

Carlo Emilio Gadda's Junk and Other Vibrant Matter in Milan and Maradagà¹

Rebecca Ruth Falkoff

Perhaps no image is more emblematic of Carlo Emilio Gadda's literary style, narrative architecture, and metaphysics than that of the knotty tangle, in all its linguistic variations, which include *garbuglio*, *gomitolo*, *gnommero*, *guazzabuglio*, and *grosso*.² Detective Francesco Ingravallo's famous philosophy in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, for example, holds that catastrophes result not from one cause, but rather from "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 gomitolo" ("a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed. He also used words like knot or tangle, or muddle, or *gnommero*, which in Roman dialect means skein").³ Similarly, the posthumous philosophical treatise *Meditazione milanese* describes a network of causes so enmeshed that they cannot be untangled into any discrete singularity:

L'ipotiposi della catena delle cause va emendata e guarita [...] con quella di una maglia o rete: ma non di una maglia a due dimensioni (superficie) o a tre dimensioni (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 grovigli infiniti.

(The hypotyposis of the causal chain should be amended and reformed [...] via that of a mesh or a net: but not a two-dimensional mesh (a surface) or a three-dimensional one (space-mesh, spatial chain, chain in three dimensions), but rather of a mesh or net that is infinitely dimensioned, so that each link or clot, or tangle of relations is bound by infinite filaments to infinite clots or knots.)⁴

Causes and effects are held together not in a chain, but in a fabric sewn in infinite dimensions, so that each stitch is stitched with infinite threads to infinite other stitches. No stitch, no matter how trifling or remote, can be subtracted from such a densely knotted textile: "Se una libellula vola a Tokio, innesca una catena di reazioni che raggiungono a me" ("If a dragonfly flies in Tokyo, it

¹ I would like to thank Marisa Escolar, Sam Falkoff, David Forgacs, and Salomé Skvirsky for their valuable feedback on drafts of this article, and Nicola Cipani for his help with and lively discussion of the translations.

² Massimo Riva tracks Gadda's many iterations of and, as the title suggests, variations on the *garbuglio* in his "Garbuglio Gomitolo Gnommero Groviglio (e Guazzabuglio)," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, Supplement no. 1 (2008).

³ Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de' via Merulana* (QP), in *Romanzi e racconti II* (RR II), ed. Giorgio Pinotti, Dante Isella, and Raffaella Rodondi. (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 11-276, 16, and Gadda, *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* (AM), trans. William Weaver (New York: George Braziller, 1984), 5.

⁴ Gadda, *Meditazione milanese* (MM), in *Scritti vari e postumi* (SVP), ed. Andrea Silvestri, Claudio Vela, Isella, Paola Italia, and Pinotti (Milan: Garzanti, 2009), 614-894, 650; translation mine. *Meditazione milanese* 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 in *La cognizione del dolore*. The treatise was published posthumously in 1974.

triggers a chain of reactions that reaches me”).⁵ Like the phenomena described in the *Meditazione* and *Quer pasticciaccio*, objects for Gadda are enmeshed in and inextricable from such *garbugli*. In his 1951 essay “Un’opinione sul neorealismo,” Gadda describes his own style (in contrast to neorealism) as one in which objects and events are not discrete, but embody temporalities that transcend the present: memory and potentiality.⁶ As Gian Carlo Roscioni glosses in his seminal *La disarmonia prestabilita*: “Gli oggetti sono punti da cui partono (o, piuttosto, in cui convergono) raggi infiniti, e non hanno, non possono avere ‘contorni.’” (“Objects are points from which infinite rays depart [or rather, in which they converge] and they don’t have, they can’t have ‘boundaries’”).⁷

This image of a *groviglio* anticipates the nascent line of inquiry called ‘new materialism,’ and in particular, Jane Bennett’s theory of vital matter—which, like Gadda’s *Meditazione*, draws on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Bennett looks past distinctions between human and nonhuman to discern a world composed not of inert and passive stuff, but of “actants” that can produce effects and change the course of events. She describes the ethical stakes of conceptualizing human and nonhuman matter as both entwined and, in important ways, of a kind:

Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a great sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of *inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations*. And in a *knotted world* of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.⁸

Such a knotted world is similarly subject to the butterfly effect—or the dragonfly effect, for Gadda—so that no event or entity is without global reverberations. Neither Gadda’s *groviglio* nor Bennett’s “inextricably enmeshed network of relations,” it would seem, could be unraveled to release any one thread, to subtract some part from the snarled whole.

Indeed, in her talk “Powers of the Hoard,” which imagines the hoarder of contemporary (and primarily American) cultural discourse as a figure uniquely attuned to this vibrancy of matter, Bennett proposes that, “the hoarder is bad at subtraction.”⁹ Her claim coincides with the

⁵ Gadda, “L’egoista,” in *Saggi, giornali, favole e altri scritti I (SGF I)*, ed. Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni, and Isella (Milan: Garzanti, 2008), 654-667, 654; translation mine. On the ways in which Gadda’s oeuvre itself—a dense knot of recurring character types, topoi, and even passages repeated verbatim—resembles the *grovigli* everywhere within it, see Gian Carlo Roscioni, *La disarmonia prestabilita: Studio su Gadda* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1969), 43.

⁶ Gadda, “Un’opinione su neorealismo” in *SGF I*, 629-633, 629.

⁷ Roscioni, 8; my translation.

⁸ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 13: my emphasis.

⁹ Bennett, “Powers of the Hoard,” *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), 237-69, 246. Though the constellation of behaviors and attitudes that now fall within the diagnostic category of “hoarding disorder” may be at least as old as, say, Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842)—and is probably much older than that—the increase in cultural interest in these behaviors and attitudes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is remarkable. Examples include installation art (Song Dong’s 2005 *Waste Not*), documentary films (Cynthia Lester’s 2008 *My Mother’s Garden* and Martin Hampton’s 2008 *Possessed*), network television series (A&E’s 2009 *Hoarders*, TLC’s 2010 *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, and Animal Planet’s 2010 *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*), memoirs such as W.D. King’s *Collections of Nothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Jessie Sholl’s *Dirty Secret: A Daughter Comes Clean About Her*

diagnostic category “hoarding disorder,” which is defined primarily as a failure to discard, or “subtract.”¹⁰ In developing an ethics to counter the devastating effects of a political economy propelled by planned obsolescence and the reckless exploitation of natural resources, Bennett finds an unlikely hero in the hoarder, who recognizes sentimental, aesthetic, or functional value where most see none and is thus unwilling or unable to discard. Taking the hoarder as a paradigmatic vital materialist, Bennett deliberately brackets the critical fact of possession: the acts of acquisition that result in hoarding, no doubt, involve a very fundamental subtraction of discrete objects from larger networks of circulation, even if, once subtracted, these objects will then meld into an additive “hoard-assemblage,” a union of hoarder and hoard. Making the hoard-assemblage a metaphor for vital materialism, Bennett reproduces structurally a paradox inherent to many cases of hoarding: setting out to salvage all that can be salvaged from the dumping ground, the hoarder makes a dumping ground of his dwelling.¹¹ For such hoarders and for Bennett, moments of salvage and acts of acquisition, which constitute the move from macrocosm to microcosm, undermine the principles of both macrocosm and microcosm. For the hoarder, the act of salvage contrasts with the abandonment of objects at the landfill or within the hoard, while for Bennett, the act of acquisition is a kind of subtraction that undermines the additive principle of both hoard-assemblage, and, more broadly, vital materialism.

Just as the act of acquisition challenges the vital materialism of the hoard-assemblage, similar forms of “subtraction” threaten the Gaddian *garbugli*. One such *garbuglio* is the social fabric of the fictional South American country Maradagàl, the setting of Gadda’s deeply personal novel *La cognizione del dolore*.¹² The “subtraction” at issue in the case of the social fabric of Maradagàl is that of Gonzalo Pirobutirro d’Eltino, the novel’s sullen protagonist, whose desire for isolation is figured as a kind of “possession.” Robert Dombroski considers Gonzalo’s concomitant exclusion from and enmeshment within the social to be the “ethical paradox” that propels the narrative—unfolding, in part, through the intertwining of macaronic and lyrical expressive modes. He writes: “The intersection and articulation of these forms of writing underlines the ethical dilemma at the heart of the novel: to negate or not to negate.”¹³

Mother's Compulsive Hoarding (New York: Gallery Books, 2011), Kimberly Rae Miller’s *Coming Clean* (Boston, New Harvest, 2013), and Alexander Stille’s *The Force of Things: A Marriage in War and Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), and novels including E.L. Doctorow’s 2009 *Homer & Langley: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2009), and Cynthia Omololu’s *Dirty Little Secrets* (New York: Walker & Co, 2010).

¹⁰ “Hoarding disorder,” new to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), is defined as follows:

A. Persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value.

B. This difficulty is due to strong urges to save items and/or distress associated with discarding them.

American Psychiatric Association, “Hoarding Disorder,” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-V* (Washington, D.C: APA, 2013) 247-51, 247. The primary behavior to define the disorder, then, is not the act of acquiring—which is included in the diagnosis as a specifier—but a failure to discard.

¹¹ Hampton’s short 2006 film *The Collector* is a poignant chronicle of this form of hoarding. Available at <https://vimeo.com/666346> [accessed 10 April 2015].

¹² *La cognizione del dolore* was first published in seven non-consecutive issues of *Letteratura* between 1938-1941. The final installment concluded with “Continua.” In 1963, Einaudi published the first united version of the text, under the supervision of Roscioni. In 1969, two additional chapters, not previously published in Italian, were included in Weaver’s translation, *Acquainted With Grief*. Unless otherwise specified, all citations of this text are from Gadda, *La cognizione del dolore* (CD), in *Romanzi e racconti I (RRI)*, ed. Rodondi, Guido Lucchini, and Emilio Manzotti, (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 565-772, and all English translations are from Gadda, *Acquainted With Grief* (AG), translated by Weaver (New York, Brazillier, 1985).

¹³ Robert Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements: Gadda and the Baroque, Gadda and the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 76.

Articulating the “ethical dilemma” as such, Dombroski evokes what is generally referred to as the “Hamlet theme” or “tema 128” of *La cognizione*: Gonzalo’s consideration of suicide.¹⁴ Although the theme has been discussed in detail by Dombroski, as well as Benedetta Biondi, Elio Gioanola, Giuseppe Stellardi, and others, scholars have yet to interrogate the logic that guides its permutations—including its reformulation, in manuscript notes, as a reflection on negative eugenics, on cutting short lives deemed unworthy of living.¹⁵ These permutations are of considerable importance for studies of Gadda because they are conducted through two essential figures for his narrative architecture: the tangle or fabric introduced above and the phylogenetic tree.

In these pages I will trace the logic that guides the reformulation of the “Hamlet theme” in manuscript notes by isolating a congruence in Gadda’s writing between objects, people, and narrative, as well as the homologous tangles and trees from which they are sometimes excluded and sometimes inextricable. I establish this connection between objects, people, and narrative through a reading of Gadda’s 1940 essay “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” which scans the raggedy knickknacks of the Milanese flea market and marvels at the parsimony and industry that lend them enduring—if diminishing—relevance.¹⁶ Although the objects Gadda describes appear to have outlived their use, they are returned to circulation in improbable redemptive moments of sale. Such sales make use of what appears useless and investment of what was a hoard. And although *La cognizione* sees no such redemptive moment, my aim is not to diagnose Gadda (or Gonzalo) with the newly established “hoarding disorder.” Instead, I follow Bennett in appropriating the themes and behaviors that define both hoarding disorder and contemporary hoarding discourse—in this case, a resistance toward “subtraction” and an interest in broken-down matter—in order to isolate the stakes of Gonzalo’s exclusion from the social fabric of Maradagàl.

Gonzalo and the language of subtraction

Gonzalo, the tormented “ultimo Hidalgo” of *La cognizione*, lives with his mother, “the Signora,” in Lukones, a town in the Néa Kéltiké region of Maradagàl. He is introduced indirectly by the condemning chorus of the community, which is described using the two critical figures for Gadda’s own narrative architecture: the “albero della collettività” (“the tree of collectivity”),¹⁷ and the “tessuto della collettività” (“fabric of collectivity”).¹⁸ The chorus is decorated by the lively accounts of Peppa, the washerwoman, Beppa, the fishmonger, and Pina, the wife of the town gravedigger. José, the “peón” of the Pirobutirro villa, joins this chorus, describing Gonzalo as having all seven deadly sins closed up in his stomach, devouring him from within. Summoned

¹⁴ Benedetta Biondi explains that Gadda labels a manuscript note “tema 128” in reference to an earlier page number. On page 128, he writes in the margin: “tema amletico.” Biondi, “Amleto in Gadda,” *Edinburg Journal of Gadda Studies*, no. 2 (2002).

¹⁵ See Biondi, as well as Elio Gioanola, “Don Chisciotte e Amleto,” in his *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Topazi e altri gioie familiari* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2004), 45-57, and Giuseppe Stellardi, “Amleto,” *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, Supplement no. 1 (2008). On negative eugenics, see Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 239-63; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 136-43; and Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 127-35.

¹⁶ Gadda, “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” *SGF I*, 231-3.

¹⁷ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 579 and *AG*, 14.

¹⁸ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 573; my translation.

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” (“crisis due to a lack of faith in life”).¹⁹

Gonzalo’s lack of faith in life, his “male oscuro,” is perhaps the central enigma of the novel.²⁰ It manifests itself in his horrible abuse of a cat, his contempt for the people of Lukones and the filth they trample through the Pirobutirro villa, his cruelty toward his mother, and his rage at those who usurp her attention and covet her possessions. Among the symptoms of Gonzalo’s *crisi di sfiducia* is the refusal that indirectly provokes the tragedy with which the novel ends: his failure to subscribe to the *Nistitúos de vigilancia para la noche*, a shakedown organization that offers landowners of Maradagàl the possibility “d’aderire o di non aderire,” options that obliquely announce the Hamlet theme. Like “to be or not to be”—or even “your money or your life”—“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 retaliation for Gonzalo’s decision not to subscribe. “D’aderire o di non aderire,” then, will be the first of a series of oscillations that pit the Signora’s life indirectly against Gonzalo’s will and ultimately culminate in a stalemate between “ethics” and “charity” in the manuscript reformulations of the Hamlet theme.²¹

Gonzalo’s “male oscuro” also takes the form of a withdrawal from the social fabric of Maradagàl. Unlike his illustrious forefathers, Spanish settlers 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” (“Irked by the noises of the radio, he would have liked an investiture from God, not to govern Néa Keltiké for the stipend of Don Felipe, el Rey Católico, but rather to write a gloss of the *Timaeus*, in silence, salaried by no one”).²² Ordained by God, salaried by no one, Gonzalo is a portrait of antisocial melancholy: he 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” (“stiff, unyielding [prose], which nobody

¹⁹ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 622 and *AG*, 69.

²⁰ Carla Benedetti understands Gonzalo’s “male oscuro” as melancholy: an *a priori* condition of loss that mediates his experience of the world in her “The Enigma of Grief: An Expressionism against the Self,” in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Manuela Bertone and Dombroski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 159-76. In one of the most lyric passages of the novel, the Signora wanders about the villa during a storm, recalling the sweetness of her lost son and puzzling over the foul disposition of her son who remains among the living: “[e]ra 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” (Gadda, *CD RRI*, 690) (“It was the obscure sickness of which histories and laws and the universal disciplines of the great chairs persist in having to ignore the causes, the stages: and one bears it within himself along all the resplendent descent of a lifetime, heavier every day, without medication”) (Gadda, *AG*, 154). This characterization of Gonzalo’s ailment will provide the title for Giuseppe Berto’s psychoanalytic novel, *Il male oscuro* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1964).

²¹ Bertone traces a tension in Gadda’s writing between the recurrent specter of matricide and a picture of maternal guilt that would justify such a crime in her “Murderous Desires: Gaddian Matricides from *Novella seconda* to *La cognizione*,” in Bertone and Dombroski, 111-31.

²² Gadda, *CD RRI*, 607, and *AG*, 50.

reads”),²³ bejeweled with “parole difficili, che nessuno capisce” (“difficult words [...] that nobody understands”).²⁴

The last descendent of a noble line, Gonzalo is a relic of the past. His haughty isolation evokes a second critical intervention that will be important for my analysis in these pages: Francesco Orlando’s *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura*.²⁵ Like Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, Orlando’s project grows from a heedfulness of the losses inherent to a political economy driven by enlightenment rationality with its imperative of functionality. Orlando understands the useless objects that litter modern literature as a return of the repressed and as an expression of anxieties about the usefulness of literature itself. Whereas vital materialism entails a recalibrated perspective that renders uselessness irrelevant, *Gli oggetti desueti* instead amounts to a monument to (and cache of) banished uselessness. In this threadbare matter, Orlando also finds an image of the corroding, rather than ennobling effects of time, and in that a reflection on the uselessness of the obsolescent aristocracy, embodied in *La cognizione* in the figure of Gonzalo.

Gonzalo’s repudiation of the world, his irritable rage, and his misanthropic isolation have been much remarked upon by critics. In his influential 1963 introduction to *La cognizione*, Gianfranco Contini describes him as an allergic pod whose neurosis seems to preexist any grievance.²⁶ Like critics of the novel, 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” (“so apart, so remote from everyone at Lukones that he could have been called a misanthrope”).²⁷ Dombroski describes Gonzalo by recalling a passage from the *Meditazione milanese* that figures the subject as a dark house without windows.²⁸ In one of the most famous passages of *La cognizione*, Gonzalo literalizes this image, concluding a tirade against personal pronouns delivered to the perplexed doctor 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....”

(“Inside, I put them, in my house, with my mother: and all the Josés and the Battistinas and the Pep—the Beppas, all the jackass grandsons screwed in French or mathematics of all the colonels of Maradagàl... away, away with them! Out! Out with them all! This is, and must be, my house...in my silence...my poor house”).²⁹

²³ Ibid., 616 and 61.

²⁴ Ibid., 616 and 61.

²⁵ Francesco Orlando, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura: rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993).

²⁶ Gianfranco Contini, “Introduzione alla *Cognizione del dolore*,” in *Quarant’anni d’amicizia: Scritti su Carlo Emilio Gadda (1934-1988)*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), 15-35, 17.

²⁷ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 596 and *AG*, 36.

²⁸ Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, 75.

²⁹ Ibid., 639 and 90-1.

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!’” (“‘A fine way to take care of yourself! To say: There's nothing wrong with me. I've never needed anyone! The farther away the doctors stay from me, the better I feel. I can take care of myself; that way I'm sure not to make mistakes'—I, I, I!’”).³⁰

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’” (“Pronouns! They're the lice of thought. When a thought has lice, it scratches, like everyone who has lice... and they get in the fingernails, then... you find pronouns, the personal pronouns”).³¹ 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?...’” (“Into his spirit, excited by the coffee's alkaloids, the gospels crept: ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ But the evil one prompted immediately: ‘including fleas?’”).³² 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. The shared language, like other Gaddian *grovigli* and like Bennett's vital materialism, does not allow for such subtraction.

As Gonzalo's tirade moves from mimicking his mother's independence to repudiating the isolated ego to assailing the flea-bitten intersubjectivity of personal pronouns, the house becomes a central metaphor for the ego: “‘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’” (“When Being becomes separated into a sack of foul guts, whose boundaries are more miserable and more foolish than this foolish, taxpaying wall”).³³ 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....

³⁰ Ibid., 635 and 86.

³¹ Ibid., 636 and 86.

³² Ibid., 715 and 187.

³³ Ibid., 637-38 and 89.

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.

(“The wall is humpbacked, you see, and even the souls of the dead could climb over it [...] It’s twisted, it’s all humps, I know: but its symbol, its meaning remains, and for the honest it should have value, for people: it must have value, perforce. For it signifies possession: the sacrosanct private, most private mine, mine! My own personal possession—which is the possession of my fingernails, ten nails, of my right and true ten nails!” He lifted his hands from his pockets and put them actually under the doctor’s eyes, both equal, with hooked fingers, as if they were the talons of a vulture.).³⁴

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.³⁵

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 first-person subject pronoun ‘io’ becomes the first-person possessive pronoun ‘mio,’ conflating 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 conflation of being and having, 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.

Between fabric and tree

The impossibility of ever truly possessing the personal pronoun ‘io’ reflects the larger system of imbrications in Gadda’s writing. And so, despite multiple and manifest similarities between Gonzalo and Gadda, the “privato privatissimo mio, mio!” of the former is doomed: not just by the mocking tone of *La cognizione*’s narrating voice, but also by the poetic projects of the latter.³⁶ As critics have noted, Gadda’s narrative *garbugli* develop in part through an emphatic

³⁴ Ibid., 638-39 and 90.

³⁵ On the mocking tone of the narrating voice, see Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, 87-9.

³⁶ The hermeneutic imperative cast by these autobiographical resonances is so forceful as to prompt a frequent conflation of the writer and his characters. This tendency becomes so pronounced, for example, that Manzotti glosses the Signora’s recollection: “Le avevano precisato il nome, crudele e nero del monte: dove era caduto” (*CD RRI* 673) (“They had told her precisely, black and cruel, the name of the mountain—where he had fallen” [*AG* 133]) 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” (“The name of the mountain where the son, Enrico G. fell with his plane on April 23, 1918”), without any acknowledgement that the Signora of *La cognizione* is not *actually* Gadda’s mother. See Gadda, *La*

privileging of metonymy, both in syntax and in structure. At the level of syntax, the privileging of metonymy is evident in Gadda's frequent use of qualifying nouns, rather than adjectives. Roscioni, who first isolates this stylistic feature, gives the example of José's entrance, described as follows: "Intanto entrò, zoccolando, la miseria e il fetore d'un peone" ("Meanwhile there came in, clogging, the poverty and fetor of a peon").³⁷ Here it is the "miseria" and "fetore" that perform the action, rather than the peon to whom qualities are attached.³⁸ Carla Benedetti notes another use of qualifying nouns in *La cognizione*, one that will lead us back to Orlando's discussion of useless objects: "la cucina era dominata dalla inutilità della rame in pensione, appeso ad una parete" ("the kitchen was dominated by the gleaming uselessness of the pensioned-off copper, hanging on one wall")³⁹ For Benedetti, this use of a qualifying noun highlights the "absence of the object itself, which disappears behind the form, thus becoming an empty phenomenon."⁴⁰ The object, in this case, is doubly useless: useless because it becomes an empty phenomenon and useless because that phenomenon is uselessness. But we might also read Gadda's use of qualifying nouns as a labor against the segregations wrought by grammar. Bennett draws attention to the difficulty of articulating a network of relations that encompasses life and matter in a language set drawing distinctions. Like Gadda's use qualifying nouns, Bennett's use of the term "hoard-assemblage" to designate the tangled web of person and thing(s) works against the divisions forged by grammar.⁴¹ Gonzalo, instead, rails against a language in which Gadda has confined him: one that is too shared, too common.

At the level of structure, Gadda's narratives follow wildly digressive trajectories that are usually guided by metonymy. Robert Rushing announces this digressivity—and the difficulty with subtraction that it presents—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."⁴² For Olivia Santovetti, digression in Gadda "is not simply one narrative technique among others, but the technique that best expresses the originality of his writing."⁴³ Building on Pierpaolo Antonello's study of Gadda's Darwinism, she 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 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" ("The theory of evolution, in its most recent manifestations, likes to represent geological change as a sequence of

cognizione del dolore: edizione critica commentata con un'appendice di frammenti inediti. (CD ECC) ed. by E. Manzotti (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), 255-6. Gadda also blurs the distinction between himself and his characters. For example, in an interview by 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?" ("You lived on this property for some time?") Gadda's response, "Sì, certo. Ne ho parlato nella *Cognizione del dolore*," ("Yes, of course. I spoke about it in *Acquainted With Grief*") 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. See Maraini, "Gadda come uomo" in Gadda, "*Per favore, mi lasci nell'ombra*," *Interviste 1950-1972*, ed. C. Vela. (Milan: Adelphi, 1993), 154-74, 156.

³⁷ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 704, *AG* 172.

³⁸ See Roscioni, 8, 15-17.

³⁹ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 716, *AG* 188.

⁴⁰ Benedetti, "The Enigma of Grief: An Expressionism against the Self," in Bertone and Dombroski, 159-76, 162-3.

⁴¹ Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard."

⁴² Robert Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2007), 137.

⁴³ Olivia Santovetti, *Digression: A Narrative Strategy in the Italian Novel* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 141.

differentiations or multiplications, by derivations, by divergences, of species from genera”).⁴⁴ Conversely, Gadda’s account of his digressions might just as well apply to Darwinism. In *La cognizione*, for example, he introduces a major narrative digression—one to which we will soon turn—with a horticultural vocabulary that evokes a phylogenetic tree: “una nuova serie di fatti ha inizio, scaturita come germoglio, e poi ramo, dal palo teleologico” (“a new series of events is initiated, burgeoning like a bud, and then a branch, from the teleological pole”).⁴⁵

The digressive trajectories, then, form two distinct structural models of narrative. The first is the *groviglio*, a dense all-encompassing tangle, web, or mesh. The second is the phylogenetic tree, which looks quite different insofar as subtraction is inherent to its movement: each branch terminates either in extinction or in the end imposed by the present. Gonzalo’s desire for possession and for isolation, as we have seen, may be incompatible with the *groviglio* of converging causes, the “maglia o rete a dimensioni infinite,” in which even the most minute of phenomena trigger a “catena di reazioni” with global consequences. His desire for possession and for isolation—for the possessed isolation of ‘mio’—may be more compatible with the narrative model of a phylogenetic tree. One way to distinguish between the two models may be by recourse to finitude: as long as time continues, a branch might twist back, convolute itself, growing into a tangled mesh of causality. Whitney Davis locates such a possibility in Darwin’s philosophy, noting that *The Origin of Species* offers no paradigm like the Freudian death drive or Heideggerian being-towards-death that would suggest a tendency toward extinction. A form, Davis writes, “*might or might not* historically be tending toward its complete disappearance, its evolutionary extinction.”⁴⁶ In the next section, we will see how objects are inscribed within the temporalities of the *garbuglio* and the phylogenetic tree in the essay “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica.”

The temporality of the flea market

In order to understand what is at stake in Gonzalo’s desire for possessed isolation, I now turn to an essay that rehearses the themes of uselessness and possession at the most literal level, through a meticulous attention to broken-down bric-a-brac. In “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” Gadda describes an array of useless objects, and attributes their presence at the Milanese flea market to an instinctive resourcefulness:

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 acquisito, 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.

(Rather than sentimental reasons, we might say some other reason, constitutional the to the human person, or better the foundation of the human soul: [excuse the

⁴⁴ Gadda, *MM SVP*, 884; my translation.

⁴⁵ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 573 and *AG*, 6.

⁴⁶ See Whitney Davis, “The Line of Death,” in *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winklemann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 143 and 135-54.

sincerity]: that instinct to stash away, to retain, to never let go of a button: in any case never to take a loss, to utilize in whatever way possible, and down to the very last cent salvageable, that which is acquired, bought, lugged home, enjoyed—perhaps even for years. The idea that, having to divest yourself of a cork, at least you might extract the profit it merits, the maximum profit allowed by the market.)⁴⁷

Constitutive of the “*persona umana*” is an instinct to extract—from even the most improbable of objects—a profit or use.

We have already noted that this “*istinto di serbare*” has recently come to be associated with mental disorder, though Bratitotis et al. note that the attitudes of hoarders toward things are distinct primarily in degree. They write: “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.”⁴⁸ Though it may entail a gross simplification, it is nonetheless helpful to align these three rationales 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ At the end of time, hoards remain hoards—just as the branches of phylogenetic trees come to a halt: there is no longer any chance that they might unravel themselves into a *garbuglio*.

It is precisely at the end of time, in Gadda, that junk washes up on the shores of oblivion, a frightful place beyond the reach of any social, economic, or literary textile or tangle. In “*Carabattole*,” however, the improbable moment of redemption does arrive. Although the essay describes the knickknacks of Porta Ludovica in such detail as to emphasize their scant worth, the locus of wonder in the essay is not the misvaluation of vendors, but the metropolis—we might consider it a *groviglio* of sorts—that matches such junk 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

⁴⁷ Gadda, “*Carabattole a Porta Ludovica*,” *SGF I*, 231-4, 231; my translation.

⁴⁸ Christiana Bratitotis, Cristina S. Schmalisch, and Gail Steketee, *The Hoarding Handbook: A Guide for Human Service Professionals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁹ We might deracinate the disorder somewhat from the field of contemporary medical discourse to venture a definition of hoarding that would include the elevation of one or more of these qualities—usefulness, sentimentality, and beauty—to an absolute, rather than relative value.

⁵⁰ A model of such a redemptive project is the Sisyphean task of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, who works against the raging storm of progress to awaken the dead, make whole what is smashed, and rescue debris from the pile growing skyward.

vende e chi compera tuttociò: esiste il mercato dell'impensabile. Tutto esiste a Milano.

(Market? But can there be a market of holey corks, busts of Garibaldi, used graters, pipes with mouthpieces missing, mangled bicycle seats, keys to who knows what door, bike horns without squeezers? [...] There are those who buy and those who sell all of that: there exists a market of the unthinkable. Everything exists in Milan).⁵¹

At Porta Ludovica, a wondrous site of economic efficiency, customers emerge from the marvelous metropolis after the *carabattole* spend years waiting for “el moment bon”:

C'è un sogno di risparmio e di profitto, un tentativo di resurrezione *in-extremis*; [...] ma anche una 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.

(There's a dream of savings and profit, an attempt at resurrection *in-extremis*; [...] but also an economy and a combinatorial certainty—of managing to smash together the frayed with the useful, the part with the whole, and infinite patience with perfect timing: “el moment bon!” that in which the tuning peg of a broken violin will be resold for nineteen cents, after eighteen years on display, to the fiddling mendicant from via Mac-Mahon, who just broke one in his hand three days ago.)⁵²

The “sogno di risparmio e di profitto,” unthinkable or unlikely as it may seem given the utter ruin of the merchandise, is realized in the redemptive moment, “el moment bon!”

The redemptive moment saves the *carabattole* of Porta Ludovica from the oblivion of shipwreck, the specter of which is raised in the following passage:

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 anni ‘dalle parti di porta Ludovica.’ Come il Petrarca sarà laureato poeta in Campidoglio, così il cavatappi [...] assurgerà finalmente al collaudo della Ludovica [...].

(The incredible relic has come to graze upon this surfless shore, as in stories of shipwreck when tins of soaked cookies wash up on the island of Melancholy. This

⁵¹ Gadda, “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica,” 231; my translation.

⁵² Ibid., 233; my translation.

is not a *shipwreck*, but the consumed customs of humans: even the customs, that is, the '*habitus*' of our mechanical and bandaged up civilization, comes to give up, exhausted, in the arms of this junk dealer—a benign but implacable old lady, who awaits it, at the end of its years, 'there around Porta Ludovica.' Just as Petrarch will be crowned with laurels at the Campidoglio, so the corkscrew [...] will finally rise for the appraisal of Ludovica [...]).⁵³

The knickknacks that come to graze on the pastures of Porta Ludovica are *like* shipwrecked objects, but the essay then specifies that they are not actually shipwrecked. Rather, to arrive at Porta Ludovica represents the crowning achievement of the life of an object: a testament to its having been passed down through generations, to its having *almost* outlived its use. Unlike shipwrecked objects, which would loll about the shore in obscurity, the *carabattole* are transformed by "el moment bon!" and returned to the economic cycle.

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" ("the parallel undertow of my life and non-life has left behind, yes, yes, left behind, junk more or less useless, on the shores of consumed time").⁵⁴ Unlike the junk of Porta Ludovica, Gadda here imagines his work as a kind of debris that is never usefully transformed by industry or economy and whose value remains unresolved, awaiting the appraisal at the end of its years, the final calculations of consumed time, with its closed accounts. Without a redemptive moment like those offered by the flea market, the "sogno di risparmio e di profitto" remains just that. And when the shores of consumed time give way to a time's past perfect, when "il tempo era stato consumato" ("time had been consumed"), use becomes a foreclosed possibility: this is the time when investments become hoards and when potential is exhausted: be it material, literary, or—as we shall see in the next section—human.⁵⁵

Charity and ethics in Maradagàl

Like Gadda's writing in "Come lavoro," Gonzalo is figured as a castaway in *La cognizione*. 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)" ("He asked all these questions at random, for the pleasure of asking them [or at least, [...]) in that umpteenth ferry ride from delirium to rationality").⁵⁶ Doctor Higeròa believes that the social fabric might resuscitate Gonzalo's flailing soul:

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Come lavoro" in *SGF I*, 427-43, 427; my translation. Much is lost by translating 'reliquato' as 'left behind,' particularly as Gadda emphasizes the importance of the unusual word with "sì sì reliquato." The verb "reliquare," of which "reliquato" is the past participle is not included in *Garzanti* or in Niccolò Tommaseo's *Dizionario della lingua italiana*. Tullio De Mauro's *Grande dizionario dell'uso italiano* cites Gadda's use of the verb in *Quer pasticciaccio*. De Mauro also includes the noun form, 'reliquato,' from the Latin 'rimanente,' used in bureaucratic and administrative contexts.

⁵⁵ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 633 and *AG*, 83.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 647 and 101.

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.

(The doctor and father, nevertheless, persisted in the opinion that even a shipwrecked man, if one is really determined, can be fished from the waves, from the howling night: the social [fabric] then intervenes to help, and acts against the cyanosis of the single individual with the never-spent vigor of charity; it operates as artificial respiration, which restores to the prostrate man, after the blue breath of hope, the red warmth of life).⁵⁷

Though the flea market can salvage the castaway objects of Porta Ludovica, the social fabric of Maradagàl—flea-bitten though it may be—cannot rescue Gonzalo, whose eyes “parevano desiderare e nello stesso tempo respingere ogni parola di conforto” (“seemed to desire and at the same time to reject every word of comfort”).⁵⁸ Indeed, in his isolation, Gonzalo becomes a sort of material waste that cannot be recovered 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 Pirobutirro villa, Higuera considers Gonzalo's gloomy isolation: “Gli parve, pensandoci, che il figlio Pirobutirro stesse per troppo a rimuginar malanni, chiuso in sé: malanni ormai rugginosi nel tempo: e i pensieri gli attossicavano l'anima, come una spazzatura irrancidita” (“It seemed to him [the doctor], thinking of it, that the Pirobutirro son spent too much time brooding over his ailments, shut up in himself—ailments now rusted by time—and thoughts poisoned his soul, like rancid garbage”).⁵⁹ Apart from the metabolic function of the social, Gonzalo's thoughts cannot be rendered useful—they cannot be processed or purified, and are left, instead, to poison his soul like garbage.

It is this very uselessness—the failure to be productively transformed and entangled—that prompts Gadda's manuscript formulation of the Hamlet theme. Commenting on Higuera's impression above, 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 segreto orgoglio *affioravano* in una negazione della vita non valida: *come*

⁵⁷ Ibid., 622-3 and 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 622 and 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 600 and 40. Rancid detritus, it is important to note, is a polysemous site of interest for Gadda, whose work as an engineer for the Società Ammonia Casale and as the author of various scientific and technical essays focuses on industrial technologies that render (with varying degrees of success) processes of decomposition extraneous to the production of fertilizers and explosives. See Rebecca Falkoff, “Carlo Emilio Gadda's Professional Alchemy, or How to Make Literature from Science and Bread from Air” *Romance Studies*, 2015 (Forthcoming).

l'agricoltore e il bravo giardiniere strappano le foglie incompiute della bella pianta.

(Either you resign yourself to what happened [distraction, forgetting] and in that case you repudiate your own being: you forgo vendetta. Or you accept the past, and in that case you must go on living. But living in rancor is a sterile pursuit [Christ] and you must destroy the uselessness within you. So the only good is propagation, generation [Christ, Mussolini] increase, augmentation. But what do you then increase? What do you produce? *One can say "crescite e multiplicàmini"* to carrots, even. His most intimate and secret perplexity, his most secret pride *blossomed* in a negation of life not valid: *just as the farmer and the good gardener tear imperfect leaves from the fine plant*).⁶⁰

This passage performs a complex alignment of the Hamlet theme with a negative eugenicist reflection about cutting short lives deemed unworthy of living. Most broadly, the passage follows a chiasmic structure of a-b-b-a, or, in terms of the Hamlet theme, *not to be* / *to be* / *to be* / *not to be*. The first option presented in the passage is that which corresponds to Hamlet's *not to be*: to forget the past, forgo vendetta, and renounce being. The alternative, *to be*, is to accept the past and continue living in rancor. But because living in rancor is sterile, the second option gives way to another possibility, which still falls within the general rubric of *to be*: propagation. Gadda considers the implications of such propagation by invoking horticulture and asking: "How are we any different from carrots, if we aim only to be fruitful and multiply?" The question, to which the implicit answer is "we're not," returns us to choice a: the suicidal *not to be*. This iteration of *not to be* is presented with another horticultural metaphor: that of the *bravo giardiniere* who cuts short defective fronds.⁶¹ A third horticultural metaphor describes Gonzalo's thoughts blossoming ("affioravano") into the very idea of pruning such fronds. The same vehicle, we might say, is driven in opposite directions, adding ambiguity and ambivalence to an already quite ambivalent and ambiguous passage. I would venture that this unruly doubling of the metaphor participates in the process we have already noted of entangling Gonzalo in a flea-bitten (or perhaps in this case, worm-eaten) language he can't escape.⁶² Put more simply, as the content seems to settle on the phylogenetic tree, the form enacts a tangle.

In the corresponding passage in the novel, the explicit opposition between the eugenicist (and suicidal) pruning and the pronatalism of Mussolini (and Christ) is shifted from the realm of bare life to that of the social through the personification of Appearance as a vile whore. Despite this reworking, Gadda maintains the figurative economy of the manuscript note: the work of the *bravo giardiniere* now resembles that of the man who becomes Lord and Prince (if not gardener) of the garden of his soul by refusing to participate in the social:

⁶⁰ Gadda, *CD ECC*, 556 (my emphasis), my translation.

⁶¹ On the relation between human, animal, and plant life instituted by eugenics, see Esposito, 127-35.

⁶² This chiasmic figurative economy amounts to something like an allegory of Esposito's immunitary paradigm, insofar as it represents a convergence of an affirmative and a negative biopolitics, a gesture of "excluding inclusion," an "exclusion by inclusion" (119). See also the discussion of the immunitary paradigm in Susan Stewart Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians, 1860-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10-12.

La sua segreta perplessità e l'orgoglio segreto *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 mōndano la bella pianta dalle sue foglie intristite, o ne spiccano acerbamente il frutto, quello che sia venuto mencio o vizzo 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.

(His secret perplexity and secret pride *rose to the surface* within the woof of his actions in a negation of nonvalid appearances. Nonvalid depictions were to be negated and to be rejected, like false specie, counterfeit money. Thus the *farmer, the wise gardener strips the fine plant of its drooping leaves, or plucks, unripe, the fruit which had grown flabby or withered despite surrounding nature.*

To seize the lying kiss of Appearance, to lie with her on the straw, to breathe in her breath, to drink down into my soul her belch and strumpet's stench. Or instead to plunge them into rancor and into contempt as into a well of excrement, to deny, deny: to be Lord and Prince in the garden of one's own soul. Closed towers rise up against the wind. But the progress of rancor is a sterile footstep; to deny vain images, most of the time, means denying oneself).⁶³

The first sentence quoted above maintains the language of the manuscript note used to introduce the idea of suicide as “la sua segreta perplessità e l'orgoglio segreto.” And as in the manuscript note, this passage describes these thoughts of pruning as a blossoming: “affioravano dentro la trama degli atti in una negazione di parvenze non valide.” That such a flowering is also a flowering of narrative is demonstrated in this passage with the inclusion of “la *trama* degli atti.”

Another instance of this horticultural metaphor sets out the narrative and “ethical” 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.

⁶³ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 703 (my emphasis) and *AG* 170-1.

(But the [fabric] of collectivity, more or less everywhere in the world, perhaps, and in Maradagàl more than elsewhere, has a happy tendency to forget, at least from time to time, the imperative end aimed at by the daily work of the single cells. And then, in the [fabric's] compact warp, the charitable rents of exception are unraveled. Ethical purpose and carnal benevolence toward the human creature emit contradictory calls. If [carnal benevolence] wins, a new series of events is initiated, burgeoning like a bud, and then a branch, from the teleological pole).⁶⁴

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 to 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” (“very special ears [...] and all five senses in perfect condition: a bloodhound’s scent and a cat’s retina, which can glimpse mice on the run, they say, in the darkness of basements”).⁶⁵ Carnal benevolence, on the other hand, would allow for an exception, the employment of “una guardia sorda o semisorda” (“a deaf guard or a half-deaf one”).⁶⁶ Should the latter come to pass, as indeed it does—with the Mahagones, who feigns deafness, appointed watchman—a new bud, then branch of the teleological pole, and of the narrative, springs forth. Charity, here, engages the two privileged metaphors for his narrative architecture: it results in an unraveling (*si smagliano*) of the social (and narrative) fabric and a new branch of the teleological (and narrative) pole. Both figures for charity (unraveling and branching) counter the larger narrative project of the *garbuglio*, though a redemptive moment might make something more like a *garbuglio* from the tree-like iteration of narrative.

Such a redemptive moment—one that resolves the tension between ethical aim and carnal benevolence (and their relationship to literature)—is presented in a 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.

(If the so-called mother of Recanati, more Lacedaemonum, [following Spartan custom], had thrown her little count-monster from a cliff, not recognizing him fit for the draft call of life, there would have been no sweet and clear night to

⁶⁴ Gadda, *CD RRI* 573 and *AG* 6. I have amended Weaver’s translation: He replaces “Se ha ragione quest’altra” with “If the former wins,” thus making it the “finalità etica” rather than “carnale benevolenza” to initiate a new series of events and a new bud on the teleological pole. In my reading of the passage, instead, it is “carnal benevolence” to initiate the new series of events. As I explain above, this is apparent from the context, since the employment of Pedro Mahagones despite his (feigned) deafness is a charitable exception to the ethical imperative that night guards have perfect hearing. It is this exception that initiates a new sequence of events. Manzotti’s commentary, in *CD ECC*, 14 supports this interpretation. The novel’s critique of Italian fascism in the guise of Maradagàl rests in part in its exploration of the ethical implications of an “ethical finality” that is set against “carnal benevolence.”

⁶⁵ Gadda, *CD RRI* 573 and *AG* 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, *CD RRI* 573 and *AG* 6.

welcome the quiet of the holiday. And so future skies await the workings of charity).⁶⁷

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 in its treatment of Gonzalo: "La madre avrebbe dovuto strozzarlo, se avesse avuto la pietà e la rettitudine della pantera" ("His mother should have strangled him, if she had had the pity and rectitude of a panther").⁶⁸ Unlike Leopardi, Gonzalo never does fulfill his literary ambition, for he is incapable of completing his work, a novel, and cannot bear the *dì di festa*.⁶⁹ Charity on the part of the mother from Recanati is good for literature: it allows for a continued raveling that ultimately produces the redemptive moment of Leopardi's *dolce e chiara notte*. The Signora's charity toward Gonzalo, on the other hand, produces no such moment: his novel is never written—and even if it were, it would be composed, like his other writings, of gluey prose that no one reads.

In the passages that we have just examined, ethics and charity are caught between two horticultural metaphors and between models of filial sacrifice and maternal compassion. In the case of the deaf night watchman, charity acts to unravel the *garbuglio* and bring forth a new bud. In other passages, suicide is likened to the gardener's work of pruning imperfect fronds and, by extension, of cutting short unworthy lives. That this "ethical" work is the preferred outcome in these notes 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 women, 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 these iterations of ethical aim, charity here would enable poetry by allowing for the survival of a sickly count from Recanati. In Gonzalo's 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, "il bacio bugiardo della Parvenza."

The permutations of the Hamlet theme, then, consist of oscillations between "ethics" and "charity," between negation and non-negation, and even between the figures of tree and fabric. We have seen how the tension between these terms structures *La cognizione* and how the essay "Carabattole a Porta Ludovica" settles—however sardonically—on charity and non-negation in its exaltation of the Milanese market, making the "istinto di serbare" not a pathological condition, like the recently defined 'hoarding disorder,' or a troubled desire, like that of Gonzalo for a "possession" that would subtract him from language and from the social, but an axiom guiding the circulation of objects. *La cognizione*, instead, does not settle on "ethics" or "charity," or on the biopolitical and narrative implications each term carries. There is, however, some semantic stability in the oscillations insofar as we might apply to them Detective Ingravallo's famous "tarda riedizione Italica del vieto 'cherchez la femme': "ch'i femmene se retroveno addò n'i vuò truvà" ("belated Italian revision of the trite '*cherchez la femme*': "you're sure to

⁶⁷ Gadda, *CD ECC*, 558; my translation.

⁶⁸ Gadda, *CD ECC*, 530; my translation. Bertone cites this passage and, more broadly, the theme labeled by the Virgilian verse: "cui non risere parentes" as an example of maternal sadism used to justify the (specter of) matricide in both *La cognizione* and *Novella seconda*. Bertone, "Murderous Desires," 122-3. On the "cui non risere parentes" theme, see also Alessio Ceccherelli, "Un 'religioso rispetto': Leopardi in Gadda," in *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies: Monographs* 2 (2002), and Elio Gioanola, 159-72.

⁶⁹ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 734-5.

find skirts where you don't want to find them"), that is, a gendered figure presides over the rejected pole, whichever that may be.⁷⁰

The permutations of the Hamlet theme, which make woman both a vile whore and a ruthless patriot who would sacrifice her own son for some *finalità etica*, anticipate the vitriol of the 1967 *Eros e Priapo: Da furore a cenere*, where the critique of fascism often takes the form of an attack on woman.⁷¹ In the treatise, Gadda ridicules pronatalist policy as follows: "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'" ("The marriage prize was set up so they'd make children: children, children, children, many children, infinite children, to send them to die in war, war, war, war, against the crimes crimes crimes of England England England England").⁷² Sending their infinite sons off to die in war, the fascist mothers of *Eros e Priapo*, ruthless as the panther of the manuscript note discussed above, are: "Pronte ad offrire il figlio e il fratello a la Patria" ("Ready to offer [their] son and brother up to the fatherland").⁷³ We might note, however, that while these fascist mothers of *Eros e Priapo* are objects 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 faults fascist mothers not for sacrificing their sons, but for sacrificing the best genetic specimens: "A morire andarono dunque i più forti, i più feroci, i più belli, i più geneticamente validi" ("Going off to die thus went the strongest, most ferocious, most handsome, the most genetically fit").⁷⁴ The "ethics" of Maradagàl, then, inform Gadda's critique of fascism in *Eros e Priapo*.

In *La cognizione*, the specter of a fascist mother who would sacrifice her sons to the *finalità etica* of the *patria* appears to Gonzalo in a dream. During Higuera's visit, 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 finalit , ogni possibilit , si era impietrata nel buio" ("The years were past! When we could love our mother... caress her...Oh! Help her. Every finality, every possibility, had turned to stone in the

⁷⁰ Gadda, *QP RR II*, 17, AM 6.

⁷¹ In the editorial notes to *Eros e Priapo* in *Saggi, giornali, favole e altri scritti II*, ed. Vela, Gianmarco Gaspari, Pinotti, Franco Gavazzoni, Isella, Maria Antonietta Terzoli, (Milan: Garzanti, 208), 993-1023, Pinotti chronicles a writing process that began between 1944 and 1945. The belated, if vitriolic, critique of fascism in the 1967 treatise is typical of Gadda's affective relationship to the regime, which Dombroski has characterized as one of great enthusiasm followed by greater disillusionment. See Dombroski "Gadda and Fascism," in *Creative Entanglements*, 117-34. Until the publication of Dombrowski's *L'esistenza ubbidiente* (Naples: Guida, 1984) and Peter Hainsworth's "Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Gadda," in Bertone and Dombroski, 221-41, Gadda was generally considered to have borne a quietly dissimulated disdain for the regime, vented in his postwar writing. This critical tendency owes much to the antifascism of Gadda's postwar works and to his self-fashioning—particularly in an often-cited 1968 interview with Maraini that dates his disillusionment with fascism to 1934. See Gadda, "Per favore mi lasci nell'ombra:" *Interviste 1950-1972*, ed. Vela (Milan: Adelphi, 1993), 154-74. Hainsworth and Dombroski, instead, set out evidence of overt support for the regime—from as early as 1922 until as late as 1943. Recent studies by Chiara Ferrari, *The Rhetoric of Violence and Sacrifice in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 77-107; Bertone, introduzione to *I littoriali del lavoro e altri scritti giornalistici, 1932-1941*, by Gadda, ed. Bertone (Pisa: ETS, 2005), 7-39; Vanni Clodomiro, "Gadda di fronte al fascismo," *Studi piacentini*, no. 32 (2002) 43-74; and Giuseppe Papponetti, *Gadda-D'Annunzio e il lavoro italiano* (Rome: Fondazione Ignazio Silone, 2002) build on and add nuance to Hainsworth and Dombroski's work by offering more detailed discussions of Gadda's early journalistic writings in support of fascism.

⁷² Gadda, *Eros e Priapo* (EP) in *SGF II*, 213-374, 248.

⁷³ Ibid., 301. On the theme of Gonzalo as a failed martyr, see Ferrari, *The Rhetoric of Violence and Sacrifice*, 77-107.

⁷⁴ Gadda, *Saggi, giornali, favole e altri scritti II*, 297.

darkness”).⁷⁵ The Signora fleetingly appears to Gonzalo in the dream as a silent, motionless figure: “Veturia, forse, la madre immobile di Coriolano, velata...” (“Veturia, maybe, the motionless mother of Coriolanus, veiled.”).⁷⁶ 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*.⁷⁷ In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Volumnia recalls her pride at learning of her son’s victories in the Volscian town of Corioles. When her daughter-in-law, Virgilia, asks, “But had he died in the business, madam; how then?” Volumnia 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.⁷⁸

Volumnia’s willingness to lose eleven dear sons to war anticipates Gadda’s fascist mothers, who would have “figli: figli, figli, figli, tanti figli, infiniti figli, da mandarli a morire nella guerra, guerra, guerra, guerra.” 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” (“But she wasn’t the mother of Coriolanus! Oh! The veil didn’t dispel my obscure certainty: it didn’t mask her from my grief”).⁷⁹ The apparition of Veturia—who exploits filial love to dissuade Coriolanus from leading the Volscian attack of Rome and thus leads her son to death—gives way to a more lasting picture of grief or guilt. The novel’s oscillations between “to be and not to be,” “to subscribe and not to subscribe,” and a being that is shared (“io”) or possessed (“mio”) seem to ultimately find sober resolution in the former. Indeed, by the novel’s close, it is clear that the dream presages not the Signora’s betrayal by sacrificing her son, but her death—which, as we have seen, comes to be aligned with “to be,” with narrative buds and with charity, but also with 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.”

(“And in the house there remained something of mine, of mine, something that had been saved... [...] The law’s delays had been concluded. Time had been consumed! Everything, in the darkness, was stony memory... definitive idea,

⁷⁵ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 632-3 and *AG* 82.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 633 and 83.

⁷⁷ Gadda may have used the name from Plutarch’s account, but it is almost certain that he would have read Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. *La cognizione* is dense with allusions to Shakespeare plays—particularly *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Julius Caesar*.

⁷⁸ William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1994), I.iii.

⁷⁹ Gadda, *CD RRI*, 633 and 83.

beyond erasure. Receipts... that everything, everything was mine! Mine!
Finally... like remorse”).⁸⁰

This final moment is when possessions become hoards, when investments become useless. It is the deeply cynical moment when the digressions finally arrive nowhere and the *groviglio* is transformed into a phylogenetic tree, the moment evaded by the junk at Porta Ludovica.

We have seen how the two vital figures for Gadda's narrative production—the *garbuglio* and the phylogenetic tree—are used to rewrite what Dombroski calls the novel's "ethical dilemma" in a negative eugenicist key. The oscillations between and contaminations of "la finalità etica" and "la carnale benevolenza," negation and non-negation, and to be and not to be are set out with the figures of tree and tangle. The layers of figuration, however, are so thick and the terms so unstable that we must understand the manuscript notes and the corresponding passages in the novel as tentative explorations and variations on a theme. Though, as we have seen, there is indeed some semantic stability in the consistent rejection of women. Through these figures, Gadda explores forms of subtraction like those Gonzalo articulates in his tirade against personal pronouns. Understanding the retreat from the social and the rejection of language as a kind of "possession," Gonzalo's rant evokes the "istinto di serbare" Gadda finds at the Porta Ludovica flea market and the broken-down objects he describes. Sharing such images of worn-out matter is the hoarder, whom Bennett considers to be a paradigmatic vital materialist. For her, the hoarder's recognition of a protean agency that collapses distinctions between human and nonhuman matter constitutes an ethics that might counter the losses inherent to a political economy propelled by planned obsolescence, as well as caesura of personhood that enable such "ethics" as those of Maradagàl.

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⁸⁰ Ibid.

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