenable within the logical tenets that guide our understanding of the world—people and things, for example, can both exist and not exist.

The narrator of *Il serpente* is an unnamed thirty-three year-old stamp dealer with a shop on via Arenula in Rome. His life is saturated with extensive readings of magazines, newspapers and various trade journals—though the words he reads, like the stamps that surround him, accumulate without amassing narrative momentum: “È difficile da spiegare, leggevo le parole ma non le legavo insieme, leggevo tutto di seguito un articolo poi andavo avanti con quello dopo, poi leggevo anche la pubblicità, le notizie della borsa, non capivo niente” (42). In addition to this accumulation of words and stamps, the narrator’s days are consumed by his hateful relationship with his wife—who, he later reveals, is a fiction: “veramente ho mentito quando ho detto di essere sposato. Non ho mai avuto una moglie o qualcosa del genere” (99). The narrator joins an amateur choir where he meets a young woman whom he names Miriam, who quickly becomes his lover.<sup>12</sup> He begins to suspect his friend and fellow philatelist, Baldasseroni, of having an affair with Miriam. Increasingly jealous, he brings his reluctant girlfriend to the well-known radiologist, Occhiodoro, hoping that the specialist will be able to use x-rays to detect traces of infidelity. When Miriam leaves him after being subjected to the medical molestation, the narrator uses telepathy to lure her back to his shop, where he poisons and cannibalizes her.

With Miriam dead and devoured, the narrator continues to suspect Baldasseroni—now of working for an international, stamp-related crime ring. Convinced that Baldasseroni’s conspiracy must be stopped, he turns to the police. The narrator confesses to Miriam’s murder, but when the police commissioner searches the store he finds no traces of the crime. The commissioner, frustrated but amused by the narrator’s prodigious inventions, encourages him to write a report—

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<sup>12</sup> The naming of Miriam, along with the eventual revelation that she is but a fantastic invention of the narrator, evokes Ennio Flaiano’s *Tempo di uccidere* (1947). As in *Il serpente*, the narrator of Flaiano’s novel kills a woman named Miriam who exists only in his fantasy. In *Tempo di uccidere*, the narrator explains Miriam’s name: “. . .mi ricordai che non le avevo chiesto il nome. ‘Meglio,’ pensai, ‘viviamo incognito.’ Ma non poteva chiamarsi che Mariam (tutte si chiamano Mariam quaggiù)” (33). Like Manganelli’s oblique engagement with Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio*, this allusion both forges an intertext that counters Malerba’s avowal of the isolated text and strengthens my own claim that the fascist invasion of Ethiopia provides a critical framework with which to understand *Il serpente*.

In *Per una letteratura della riflessione: elementi filosofico-scientifici nell’opera di Luigi Malerba* Margherita Heyer-Caput considers the act of naming Miriam something like nominalism to the extreme, since the character doesn’t exist anagraphically.

which becomes a sort of spectral double of *Il serpente*, or perhaps an imperfect account of its genesis. With a package under his arm, the narrator roams about an archeological site outside of the city in search of a place to bury a package—which may contain the remains of Miriam’s body, or perhaps the lengthy report, or some other unspecified contents. In the final pages, the narrator, tormented by the radio and the various media that invade his apartment wishes for silence, darkness, and even death.

As the summary above suggests, the novel concomitantly compels the reader to sleuth for “what really happened,” and reveals the preposterousness of such a search. This investigative role foisted upon the reader may be typical of denarrated texts, which, Richardson proposes, foreground the problem of separating story from discourse (94).<sup>13</sup> In part because the inaccessibility of the denarrated events shifts the weight of the narrative from story to discourse, the narrating voice itself becomes the locus of interpretation. Richardson writes:

It is the first person form of the denarrated that is generally most prevalent and, I believe, most compelling. I suspect this is because it invites more possible interpretive positions concerning the subjectivity of the narrator, as the reader wonders whether the narrator is incompetent, disoriented, devious, or insane. (93)

The first person denarrated text, then, may elicit a hermeneutic stance that is both investigatory—as the reader struggles to separate discourse from story, and individualizing—even pathologizing—as the reader comes to understand the discourse as issuing from the contortions of a troubled mind, and thus locates some “reality” to the narrated fictions: that of mental illness.

Since the entirety of *Il serpente*—with the possible exception of fourteen italicized passages that separate the chapters—is related from the point of view of the narrator, to try to tease out layers of reality within the fiction would be futile. Yet the reader of *Il serpente*, like the commissioner who proposes that the narrator write a confession, is left hunting for clues to establish the narrator’s guilt or innocence. Thus words delivered by other characters, such as the commissioner’s report: “Non si accusa scomparsa nessuna ragazza a Roma nell’ultimo mese decorso” (182), leave the reader with a sense of closure by authorizing the assumption that the homicide was an invention of the narrator. Such disclosures may seem more legitimate to a reader striving to reconstruct the *delitto* (or absence of it)—even though they are related by the same vividly “unreliable” narrator as *Il serpente* as a whole.

The absence of incriminating evidence in the Via Arenula shop further suggests the narrator’s innocence: “Non avevano trovato nessun indizio. Solo francobolli, cataloghi, torroni” (185). Similarly, a search of the narrator’s house turns up no trace of Miriam: “Nessuna traccia di Miriam, non una fotografia una lettera una calza una giarrettiere, niente. Non una macchia di rossetto una forcina per capelli, nemmeno un capello femminile, niente” (185). These passages occupy a privileged status in the text because they refer to actions performed by characters other than the narrator, but also because of the oblique way in which they engage the evidential paradigm—the epistemological foundation of the *giallo*.

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<sup>13</sup> The inextricability of story from discourse in denarration render the narrative strategy particularly powerful in challenging conventions of the *giallo*, since, as Tzvetan Todorov proposes, the two orders of crime fiction—inquest and crime—traditionally coincide with discourse and story. See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 25.

## The Evidential Object Amid Piles of Stamps and Newspapers

In “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” Ginzburg isolates the epistemological model that surfaced in the late-nineteenth century, most strikingly in work by art historian Giovanni Morelli, Arthur Conan Doyle and Freud, whose writings share an interpretive attention to “discarded information,” and “marginal data” (101): “In each case, infinitesimal traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality: traces—more precisely, symptoms (in the case of Freud), clues (in the case of Sherlock Holmes), pictorial marks (in the case of Morelli)” (101). Like the psychoanalyst, detective, and art historian, the contemporary hoarder displays an “intense perceptual sensitivity to visual details,” particularly those “overlooked by the rest of us” (Frost and Steketee 2010: 215).<sup>14</sup> But unlike the hoarder’s detailed attention to discarded information and marginal data, the evidential paradigm is individuating: it requires that objects serve as cairns marking a specific hermeneutic path, a narrative characterized by causality.

In addition, the paradigm functions metonymically. Ginzburg explains: “The rhetorical figures on which the language of venatic deduction still rests today—the part in relation to the whole, the effect in relation to the cause—are traceable to the narrative axis of metonymy, with the rigorous exclusion of metaphor” (103). As such, the evidential object shares something with the souvenir; which Susan Stewart understands in *On Longing* as a metonymic trace of authentic experience. The ticket stub or the felicitous miniature model of Milan’s *Duomo*, like the painting of a palm reader whose fingernails betray the brush of Caravaggio or the hair of a victim in the home of a suspect, share a common rhetorical structure with respect to the narratives they engender.

In contrast to the souvenir, for Stewart, “The collection offers example, rather than sample, metaphor, rather than metonymy” (151). Also fundamental to her understanding of the collection is the way in which it eradicates context. Building on Benjamin’s formulation in *The Arcades Project*: “What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions to enter into the closest conceivable relation with objects of the same kind” (204); Stewart proposes that organization and categorization then become the guiding principles of the collection: “Because collection replaces origin with classification, thereby making temporality a spatial and material phenomenon, its existence is dependent upon principles of organization and categorization” (153).

*Il serpente* corresponds to Stewart’s understanding of both the souvenir and the collection to problematizes each theoretical model. Objects function metonymically, but do not conform to Stewart’s theorization of souvenirs (or evidential objects) because they proliferate interpretive trajectories, forging no single narrative whose referent is authenticity. Similarly, as in Stewart’s understanding of the collection, objects in *Il serpente* are detached from their original functions to enter into relation with others, but the text multiplies classificatory systems so resolutely as to suggest not the order of a collection but the chaos that confronts the sick mind Foucault describes, who struggles to arrange varied skeins on a tabletop. These departures from Stewart’s understanding of both the collection and the souvenir evoke instead the hoarder of contemporary medical writing, whose alertness to the uniqueness of each object renders organizational efforts ineffective.

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that a second pathologized type is more frequently associated with detection: the paranoiac. (See Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism*). But if the paranoiac differs from the detective insofar as reality concurs only with the latter; the hoarder instead departs from the detective insofar as he is unable to construct a single causal narrative sequence from his detailed perceptions.

In *Il serpente*, the evidential paradigm represents, in negative, the epistemological model that affords the reader a fleeting sense of resolution to the whodunit—the absence of material traces suggests the absence of a crime. But the evidential paradigm does not work in reverse: Ginzburg distinguishes between the work of exclusion and that of verification in his discussion of late 19<sup>th</sup> century criminologist Alphonse Bertillon’s method of using minute bodily measurements to assist in the identification of criminals:

The principal defect in Bertillon's anthropometric method was its purely negative quality. It permitted the exclusion, at the moment of identification, of individuals not corresponding to the data, but not the positive verification that two identical series of data referred to a single individual. (120)

While the absence of clues in *Il serpente* may lead the reader through an epistemological process somewhat different than would their presence, the text nonetheless evokes the evidential paradigm—much in the same way that it asserts events that are then denarrated. But if the evidential paradigm is inverted in the novel’s investigative trajectory, it is challenged in an ongoing way in the rest of the novel because it contrasts with the way in which objects signify for the narrator and, more critically, for the text itself. Indeed, with its thematic and structural use of collecting and hoarding, *Il serpente* proceeds not by creating a single hermeneutic path but by multiplying its interpretive itineraries.

#### “Si Parla Molto di Autarchia”

In describing the way in which the novel systematically dismantles itself by refusing to develop a coherent narrative based on causality, Guglielmi considers its negations themselves as a sort of collection: “Nel romanzo si verifica un processo di accumulazione all’incontrario, o un processo di accumulazione con effetti non additivi ma diminutivi, di sottrazione” (“La sottrazione di Malerba” 84). Like the evidential paradigm, which functions *all’incontrario* insofar as the absence of material traces suggests the absence of a crime, Guglielmi proposes that, on a structural level, the denarrated novel is something like an accumulator in reverse. But while much of what is added to the narrative of *Il serpente* is subtracted in the course of the novel, the first chapter remains relatively unbound by the chain of negations that tethers the plot.

We have seen how, in the pathologizing reading urged by a denarrated text, the “reality” constructed by *Il serpente* is that of the troubled mind of its narrator. As such, the first chapter, set during the narrator’s childhood, represents a sort of primal scene that might provide a sleuthing reader with insight into the character.<sup>15</sup> But, as we shall see, the first chapter emphasizes not the specificity of the narrator’s life, but the shared cultural experience of autarchy: the parades, songs, and radio broadcasts, and the climate of scarcity. Indeed, it is precisely in this first chapter that Malerba sets out the historico-cultural stakes of the thematic

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<sup>15</sup> In “Self and the City: a Psychoanalytical Reading of Luigi Malerba’s *Il serpente*,” Ruth Glynn too finds the interpretive stakes of the novel in the first chapter. Glynn proposes that one episode, the narrator’s encounter with Alfonso, represents a screen memory. Referencing Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City,” Glynn understands Parma as a maternal space, and, relying on a Lacanian developmental model, she diagnoses the narrator’s disorder as resulting from difficulties surrounding entry into the symbolic. Though Glynn develops some suggestive ideas, she entirely overlooks the historical specificity of the first chapter—which could suggest a more nuanced understanding of the *nom du père*.

and structural collecting and hoarding of the novel—if not because of a direct causal relationship, then because of a unifying ideo-logic.

The exteriority of the first chapter is underscored by its setting: rather than contemporary Rome, it takes place in Parma during the period of economic autarchy following the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. Notwithstanding the specificity of the setting, neither geographical nor historical context is named; both are conveyed indirectly. References to Caffè Tanara, Piazza Grande, and Strada Garibaldi provide enough information for the reader to identify the city. In *Città e dintorni*, Malerba describes the Parmesean setting of the first chapter:

Anche una parte del mio libro *Il serpente* è per così dire ambientata a Parma. Ma è una Parma deformata dal sogno o dalla lontananza fantastica, quindi non realistica anche se i luoghi vengono nominati con il loro nome e corrispondono a quelli reali. Del resto, questa è l'immagine che ho della mia città... Più che una città concreta, Parma è per me un emblema, un luogo mentale, una immagine sfuggente. (60)

The historical period undergoes a similar transformation into an emblem, as the novel begins, “C’era una guerra in Africa” (33), a proposition that eludes both temporal and circumstantial specificity regarding the colonial conflict. Instead, the chapter develops a sort of shorthand to evoke the period of autarchy: the soldiers in the street singing “quella canzone là che tutti sanno” (33) and “la voce della radio” (33). Without naming the song, identifying the voice, or specifying which war in Africa, the text conjures a distinct time and place that would be unmistakable to a contemporary Italian reader—in part because just one year before the publication of *Il serpente*, Del Boca’s *Guerra d’Abissinia* (1965), caused uproar amongst veteran’s associations and raised public awareness about the atrocities committed during the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>16</sup> The shorthand used to situate the historical moment at which the novel begins represents, on the one hand, the perspective of the narrator as a child. But the shorthand also performs the ideological work of interpellating the reader as one who would recognize “quella canzone là,” and “la voce della radio”; and, as such, it emphasizes the shared cultural experience.

A typewritten draft of the *Il serpente*, part of the collection at the Fondo manoscritti in Pavia, corroborates this pointed vagueness and the specificity it betrays. The draft includes a crossed-out sentence, excised in the published text, in which the narrator situates the historical moment more explicitly: “Io giro per la città si parla molto di autarchia, bisogna moderarsi in tutto” (4). In this iteration, autarchy represents a sort of enigmatic signifier for the narrator, a vaguely understood *voce in giro* that translates, more comprehensibly, into a mandate of moderation in the context of scarcity. And while the excised sentence figures autarchy as a form of restraint, the interpretive trajectories of the chapter are unhinged, expanding ever outwards to take in more and more conceptual material. This pairing echoes the autarchic split we isolated in the Introduction between scarce raw materials and various forms of boundlessness. With the shorthand depiction of autarchy and imperialism and the expansive interpretive trajectories of the first chapter, Malerba sets out the historical and political stakes of the thematic and structural collecting and hoarding of the novel.

The analogy forged in *Il serpente* between imperialism and hoarding is particularly pronounced because the objects collected in the text can be traced to colonial origins. The novel

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<sup>16</sup> See Labanca 462 and Del Boca, *La guerra d’Abissinia*.

specifies that the narrator's own inventory was purchased in bulk from missionary institutes that had amassed Chinese and African stamps:

Avevo guadagnato parecchi soldi sonati (milioni) con la scoperta degli Istituti Missionari, andavo lì a frugare dentro le casse di cartone piene di francobolli cinesi e africani, li compravo a manciate, a chili, compravo a cento e rivendevo a mille ai ragazzi delle Scuole Medie con l'aiuto dei bidelli che avevano la loro parte di guadagno (72).

The narrator's own stamp collection and the fortunes he amassed in dealing stamps find their origins in an expansionist project.

Another collection, Baldasseroni's marble spheres, is made up of stone scavenged from construction sites, looted from archeological areas, and even chiseled off monuments. Baldasseroni takes these stones to a workshop and has them recast as small, polished spheres: "Sostiene che questa collezione di sfere di marmo è come una ricerca della perfezione, che si tratta di un'idea filosofica, religiosa più che un collezionismo" (96). The collection, on the one hand, represents a sort of negation of the evidential paradigm, insofar as all traces of an individuated history are obliterated as the uniform shape and polish of the spheres eliminate signs of the ancient fragments from which they are extracted. But more importantly, the spheres Baldasseroni most prizes are those made of marble pillaged from Africa.

### **Resignification in Giallo**

The novel's structural use of collecting and hoarding is twofold. On the one hand, the italicized passages that separate the chapters resemble a collection insofar as they form a sequence of discrete entities that do not participate directly in the narrative development. Instead, each italicized passage explores a logical paradox or puzzle that engages only obliquely with themes of the novel. In addition, *Il serpente* detaches objects from their original functions—as happens in a collection—grouping them by a shared quality and thus submitting them to a process of resignification. In the first instance of such a signifying process, diverse yellow objects are grouped together. Given that, in Italian, *giallo* also denotes the genre of crime fiction, there is a coincidence of the resignifying practice and the locus of its effects: that which makes the novel falter as a *giallo* is performed using the very word "*giallo*."

In the first chapter, the narrator distinguishes between the gelato of Parma's Caffè Tanara, which is made from real eggs (which, in Italian are *rossi*, not *gialli*), and the gelato of other local *gelaterie*, made with yellow egg powder imported from China. The narrator then extends the nationality of the yellow egg powder to all other yellow objects: "Si sente parlare spesso di questa polvere gialla che viene dalla Cina. Tutto quello che è giallo viene dalla Cina, anche certe palline gialle che un vecchietto vende sotto i portici del Palazzo del Comune" (34). Grouping together yellow things represents, on the one hand, the idea of collecting, insofar as it detaches them from their use and groups them according to a shared quality. But the passage also anticipates the taxonomical troubles of the contemporary hoarder; though here categories are not defined too narrowly, but too broadly. The category resulting from the logical fallacy voiced by the narrator: yellow things that are also Chinese, is; however, too narrow, and becomes impossible to sustain, so that the contagion of signification comes to a halt with the "E le banane allora? Sono gialle anche loro" (34). The passage above, then, appears to voice a logical fallacy wherein if two objects share one property, their other properties merge. But not *all* properties merge—only the fact of being Chinese. The contagion of signification, then, is not neutral with regards to the signifier. Indeed, it is a racialized contagion, made explicit later in the novel with



the formulation: “gialli sono anche i cinesi” (151).

Like the racialized contagion, wherein all that is yellow becomes Chinese, the question that brings it to a halt, “E le banane allora?” is not neutral with regards to race. Bananas are introduced before the Chinese egg powder in the first chapter, and are represented as the subject of superstition: “Agli angoli delle strade comparvero carretti cariche di banane che la mia madre non comprava per paura delle infezioni (sulla punta della banana c’è il cadavere di un insetto)” (33). The narrator’s mother, insisting that the tips of bananas contain dead insects and that they are “pericolosissime” (33), displaces the dangers posed by colonial warfare onto the African import.

Describing representations of colonial products in fascist advertising Pinkus emphasizes that a taste for bananas “had to be assiduously cultivated in Italy” (25). One gesture toward cultivating a taste for bananas is Gadda’s “Mercato di frutta e verdura,” first published in *L’Ambrosiano* on December 26, 1935, just over a week after the *Giornata della fede*. The essay celebrates the diversity of produce at Milan’s Corso Ventidue Marzo market and traces the routes along which the fruits and vegetables travel from farm to market. The essay must be understood in the context of the economic sanctions against Italy imposed just over a month earlier. On the day the sanctions went into effect, *L’Ambrosiano*’s front page featured an anonymous piece by Gadda entitled “Diciotto Novembre,” which exhorted Italians to remain courageous, and presaged Italy’s future honor and victory against the “moralisti seduti nella città di Calvino”:

La nazione italiana ha per sé destino di onore e di vittoria. Le ferite che le infligono i legulei di Ginevra, venuti alcuni da paesi che all’Italia e al sangue d’Italia debbono finanche la loro nuova indipendenza, sono certo mostruosa cosa: e la sanzione terribile del destino, presto o tardi, non mancherà di raggiungerli.

Sharing the page with Gadda’s “Diciotto Novembre,” a series of short pieces discuss logistics and civil duties of autarchic life. One, “Frutta e verdura,” catalogues the pricing of produce at the open-air market that Gadda later describes in “Mercato di frutta e verdura.” Gadda’s essay serves, in part, to minimize the impact of the economic sanctions and to celebrate the sophistication of the market that brings fresh produce daily into “la città senza frutto: ché dall’asfalto e dalla petraia del selciato, mai, mai, nemmeno a maggio, non si vede spuntar un asparago” (*SGFI* 39). The essay concludes with brief discussion of banana importation, storage, and distribution in Italy:

E dalla *Somalia* vengono importate le banane: la S.A.N.I.S. si incarica di traghettarle coi quattro piroscafi bananiferi, battezzati nei nomi di Bottega, Cecchi, Luigi di Savoia e il quarto non me lo ricordo più. La S.A.B.I. (Società Anonima Banane Italiane), con sede a Genova, ha il monopolio della distribuzione ai grossisti. Il quantitativo importabile è limitato per legge e non oltrepassa di fatto i 180.000 quintali all’anno. Il mercato di Milano assorbe il 27% del quantitativo suddetto.

Queste banane, colte trasportate e distribuite immature per evitare ogni danno di fermentazione, vengono fatte poi maturare dagli stessi grossisti in una ‘sala di maturazione delle banane.’ È una cantina chiusa ed asciutta nei muri, questi con buon rinzaffo e lisciatura di cemento, dov’è acceso perennemente un fornello a gas e il termometro sonnacchia sui 25. Un fornello parenne da parere il fuoco delle Vestali. Sul quale una padella piena d’acqua funziona come il perfettissimo degli impianti di

umidificazione. Così le banane maturano e cangiano gradualmente quel verde aborrito in un carnicino di buona promessa, appese al soffitto in enormi grappoli, e, sulla stanga del grappolo, in caschi.

Avevo un po' di paura a discendere in quella cantina (quella che visitai), perché certi frutti in fermento possono anche serbarci delle sorprese, che so, uno smarrimento, un improvviso 'giramento di testa'; ma ho potuto constatare che non vi è nessun pericolo, neppure per il fatto del gas. (*SGF I* 49-50)

Likening the rudimentary heating system of the banana warehouse to a hearth watched over by Vestal Virgins, Gadda domesticates the colonial product. And in acknowledging, and then overcoming his own fear of descending into the underground warehouse, he dispels superstitions like that of the narrator of *Il serpente's* mother.

The narrator goes on to describe how his mother used take him to the *centro*, where he would watch other children eat ice cream from Caffè Tanara. Bananas make a second appearance in this chapter in the description of one such boy, Alfonso: "C'era un bambino con la faccia rosea come un angioletto, vestito di celeste, il naso voltato all'insù con due buchi in vista, i riccioli biondi pettinati a banana. Sembrava sceso dal Paradiso" (34). Alfonso uses his cherubic smile and coveted gelato to lure the narrator nearer, until "appena sono a tiro mi dà un calcio a tradimento" (34). The duplicitous violence of the child with banana-like hair again links bananas with danger, doubling the metonymic relationship to associate colonial product with colonial warfare, and the boy's banana-like hair with his violent act.

This association between colonial product and the danger posed by colonial warfare is similar to an identification Pinkus describes as being typical of fascist-era advertising:

Many of the advertisements for the first category of goods, the 'fruits' of colonization, go far beyond a proximity of the product with blackness; they make an utter identification. A banana grows as a tassel from the fez of a Somali black head. A black head is formed by, its very shape defined by, the bananas that surround it, constituting nothing less than the entire ethos from which blackness emerges (25).

If Alfonso's banana-like curls resemble the black head shaped by the bananas that surround it, there are also some critical differences: the boy is not equated with or formed by the bananas. Furthermore, Alfonso is not African, but Italian, not black, but rather emphatically white, with a "faccia rosea" and "riccioli biondi" (34). Like Malerba, Gadda, in the two postwar texts, *Eros e Priapo* and *Quer pasticciaccio*, also associates bananas with a white body: that of Mussolini. Indeed, Gadda likens Mussolini's hands to bunches of bananas that in turn resemble gloved hands of Africans. In *Quer pasticciaccio*, he writes: "e quei dieci detoni che je cascavano su li fianchi come due rampazzi de banane come a un negro co li guanti" (*RR II* 55-6). In *Eros e Priapo*, he writes:

Con que' du' grappoloni di banane delle du' mani, che gli dependevano a' fianchi, rattenute da du' braccini corti corti: le quali non ebbono mai conosciuto lavoro e gli stavano attaccate a bracci come le fussono morte e di pezza, e senza aver che fare davanti 'l fotografo: I ditoni dieci d'un Sudanese inguantato. (*EP SGF II* 228)

The enthusiasm for banana importation and distribution evidenced in Gadda's "Mercato di frutta

e verdura,” cedes to a vitriol fixated on the body of Mussolini that characterizes Gadda’s postwar writing. This, in Gadda, is not a contagion of the colonies, but an expression of ire directed at Mussolini. But if the fascist-era advertising trend was to associate colonial product with colonized people, perhaps a postwar response instead displaces this figuration onto an Italian body. Malerba further exemplifies the fascist-era identification Pinkus isolates in an objectionable little poem included in *Cina, Cina* entitled “Banane come uomini”: “Le banane di Canton/ Sono corte/ Sono gialle/ Si producono a million” (85). But almost two decades before Malerba writes the poem, he locates a similar ideology in Italy following the invasion of Ethiopia, as the narrator’s logic toys with the signifier *giallo*.

The color yellow is also central to one of the italicized passages that separate the chapters of *Il serpente*. As we noted above, given that these passages do not participate directly in the narrative development, but form instead a sort of collection of short riddles, they inherently perform a meditation on the narrative as a faltering *giallo*. The passage opens by announcing the death of a Dutch mattress-maker: “*Una materassaia di Haarlem in Olanda, certa Josepha Gessner, nel cogliere un tulipano giallo venne morsicata da una vipera e morì*” (151). The remainder of the italicized passage consists of a sort of inquiry into the *materassaia*’s death. Like the detective Ginzburg describes, the passage hones in on a piece of marginal data, ignoring the viper and focusing instead on the color of the tulip behind which it hid. Yellow then becomes the subject of the investigation: rather than establish “what really happened,” the mystery at issue is, most basically, “Is yellow good or bad?”

*Già si sapeva che dietro il fiore giallo si nasconde il serpente velenoso. Siccome però anche l’oro è giallo e anche il Sole si dice che sia giallo, non tutti vogliono ammettere che dietro il giallo si nasconde il serpente velenoso, che il giallo è peggio di Attila, che dove passa semina la morte. (151)*

The narrating voice describes a contentious debate between those who note the blameless embodiments of the color and those who find the color objectionable: “*È una polemica che non finisce mai. Giallo è il granoturco, il limone, la cera vergine, l’oro e il Sole, dicono gli uni.*” *Giallo è “lo zolfo, la febbre, il Sant’Uffizio, l’itterizia, gialli sono anche i Cinesi, dicono gli altri”* (151). The passage reaches no judgment, the narrator explains: “*Il caso della materassaia di Haarlem non è stato decisivo, non ha risolto la polemica, forse perché i giornali non l’hanno messo nel dovuto rilievo o forse perché il tulipano, per giallo che sia, è sempre un fiore*” (151). With the *materassaia* dead and the color yellow eluding judgment, the passage illustrates the way in which the logic of hoarding defies the conventional structures of the *giallo*. The attempt to establish the guilt or innocence of the color yellow forges a sort of mini-*giallo* about the color *giallo*. The series of negatively connoted yellow entities, consistent with the text’s complication of the evidential paradigm, is presented as evidence of the color’s guilt. If we recall Malerba’s “Profilo,” which playfully feigns incomprehension of relevant differences between gasses and solids and images and things, we might note a similar rhetorical structure at work here.

### **Critical Messes**

Like the classificatory problems performed by the novel’s use of the color yellow, the thematization of the filth and clutter in the novel anticipates contemporary hoarding discourse. The diagnostic category “hoarding disorder,” proposed for inclusion in the forthcoming fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, is defined primarily as: “Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of the value others may

attribute to these possessions.” Critical to this definition is a disregard for the value conferred upon objects by the social “consensus” of economic exchange. Hoarding, then, like fetishism, is essentially a misevaluation, insofar as it presupposes clashing perspectives: the attribution of “false objective values” to an individual or culture “from which the speaker is personally distanced.”<sup>17</sup> In the recent proliferation of documentary films and television series dedicated to hoarding, these clashing perspectives are signaled by the aestheticization of mess, squalor, and unsanitary living conditions found in hoarders’ homes.

Such aestheticization of filthy neglect is integral to *Il serpente*, as the narrator’s dwellings become increasingly disordered as his paranoia intensifies. Because, as Richardson proposes, the denarrated text invites a pathologizing hermeneutic, the reader is compelled to understand this mess symptomatically. At the outset of the novel, the narrator describes the backroom of his shop as a cramped, windowless space crammed with furniture:

L’ambiente retrostante del mio negozio è molto angusto e non ha finestre. Qui tengo i pacchi dei cataloghi, uno schedario Olivetti, uno scaffale per gli album e i francobolli non catalogati divisi in grosse buste per anno e per nazionalità. Una piccola cassaforte a muro per le rarità, una vecchia poltrona di pelle. Una branda di rete metallica contro il muro, sotto la cassaforte. Sembra messa lì per caso. (63)

Though the description above suggests no flair for interior decorating, it does indicate an intentioned order. The narrator’s apartment, similarly small, is perpetually invaded by branches, and by the piercing stares of ill-auguring owls: “Ho un appartamento molto piccolo dove sto il meno possibile. Il difetto di questo appartamento sono gli abeti con i rami che entrano dalle finestre e le civette che vengono a posarsi su questi rami durante la notte” (99).

A final description of the narrator’s apartment brings hoarding into sharper focus and demonstrates the incompatibility of the hoard with detection. When police search his home, as I note above, they find no evidential object, no trace of Miriam, but instead the great disorder of undifferentiated heaps: “Montagne di biancheria, vecchi giornali, un gran disordine. Nessuna traccia di Miriam, non una fotografia una lettera una calza una giarrettiera, niente. Non una macchia di rossetto una forcina per capelli, nemmeno un capello femminile, niente” (185). While mountains of linens and the old newspapers are plural, the absent evidential object is singular. The “gran disordine,” the hoard, is an undifferentiated multitude; the evidential paradigm requires instead singularity and metonymy.

As the narrator severs his already limited social bonds and pursues his persistent obsessions, the spaces he occupies become increasingly squalid, and the unventilated shop begins to smell of mildew and mold: “L’umidità aveva fatto scaturire dai muri del negozio, dal pavimento, dai vecchi scaffali di legno, dalle carte, e dai francobolli ammucchiati un odore di muffa e di mele fradicie” (132). This asthmatic’s nightmare then comes into clearer focus as a space of hoard-like clutter when the narrator sets out to inventory and organize his merchandise, but then mocks the endeavor and embraces the disorder:

Il negozio era tutto in disordine, da qualche giorno avevo incominciato a contare le buste dei francobolli sullo scaffale e poi i francobolli dentro le buste, a segnare tutto su un quaderno secondo la nazionalità. Avevo incominciato anche a mettere ordine negli album dei pezzi rari che tengo confusi agli altri per ingannare i ladri. Forse forse mi conveniva

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<sup>17</sup> See William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I” (*Res* 9: 1985) 14.

staccarli e metterli nella cassaforte insieme alle altre rarità più pregiate, insieme ai francobolli della Inflazione Tedesca. Ma che cos'è questa smania di ordine? Mi dicevo. Stai forse facendo un inventario? Questo che stai facendo assomiglia più a un testamento che a un inventario. Così avevo lasciato tutto in disordine, le buste sul pavimento, pacchi di album da tutte le parti, sul tavolino, sullo schedario Olivetti (157-8).

In the passage above, the narrator begins by counting the stamps in each envelope, and entering them into a notebook according to nationality. He begins to order the albums with rare stamps, but ultimately resigns himself to the disorder, with envelopes on the floor, and stacks of albums all over.

Foregrounding the narrator's efforts to organize his stamps, the passage anticipates Frost and Steketee's description of the hoarder's "churning": "With each new attempt to organize and discard, everything in the pile is examined and moved to the new pile or repositioned in the old pile. The end result is that the pile has been 'churned' but no real progress has been made" (1998: 546). Though the narrator does not—like the paradigmatic hoarder described by Frost and Steketee—aim to select items to discard, the passage above foregrounds the narrator's struggles with classification. The narrator groups stamps according to nationality and rarity, but also considers the possibility that the cleverest way to store valuable stamps might be to treat them as trifles. The problem is less underinclusion, than an overwhelming indecision with respect to categories. This indecision recalls the confusion of the sick mind Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*:

But no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again, for the field of identity that sustains them, however limited it may be, is still too wide not to be unstable; and so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety.

Finally, in his growing disdain for his customers, the narrator of *Il serpente* further resembles a hoarder because he refuses to actually *sell* stamps:

In quel periodo incominciavo a avere vergogna dei francobolli e quindi anche di me stesso. Certi giorni rimanevo dietro il mio banco e non osavo voltare l'occhio verso la strada. Trattavo male i clienti. Li prendevo in giro. Lei fa la collezione, fa il collezionista? Domandavo, e quello rispondeva di sì. Bravo, dicevo con'aria ironica. Oppure, se quello mi domandava il prezzo, mezzo chilo di milioni, dicevo. E quello si arrabbiava. In certi case il cliente aveva una pazienza infinita, stava a ascoltare, sorrideva e usciva ringraziandomi lo stesso. Spesso invece usciva infuriato giurando di non rimettere piede nel mio negozio. (71)

### **The Lives of Things**

As we have seen, the novel both enacts the organizational difficulties that characterize the contemporary hoarder by grouping and regrouping objects according to unstable categories, and urges a pathologizing reading of the increasing squalor of the narrator's dwellings. In addition, contemporary understandings of hoarding also emerge from the disavowal of mortality that marks the narrator's figuration of collecting. At the outset of the second chapter of *Il Serpente*

the narrator sets forth his understanding of collecting, describing his customers with sympathy and distance: “Ho una grande pietà per i miei clienti. Perché li capisco, anche se a me dei francobolli non mi importa niente (me ne intendo ma non me ne importa niente)” (40). He explains stamp collecting as follows: “È un vizio o una mania come tutti i collezionismi e serve per difendersi dagli altri vizi o per nasconderli, ma il collezionista non raggiunge mai la felicità per mezzo della collezione. Deve cercarla altrove” (40). Philately, the narrator claims, wards off or dissimulates other vices but can never be a means to achieve happiness. He elaborates:

Se uno ha cento francobolli vorrebbe averne mille, se ne ha mille vorrebbe averne centomila. Il numero dei francobolli esistenti è un numero finito eppure se un collezionista riuscisse a avere nella sua collezione tutti i francobolli esistenti non sarebbe felice, di questo sono sicuro (40).

Collecting thus emerges as being based primarily on a desire not to possess *all* stamps, but rather to possess ever more. The collection, as it is figured above, is defined by its tendency towards infinity. Though a collector could never possess infinite stamps—or even all extant stamps—his desire must be articulated in a formula that is asymptotic.

The passage, then, demonstrates a disavowal of mortality like that of the clinical picture of hoarding I sketched above. The claim, “Il numero dei francobolli esistenti è un numero finito,” following the elaboration of the philatelist’s amplificatory desire, suggests that it is the finitude of extant stamps, rather than the finitude of life itself that limits satisfaction. Although the remainder of the sentence, “eppure se un collezionista riuscisse a avere nella sua collezione tutti i francobolli esistenti non sarebbe felice, di questo sono sicuro,” acknowledges that the limited number stamps is not what hinders happiness, it does so by referring back to the earlier claim that philately is “uno vizio o una mania,” rather than by reconsidering the disavowal of mortality it performs.

A similar expression of disavowal, as well as taxonomic troubles like those that characterize hoarding, emerges from a conversation between Miriam and the narrator about the standards according to which philatelists appraise stamps. The narrator explains:

I francobolli hanno valore se sono antichi e se sono rari, man mano che un francobollo diventa antico diventa anche più raro perché molte copie vanno disperse, ma ci sono francobolli rari che non sono antichi come quello di San Marino dove hanno stampato un pettirosso con la coda di pappagallo, oppure antichi che però non sono rari come le prime emissioni inglesi One Penny. (64)

Though the categories in the narrator’s explanation are only two, his analysis nonetheless suggests the hoarder’s underinclusion. Though age may add to rarity, rarity itself does not add to age—as the San Marino misprint confirms. And yet age and rarity can be equated insofar as time will eventually bring both. As such, distinctions between the two categories are subsumed by an overarching temporal structure. The investment strategy the narrator garners from his analysis, accordingly, is to wait: “Il segreto sarebbe di tenerli lì e aspettare mentre invecchiano e diventano rari nello stesso tempo” (64). When Miriam points out a fundamental flaw in his method—that is, that time spares no one age—the narrator shrugs it off: “Ma intanto diventi vecchio anche tu, diceva Miriam e su questo aveva ragione, ma si diventa vecchi in ogni modo” (64). While the narrator’s position may constitute a disavowal of mortality, we might propose

that the novel itself, by including Miriam's apprehension, forges a system in which objects—in this case, stamps—skirmish with life.

The skirmish between objects and people becomes more pronounced when the narrator watches a dumptruck make its daily rounds of the neighborhood and reflects on the urban cycles of consumption and waste:

Il rospo lucente deve inghiottire per più di due ore le immondizie di tutta la zona. Qui i palazzi sono grandi e le famiglie producono molte immondizie. Durante il giorno le donne vanno a fare la spesa, portano a casa le sporte piene di roba da mangiare e all'alba del giorno dopo arriva il rospo e inghiottisce tutti gli avanzi. Questo è il normale ciclo delle immondizie cittadine. Un ciclo che non ha niente di bello perché fa pensare a tutte le cose che vengono consumate e distrutte. Parlo specialmente delle cose da mangiare perché le altre hanno cicli più lunghi. (69-70)

But even "le altre cose"—those with a longer lifespan—get caught up in the cycle of consumption and waste the narrator describes, ultimately producing a standoff between people and things:

Certe cose teoricamente potrebbero durare per l'eternità come gli oggetti di cristallo che non si consumano. Ma l'uomo dura così poco che non può nemmeno prendere le misure di quanto dura il cristallo senza consumarsi. Occorrono tante generazioni di uomini per fare questo e in tutti i casi ogni riferimento all'uomo è sempre a suo svantaggio se si fa eccezione per le verdure e gli altri commestibili. (70)

The perishables that pass daily from the refrigerators and tables of Rome to the "Grande Mondezzaio" (70) represent, for the narrator, an exception to the rule of the disadvantage of humanity with respect to things. And like objects for the collector, which are grouped together and amassed, subjectivity, in *Il serpente* is constantly threatened by the asymptote.

### **The Chiasmus and the Subject of Fantasy**

As we have seen, the narrator of *Il serpente* sets out an asymptotic understanding of collecting that skirmishes with the finitude of a lifespan. This tension is one that Stewart describes in *On Longing*, where she writes: "To play with series is to play with the fire of infinity. In the collection the threat of infinity is always met with the articulation of boundary" (159). The boundedness that counters the "fire of infinity," in *Il serpente* is also demonstrated at the rhetorical level, insofar as the novel makes frequent use of antimetabole: the repetition of the same words in reverse order. The first paragraph alone, which describes a parade, contains three such inverted structures: "la testa imbottita di sughero, i caschi di sughero sulla testa" (33); "Che cosa fanno? Dove vanno? Che cosa vanno a fare?" (33); "quando smetteva di cantare parlava, continuava a parlava e poi cantava di nuovo" (33); and the remainder of the novel employs the structure with like frequency.<sup>18</sup> But if most well-known antimetaboli, such as "never kiss a fool or be fooled by a kiss," emphasize the importance of word-order, since the same words,

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<sup>18</sup> Cork was among the materials that remained readily available during the autarchic period. Indeed, when metals used to make traditional high-heeled shoes became unavailable, Salvatore Ferragamo invented the cork- and wood-based platform shoe (Aspesi).

rearranged, emerge with vastly different meanings; the antimetaboli of *Il serpente* instead create negligible semantic changes.

In the antimetaboli of *Il serpente*, then, words are subjected to an ongoing process of reordering—or, we might even call it, following Frost and Steketee, “churning.” In addition to the hoarder’s churning, these unstable sequences of words evoke the understanding of the subject of fantasy that Laplanche and Pontalis describe in “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality”:

In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired objects but is himself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it. (157)

Like the subject of fantasy, words in *Il serpente* are without fixed place. Indeed, the antimetaboli that pervade the text emphasize the extent to which words can shift about with respect to each other without changing, in any critical way, the meaning of the sentence in question.

The instability of word order in *Il serpente*, along with the relationships between objects in a collection that tends toward infinity, is echoed in the novel’s explorations of intersubjectivity. In the first chapter, the narrator inserts himself into the logic of collecting by describing how, upon returning home from Caffè Tanara, he would recount the day’s visions to a boy from his neighborhood, who would, in turn, pass the story on to other boys: “Io parlo dei gelati a un ragazzo che sta nella mia strada, un ragazzo molto povero con le ginocchia piene di croste. Gli parlo anche della giostra, il ragazzo ascolta i miei racconti e riracconta tutto a altri ragazzi ancora più poveri e pieni di croste” (35). In the economy delineated above, narrative develops out of material deprivation and participates in the production of a hierarchy, the gaps of which are bridged with anecdotes. The narrative binds together boys who are grouped on the basis of their shared qualities: poverty and scabs. The narrator continues to suggest the way in which—like *collezionismo* itself—the number of poor scabby boys is ever increasing: “È incredibile come ci sia sempre un ragazzo più povero e pieno di croste del ragazzo più povero e pieno di croste che si conosca. E la scala continua a scendere, non si sa nemmeno dove finisce” (35). The narrating ensemble, like the collection, expands *ad infinitum*, with the position of each poor scabby boy constantly changing with respect to the others.

Kinship structures, for the narrator, are guided by the same asymptotic logic as the chain of scabby, narrating boys. Baldasseroni’s stamp collection, composed solely of stamps featuring royalty, leads the narrator to a consideration of kinship: “È incredibile quanta gente sia parente di altra gente, le parentele corrono in senso orizzontale, verticale e anche in diagonale, investono il presente e il passato, si espandono nello spazio e nel tempo, come è noto. A forza di andare indietro siamo tutti parenti con tutti” (95). Like a collection, the kinship system imagined by the narrator expands ever outward, destabilizing the discreet relationships of its members. Similarly, the stories the narrator reads in newspapers undermine any fixing of subject positions:

Spesso succedeva un altro fatto, che quando io entravo a fare la parte di un uomo, la ragazza o la moglie me la figuravo come Miriam. Quando invece ero io la moglie o la ragazza, l’uomo me lo figuravo come Baldasseroni. La confusione nasceva dal fatto che una volta ammazzavo e una volta ero ammazzato, una volta moriva Miriam e una volta Baldasseroni, una volta mi trovavo di fronte a Miriam con la rivoltella in mano e un’altra mi trovavo di fronte a Baldasseroni (168).



The narrator inserts himself, Baldasseroni, and Miriam into various roles in the episodes from the *cronaca*, unfixing subject positions and thus demonstrating the understanding of fantasy that Laplanche and Pontalis describe.

The ostensible crime of the would-be *giallo*—the murder and cannibalization of Miriam—temporarily halts the ever-expanding chain of interchangeable subject positions. The narrator first insists on the rarity of the crime: “Ero diventato proprio una rarità” (169), yet this rarity is immediately undermined by a lengthy discussion of various cannibalistic practices throughout the world, which concludes by establishing Europe as the exception: “Eppure in Africa i tipi come te non sono così rari, mi dicevo. Anche in Oceania, in Asia, in America. Invece in Europa ci sei solo tu, mi dicevo, e questa era una cosa che mi faceva impressione” (169). Cannibalistic practices in Europe surface shortly thereafter, if distanced by time:

In Europa queste cose non succedono, in Europa ci sono soltanto io, fatta eccezione per i casi rarissimi successi durante la guerra, fra i naufraghi, o durante gli assedi nella antichità. Durante certi assedi del Medioevo gli uomini si sono mangiati l’un l’altro anche in Europa, come durante il famoso assedio di Parigi (170).

Though the text devotes considerable attention to ascertaining the extent to which the crime is or is not singular, the unfixing subject position that precludes such singularity is already inscribed in the thematic and structural collecting and hoarding of the text.

### **Soltanto un Simbolo Fallico?**

This chapter began by recalling the ambivalence toward figuration in Manganelli’s *appunto critico* and by examining Malerba’s equation of words, images, and ideas with things. These semiotic positions develop from and participate in theoretical debates of the *secondo Novecento* that take as their implicit point of departure Saussure’s radical claim that the relationship between signifier and signified, between word and concept, is arbitrary. Guglielmi’s account of the Italian literary landscape of the 1960s captures the seismic impact of Saussure’s work: “Ogni ponte tra parola e cosa è crollata” (331). Amidst the rubble of these crumbled bridges, both Malerba and Manganelli, as well as many of their contemporaries, strive to develop forms of representation that traverse the gulf between signifier and signified. In such theoretical courses, objects and bodies come to occupy privileged positions as quixotic sites of unmediated reality.

In this context, the thematization of collecting and hoarding in *Il serpente* represents a sort of reflection on language itself. But rather than act as mimetic guarantors, the objects of the novel are submitted to an ongoing process of resignification that draws attention to their semantic instability. Similarly, the denarrated text itself, dramatizing its existence only through iteration, gestures toward an insuperable rift between signifier and signified. Malerba’s *profili*, on the other hand, seem to present a motivated relationship between signifier and signified, insofar as they bear traces—being, literally, tracings—of the objects they denote. And yet, we have seen how the inclusion of additional signifying elements complicate this indexical relationship, creating a network of interpretive categories tenable together only in the “non-place of language,” China as a “site of space,” or, as we have seen, the hoarder’s dwelling.

Malerba calls these signifying practices an “atteggiamento di concretezza,” and claims to use a language free from figuration—though, as we have seen, this is hardly the case. In his writing about dreams, literature, and China, he understands this *atteggiamento* in contrast with

facile “Freudian” analysis, which would allow no cigar to be just a cigar. The risk of such a hermeneutic, Malerba explains, is not trite analysis (though presumably that would also result), but rather a sort of castration. Citing the apocryphal words of Jung, he explains: “Altrimenti arriviamo al paradosso junghiano per cui il pene è soltanto un simbolo fallico” (235). By putting symbols into play, Malerba proposes, the real penis would become a mere phallic symbol. Given that these are, for Malerba, the theoretical stakes of his signifying practices, his 1973 “phallic novel,” *Il protagonista*, represents a critical intervention.

*Il protagonista* mimics the structure of *Il serpente*, insofar as its twenty-eight chapters are separated into seven four-chapter sections, which are separated by italicized passages that pose a series of questions about the phallus, intercourse, and art. In addition to these italicized passages, the text is divided in another important way: it is interspersed with footnotes consisting of bawdy quotations—from ancient, modern, and contemporary sources, in Latin, Italian, and regional dialects. To relate the plot of *Il protagonista*, as Francesco Muzzioli points out, necessitates a synecdochic reading, since the narrator’s perspective is sufficiently expansive as to reveal events in the life of il Capoccia, the whole of which the *fallo* is part, and a radio hobbyist who lives in Rome. Surfing the radio waves, il Capoccia encounters a young woman named Elisabella, with whom he begins a long distance radio romance. Elisabella comes to Rome from Orvieto to visit il Capoccia, but despite her sexual advances, they do not consummate their relationship, in part because il Protagonista becomes increasingly fascinated by a putrefying giant Norwegian whale on display in Piazza del popolo. In addition to the giant whale, the protagonist is drawn to the bronze horse buttocks of the equestrian statue of Garibaldi in on the Janiculum hill—though, when he is on the verge of penetration, il Capoccia is shooed away by two guards on horseback. As il Capoccia wanders around Rome, captivated by, as Almansi writes in *L’estetica dell’osceno*, its “simboli penetranti e simboli penetrandi,” Elisabella waits for him in bed, frustrated by his impotence and jealous of his erotic attachment to the putrefying whale. Eventually, she goes out to a café. When il Capoccia returns to an empty apartment, he decides to go to Orvieto to find her. In the meantime, Elisabella, devastated that il Capoccia prefers the whale to her, poisons herself. Returning to Rome, il Capoccia discovers Elisabella’s recently deceased body in bed, and the Protagonist finally consummates the relationship with the corpse.

The description of the necrophilic act reverses the symbolic interpretation Malerba describes elsewhere that would transform everything into a phallic symbol. Instead, the penis itself is invoked by a series of figures:

Sono entrato nel suo Giardino Invernale come un ladro entra in una casa abbandonata dove vuole rubare. Ma più che un Giardino era un cimitero, un Verano d’inverno quando ormai sono seccate le erbe e i fiori lungo i vialetti di ghiaia. Elisabella era lì immobile come la balena imbalsamata. Anche come la mummia egiziana. Io invece correvo come un corridore nella Carrera Messicana. (144)

The penis becomes a burglar and a *corridore*, finding itself in a winter garden, a cemetery, an abandoned house, a whale, and a mummy. The risk of symbolic interpretation, for Malerba, is that it would make even the penis a phallic symbol, and as such, presumably unable to occupy its own thing-in-itselfness. The passage above reverses the vehicle and tenor of the symbolic interpretation Malerba describes: in symbolic interpretation, the penis is the vehicle; the cigar is the tenor; while in the passage above, the burglar is the vehicle and the penis is the tenor.

The novel, then, urges us to return to a question we have posed elsewhere in this

dissertation: can the terms of a metaphor be reversed without changing the meaning? Or, in this case, is there any difference between the “atteggiamento di concretezza” Malerba champions and symbolic interpretation he shuns? The question is one to which *Il protagonista*—like this dissertation—repeatedly returns. At the outset of the novel, the Protagonista lays claim to the function of tenor, insisting that bell towers and obelisks imitate his form, not the other way around:

Io sono l'Antenna che trasmette e riceve. Sto su senza i tiranti d'acciaio delle antenne tradizionali cioè mi reggo da solo per erezione naturale. Dovrei stare attento a non farmi vedere, secondo loro, non si è mai capita la ragione. Non sono brutto da vedere. Il mio colore è intonato con il rosso Romano mattone e la mia forma richiama in qualche modo un campanile barocco di Borromini però sono i campanili che mi hanno copiato, non io loro. Io sono forte e altero come un cannone sul punto di sparare ma nel paragone è lui che ci guadagna, il cannone qui sopra nominato.

Potrei stare benissimo su un piedistallo in mezzo a Piazza di Spagna o a Piazza Navona al posto della fontana. Per carità non se ne parla nemmeno. E allora vi faccio una domanda. Perché mi nascondete? Forse vi vergognate? Gli antichi invece mi facevano i monumenti, gli Etruschi e i Romani. E gli obelischi che cosa sono? (5)

But even as the Protagonista claims to be the original and all other phallic forms copies, the text destabilizes such notions of originality through its ongoing interrogation of metaphor.

The first italicized passage explores limits of the popular slang “uccello,” by asking a series of questions about the penis: “*Ha le penne? Ha le ali? Ha il becco? Volà?*” The logical error here is much like that of *Il serpente*, in which some overlap in properties suggests a broader congruence. Other passages suggest impossibility of relating the form of the protagonist except through a series of comparisons:

*Che forma ha? È rotundo? Quadrato? Piramidale? È per caso oblungo? Bislungo? Oppure ha una di quelle forme che non si possono definire con una parola? Ha un alto e un basso? Una base? È largo o stretto? È grosso o piccolo? Grosso rispetto a che cosa o piccolo rispetto a che cosa? Ci vuole sempre un termine di confronto. Allora assomiglia più a una pera o a una zucca? A nessuna delle due? Assomiglia a qualche cosa? A che cosa? A una pipa? A un palo? A un pugno? A un pilone stradale? A un tubo? (43).*

The following passage further problematizes the paragon, since the term to which the Protagonista is likened, like the Protagonista itself, cannot signify except through another comparison:

*Diritto come un fuso? Ma un fuso è diritto? Allora diciamo diritto come un'altra cosa. Che cosa? Un palo della luce? Un tronco di betulla? Un tubo di ferro? Un sigaro cubano? Una pompa da bicicletta? Il collo di un fiasco di vino? Un candeliere da chiesa? L'asta di un parafulmine? Un obelisco? (62).*

The result of such sequences of comparisons is a signifying chain, in which meaning is not bound to any one fixed point—in this case, the penis. No thing is a thing in itself, but gains meaning only in relation to the endless other entities enchaind. This asymptotic relationship

necessitates an unfixing like that which is the fate of the subject of fantasy in Laplanche and Pontalis' formulation and of words in the antimetaboli of *Il serpente*.

### Conclusion. After Orpheus? Violence and Metaphor from Gadda to the *Gruppo '63*

As the “onesto masochista” who has plodded through to this point in the dissertation may already have noted, our path is stained with blood; for cairns we have battered bodies and corpses. More specifically, the battered bodies and corpses of women: the Signora Pirobutirro of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s *La cognizione del dolore*, Liliana Balducci of his *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de’ via Merulana*, the unfaithful woman of the “Chiosa sulla donna infedele” and the *madre* of the “Aneddoto propedeutico”—both in Giorgio Manganelli’s *Hilarotragoedia*, Miriam of Luigi Malerba’s *Il serpente*, and Elisabella of his *Il protagonista*.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances leading to these too-early ends and awful abuses vary broadly, but the victims are—with the exception of Liliana and the *donna infedele*—the mothers and lovers of the protagonists of the narratives in which they appear.

The first murdered mother we encountered in the dissertation is the Signora Pirobutirro, left for dead at the end of *La cognizione* after an assault by the night watchman. The penultimate paragraph of the novel draws the regained dignity of her swollen visage: “Nella stanchezza senza soccorso in cui il povero volto si dovette raccogliere tumefatto, come in un estremo ricupero della sua dignità, parve a tutti di leggere la parola terribile della morte e la sovrana coscienza della impossibilità di dire: Io” (*RR I* 754). No longer a speaking subject, the Signora becomes a text: “la parola terribile della morte” is legible in her physiognomy, along with her consciousness of the impossibility of uttering the personal pronoun “I.” This description of the poor Signora’s final moments thus foretells the function of other mortal remains we have seen in this dissertation, as woman is repeatedly silenced so that her body can be appropriated for figurative economies.

In Malerba’s *Il serpente*, the narrator invents a lover, along with various methods to render her body legible as an evidential object. As we noted in Chapter Two, the silencing of woman is particularly vivid in writing by Manganelli, who repeatedly figures literature as a duplicitous whore—now a “cortigiana di vocazione,” now a truck-stop hooker (“La letteratura come menzogna” 217). Understood as such, literature becomes a *mise-en-abîme* of artifice upon artifice, refraction without referent: “L’opera letteraria è un artificio, un artefatto di incerta e ironicamente fatale destinazione. L’artificio racchiude, ad infinitum, altri artifici” (222). In addition to an emblem of the artifice of literature, Manganelli depicts woman, denuded, as a site of essential truth. In the *Appunto critico* that begins: “Bisogna arrivare a parlare di cultura come si parla di figa,” he excludes woman from conversations about *cultura* by fragmenting her body to offer *figa* as locus of a truth unmediated by language or artifice.”

Proposing that men discuss culture as they would *figa*, Manganelli formulates the basis of what we have called *figaliation*: a literary genealogy forged through a shared horror at that which, as Freud writes in the 1927 essay “Fetishism” spares “no male human being [...] the fright of castration” (21: 154). In a draft of *Hilarotragoedia*, Manganelli urges his (male) reader to face such horror by holding a lamp to his lover: “a illuminare questo pallido abisso, questo verticale taglio verticale.” This “verticale taglio verticale” echoes the objects of Ingravallo’s gaze in *Quer pasticciaccio*: the “terribile taglio rosso” (*RR II* 59) of Liliana’s slashed throat: “un orrore! da nun potesse vede” (*RR II* 59); her corpse: “quella cosa orribile” (*RR II* 58) with “le gambe un po’ divaricate, come ad un invito orribile” (*RR II* 59), and finally the “piega nera verticale” (*RR II* 276) of Annunziata’s furred forehead, which paralyzes the detective with a new

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<sup>1</sup> Manganelli describes his reader as an “onesto masochista” in *Hilarotragoedia* 61.

awareness of his own complicity: “lo paralizzò, lo indusse a riflettere: a ripentirsi, quasi” (*RR II* 276).

The petrifying gazes that establish a *figaliation* between Manganelli and Gadda also draw them towards a more ancient ancestor: Orpheus. After turning back to look at Eurydice and thus losing her a second time, Orpheus, like Ingravallo and the reader of *Hilarotragoedia* after him, turns to stone:

The double death of his Eurydice  
Stole Orpheus' wits away; (like him who saw  
In dread the three-necked hound of Hell with chains  
Fast round his middle neck, and never lost  
His terror till he lost his nature too  
And turned to stone. (10: 64-9)

Returning to earth without Eurydice, “he attempts to rid himself of his mortality by feminizing it” (Silverman 2009: 5). Orpheus scorns the company of women and retreats to a *locus amoenus*, where he “charmed/ The rocks and woods and creatures of the wild” (11: 1-2) with his music. In *Flesh of My Flesh*, Kaja Silverman notes the persistence of representations of Orpheus as a prototypical artist who returns unscathed to sing (in isolation) of his encounter with (and feminization of) death.

In addition to the *figaliation* between Manganelli and Gadda established by their shared horror at both femininity and death feminized in the form of a “terribile taglio rosso,” both writers foreground difficult relationships between mothers and sons, and thematize matricide. Manganelli famously rebuffs Gadda’s accusation that *Hilarotragoedia* is a parody of *La cognizione* by laying claim to a shared cultural mother. Lietta Manganelli explains in a “Fotobiografia”: “Come giustamente diceva mio padre: se in quell’epoca le madri matte abbondavano, non era colpa di nessuno; per caso ne avevano una per uno, lui e Gadda, così i libri si somigliavano” (53). This response roots *Hilarotragoedia* in a specific (if fictional) historico-cultural context—Italy in the age of *madri matte*, and blames such mothers for the similarities between works produced in such an era.

Though all textual evidence suggests that the attack that leaves the Signora for dead at the end of *La cognizione* is the work of the night watchman, the text nonetheless raises the specter of matricide, most explicitly when Gonzalo threatens to kill his mother.<sup>2</sup> In the “Aneddoto propedeutico,” Manganelli attributes the (maybe) matricidal violence to an unbearable likeness—anticipating Silverman’s observation: “Sometimes all that it takes to get the war machine up and running is a whiff of likeness” (2009: 1). The “Aneddoto propedeutico” introduces the narrator’s mother as a *dissimile simile* (*Hilarotragoedia* 104). While visiting her son, she approaches his sofa, stained with some abject matter—a *macula radiosa*. The narrator pounces: “Le sono addosso, la butto da parte, mia madre cade a terra! La miserrima vecchia! Io sento le sue ossa che scricchiolano” (107).<sup>3</sup> The narrator glosses the attack by explaining the

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<sup>2</sup> On Gonzalo’s threats and the specter of matricide, see Bertone, “Murderous Desires: Gaddian Matricides from *Novella seconda* to *La cognizione del dolore*” and Sbragia, “‘*Toga Caput Obvolvitur*’: The Ideal of Rome in C.E. Gadda.”

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter Two of this dissertation for more detailed discussion of the much remarked parallel between Gadda’s *La cognizione* and the “Aneddoto propedeutico.”

horrible sameness that provokes it: “Mia madre ed io [...] odiosi l’uno all’altra, siamo fatti della stessa orribile pasta. [...] Non c’è limite all’orrore che ci attende” (108).

To the violent episodes above we might add one more: that narrated by Viola Papetti in Nicola Tripet’s 2011 documentary, *Giorgio Manganelli. Discourse on the Difficulty of Communicating with the Dead*. Papetti describes a scene of domestic violence, attributing Manganelli’s occasional outbursts to a greater “cosmic violence”:

In privato... Era... Era sorprendente anche... Mi ricordo una volta che stavo cucinando, e prese... Prima s’affacciò tranquillo in cucina e disse: “La famiglia è come un serpente... Tu la tagli e quello si riaccorse, si riforme, eccetera. Che era qualche serpente mitico, evidentemente, non ero io. E quindi io continuai a cucinare. Poi arriva di botta, prese la padella, e butta tutto per terra... E il serpente, la famiglia tutto finito all’istante. Ma devo dire che non me la prendevo molto, perché sentivo quest’aggressività che mi sorpassava, no? Era contro il creato, non lo so, contro le stelle....

Lietta concurs with Papetti: “Sì, non era contro di te, come non era contro di me e non era contro nessuno. Era sopra, no? Era un’aggressività cosmica.” Papetti continues: “Sì, era la violenza cosmica del vivere, che ogni tanto si stringeva in un episodio, in una persona che aveva sbagliato una frase.”

We might conclude by asking: “What is this cosmic violence?” Or rather: “Why is this fairly banal outburst of domestic violence hailed as an expression of something greater—cosmic, even? Is this the legacy of Orpheus, whose artistic blossoming is predicated on a banishing gaze, an exclusion of woman? Is it the legacy of the Cartesian subject who excised the world only to reconstruct it with his look?<sup>4</sup> Or is this violence—and the models of male subjectivity and aesthetic theory specific to Italy of the *secondo Novecento*?

To answer these questions we might return to the story of Orpheus—more specifically, the long-neglected redemptive coda Silverman excavates from the *Metamorphoses*:

The ghost of Orpheus passed to the Underworld,  
And all the places that he’s seen before  
He recognized again and, searching through  
The Elysian fields he found Eurydice  
And took her in his arms with weeping heart.  
There hand in hand they stroll, the two together;  
Sometimes he follows and she walks in front,  
Sometimes he goes ahead and gazes back—  
No danger now—at his Eurydice. (11: 60-8)

In Orpheus’s return to Hades, Silverman finds a different mode of relationality—one based not an “odio delicato,” Manganelli describes, “trattenuto ma del tutto cosciente, che mi ingiunge di sapere ‘sempre’ che io sono una cosa diversa dalla donna—che me ne protegge, sempre” (“Elogio dell’odio” 127), but rather in analogy—in a recognition of an ontological sameness shared by all.

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<sup>4</sup> Silverman writes: “Descartes’s *Meditations* dramatizes the end of this way of thinking and the emergence of what Heidegger calls ‘representation.’ The world ceased to be a book that man must learn to read and became a picture constructed by his look” (2009: 2).

In Chapter Three we considered Benjamin's allegorical reading of Klee's *Angelus novus* as the Angel of History and noted that the figure looks something like a paradigmatic hoarder, confronting the Sisyphean task of salvaging the debris piling in the storm of Progress. In *Flesh of My Flesh*, Silverman imagines the debris as unrecognized analogies from our past: "Over the centuries, the pile of unacknowledged analogies has grown even higher, impeding our vision, and our capacity to change" (179). This dissertation has been dedicated to acknowledging one such analogy: that between the period of economic autarchy and models of male subjectivity and aesthetic theory articulated by two experimentalist writers of the *Gruppo '63*. What emerges is by no means a causal relation, but a common constellation, a persistent analogy. We can only hope that through this and other projects of recognition we might begin to make whole what has been smashed, and perhaps even reawaken the dead.



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