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Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics



Objects and Object Fetishism in Italian Short Stories: 1930-1959

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
April 2021



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## **Objects and Object Fetishism in Italian Short Stories: 1930-1959**

The subject of this thesis is the literary representation of objects and of the phenomenon of object fetishism in Italian short stories written between 1930 and 1959. The examination of the recurrence and representation of these motifs offers both a viable route for an exploration of the impact on literature of the rise of material culture during this period of modern Italian history, and a deeper understanding of the expressive modalities adopted to depict that culture.

The interpretative approach adopted in this study is both critical and theoretical. It hinges upon a selection of four different theoretical frameworks, which conceive of the ideas of objects and of the phenomenon of object fetishism in radically different ways. Each chapter is centred on one theoretical approach and uses it to undertake textual analyses of short stories by Dino Buzzati, Italo Calvino, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Tommaso Landolfi, Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia, and Anna Maria Ortese. This thesis also shows how the application of the selected theoretical approaches can fit with the existing critical literature on the authors, whilst simultaneously providing more complex and refined considerations on the texts.

Following these premises, the thesis is articulated in five chapters. The introduction lays out the historical, cultural, and literary background of the period. Chapter One applies psychoanalytical theories to texts by Morante, Ortese, and Calvino. Chapter Two is based on the application of Marxism-derived theoretical parameters to the analysis of texts by Gadda and Moravia. Chapter Three adopts a new materialist approach to the study of short stories by Landolfi and Buzzati. Chapter Four considers dust and rubbish theories and discusses them in reference to texts by Gadda and Calvino. These chapters are followed by a conclusion.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis would have not been possible without the help, support, love, and encouragement that I was offered by the people around me. First of all, I would like to thank Keith Sykes, Pembroke College, and the Italian Section at the University of Cambridge for giving me the unique and precious opportunity to be part of such a vibrant, friendly, and intellectually stimulating community, in both my MPhil and PhD. I thank my supervisor, Dr Pierpaolo Antonello, for his help, feedback, perseverance, and accuracy in reading my work throughout these years. I wish to express my gratitude to my examiners, Prof Robert S. C. Gordon and Prof Florian Mussnug, for their thoroughness, their accuracy, for the attention with which they read my thesis and the insightful feedback they provided me with during my viva.

This journey would have not been the same without Mara Josi, who has made Cambridge feel more like home and whose friendship, love, intelligence, and sensitivity have illuminated and enriched this long and winding path. I am grateful for the ‘amiche storiche’ in Italy and for the new friends who have shared part of their journey with me at different stages: Roberto Binetti, Ollie Batey, and Damien Pollard. I wish to thank Richard Cook for the help and encouragement I received in the last crucial months of my degree.

My experience as a Master and Doctoral student would have been completely different without Mick Bonnington—his love, unfaltering encouragement, patience, intellectual input, and human generosity have made him a precious travel companion throughout this journey. Finally, I would like to express my endless love and gratefulness for my family, who have always been there for me, who have always encouraged me to be strong, and whose sacrifices, patience, and love have allowed me to be where I am today. To them I dedicate this thesis.



## INTRODUCTION

### 1. An Overview on Fetishism

The subject of this thesis is the literary representation of objects and of the phenomenon of object fetishism in Italian short stories written between 1930 and 1959. The examination of the recurrence and representation of these motifs offers both a viable route for an exploration of the impact on literature of the rise of material culture during this period of modern Italian history, and a deeper understanding of the expressive modalities adopted to depict that culture.

The study of material culture in the Italian context has long been limited to the pre-modern period. Since its expansion into the study of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, the critical and theoretical investigation of objects has long been dominated by the model offered by Francesco Orlando's *Oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura: rovine, reliquie, rarità, robaccia, luoghi inabitati e tesori nascosti* (henceforth *Oggetti desueti*), published in 1993. Orlando's work is based on the idea that 'il rapporto fra 'uomo e le cose occupa in ciò che chiamiamo letteratura un posto ben più importante di quanto pensiamo di solito' (Orlando 1993, 5). Following a structuralist approach, he applies psychoanalytical and Marxist ideas to the study of the used, dysfunctional, and worn-out things appearing in the Italian and European texts forming his corpus. According to Orlando, literature is 'apertamente o segretamente concessiva, indulgente, parziale, solidale o complice verso tutto quanto incontra *distanza, diffidenza, ripugnanza, rifiuto, condanna fuori dalle sue finzioni*' (8). In other words, literature becomes the space for the return of the repressed, because it 'ha in permanenza il valore di un negativo fotografico della positività delle culture da cui emana; e come archivio storico, non ha eguali nella somma di tutti gli altri documenti' (8).<sup>1</sup> The study of 'il ritorno del represso [...] incarnato e incorporato nelle cose' (9), then, has allowed Orlando to devise transhistorical and transnational categories, which can be productively applied to a variety of contexts. The popularity and the usefulness of the theories exposed in *Oggetti desueti* lie in their capability to help the formulation of historical, cultural, and literary considerations through the employment of the twelve categories Orlando identifies as embracing the different functions of worn-out objects in literary texts.

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<sup>1</sup> In 'Repression' ([1915] 2001) Sigmund Freud states, 'the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious' (2001, 147). When an event is particularly traumatising, the individual expels it from his or her consciousness and, indeed, represses it. In adult life, such traumatic memories can come back and represent the so-called 'return of the repressed'. For a discussion of the Freudian notion of the return of the repressed, see Boag (2006).

Driven by similar interests but with a narrower scope, Massimo Fusillo's *Feticci: letteratura, cinema, arti visive* (2012) has added to the body of critical and theoretical literature on the theme of objects and object fetishism through a comparative analysis of textual and visual works that deal with, and problematise, the idea of fetishism. Unlike Orlando's study on useless things, Fusillo's work looks at fetishised objects, and more specifically at objects that conceal a creative function. As he writes in the Introduction 'il motivo portante [della ricerca] è il legame profondo che sussiste tra feticismo e creatività artistica [...] il feticismo lavora sempre sul dettaglio: lo valorizza, lo infinitizza, fa entrare nel suo microcosmo un intero macrocosmo di emozioni e narrazioni' (Fusillo 2012, 9). Fusillo's methodological approach is far from structuralist, it does not attempt the systematisation of the type of objects found in literary texts. Instead, it is more interested in proposing the critical re-evaluation of the conceptual productivity of fetishism. Although the subdivision of the book into chapters devoted to the study of the different functions of the fetishised objects can give an impression of rigidity, Fusillo's book offers a fluid structure, which has served as an inspiration for this research.

The theoretical approaches that both Orlando and Fusillo's works use have served as a paradigm for this thesis, which, like its models, aims to investigate the ways in which objects and the phenomenon of object fetishism are depicted in literary texts. While the studies by Orlando and Fusillo have inevitably contributed to the conception of this work, their theoretical approaches now look rather limited, being either extremely rigid, as was the case for Orlando, or mainly centred on the psycho-analytical notion of fetishism, albeit a revisited one, as was the case for Fusillo. Neither of them programmatically expanded on the critical literature relevant to the literary texts that they investigated. Though this thesis draws on both studies, the intention is to detach from them and expand on the idea of fetishism through the input of new philosophical and epistemological approaches, as well as through the formulation of new critical considerations of the corpus of literary texts considered. However, in order to fully understand the theoretical novelty proposed here, it is necessary to describe the development of the phenomenon of fetishism from its origin.<sup>2</sup>

The word fetishism comes from the Portuguese *fetisso* with which colonisers described the idols used for religious purposes by African peoples. Böhme describes the origin and development of this word as follows:

The word *fetisso* is rooted in the Latin *factitius*, 'the manufactured' as opposed to the natural and the grown (*terrigenus*). [...] Fetishes were therefore understood as artificially produced things (it was only noticed later that natural objects and living beings could also be elevated

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed theoretical and historical analysis of this phenomenon in its various declinations, see Böhme's study (2014).

to become fetishes). The words *feitiço*, *feitiçaria*, *feitiçeiro* develop in sixteenth century Portuguese, followed by the Spanish *fetichior* or *fechiceria*; *fechura* (= magical production); *fechizo* (= magical object), *fechicero* (= magician). *Fetish*/*fétiche*/*Fetisch* are all loanwords from Portuguese, borrowed by authors from outside the Portuguese empire, disseminated throughout the Northern European languages primarily by the Dutch. (Böhme 2014, 140, emphasis in the original)

In its nature and in its origins, the idea of fetishism is intertwined with the notion of idolatry, and it was used to indicate the rituals and the practices of early, colonised populations.<sup>3</sup>

The use of this concept extended beyond the field of anthropology and religion and began to be used in the nineteenth and twentieth century in the field of philosophy and in the growing psychoanalytical domain. This is shown famously in the use that Karl Marx made of this term in his work *Das Kapital* (1867). Here, Marx dealt with the economic implications of ‘commodity fetishism’ and with its relevance to the capitalist system. According to the philosopher, as soon as a product becomes a commodity, it is invested with transcendental qualities which are not linked to the inherent features of the product, but rather correspond to the monetary value of the object itself. By being appointed an abstract exchange value, or price, the commodity loses its connection with the human labourer who produced it and undergoes a process of fetishisation. Not recognising their connection to the commodity, the labourers are alienated from it, and end up being subjugated to a system that obliges them to buy what belongs to them in the first place. Once again, the term fetishism is employed in its anthropological and religious connotations, insofar as Marx intended to compare the arbitrariness of the exchange value appointed to the commodity to the sacred power projected onto idols and religious paraphernalia. This arbitrary and supposedly mystical process is rejected by Marx. He thus identified fetishism as a negative and degrading phenomenon, locating his definition alongside the judgment offered by the anthropological and, as will be shown, psychoanalytical approaches.

Alfred Binet’s *Le fétichisme dans l’amour* ([1887] 2000) and Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* ([1894] 2012) are amongst the first works to discuss the notion of fetishism in psychoanalytical terms.<sup>4</sup> Krafft-Ebing overtly borrows the word ‘fetishism’ to indicate a sexual phenomenon similar to the religious practices of fetishism: ‘analogies with religious fetichism are always discernible; for, in the latter, the most insignificant objects (hair, nails, bones, etc.) become at times fetiches which produce feelings of delight and even ecstasy’ (Krafft-Ebing 2012, 17). The association

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the following proto-anthropological works: De Brosses ([1760] 1972), Waitz, ([1864] 2011), and Müller ([1892] 2016). Later works on fetishism include Durkheim, ([1912] 1957), and Mauss ([1925] 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Böhme discusses the origin and the ‘prehistory’ of sexual fetishism in his article (2001).

between religious custom and sexual behaviour remained relatively strong until the theorisations offered by Sigmund Freud, who detached the religious from the sexual sphere and dealt with fetishism as an independent psychoanalytical phenomenon.

In ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ ([1905] 2001) and then more extensively in ‘On Fetishism’ ([1927] 2001), Freud explains how fetishism is based on a process of substitution.<sup>5</sup> The child perceives the mother’s sexual organs to be the result of a castration. He<sup>6</sup> fears that he will be subjected to the same emasculation and puts in place defence mechanisms to fight off this fear. One of the most common and successful mechanisms, Freud argues, is selecting sexual substitutes. Once grown into a man, the subject no longer addresses his sexual attention to the woman’s sexual organs, which he perceives purely as a lack of penis thereby reminding him of his fear of castration, but rather concentrates on another, external object, commonly furry or made of leather. This inanimate thing becomes the new addressee of his sexual interest and, differently from the woman’s sexual organ, does not remind the fetishist of the threat of castration. By describing this phenomenon as a perversion or deviation, Freud agrees with the previous examples of Binet and Krafft-Ebing who interpreted fetishism as a degrading practice, but he detaches it from the religious sphere. In this way, his theorisations further reinforce the derogatory view of this behaviour previously shared by the anthropological works.

Freud’s contributions paved the way for subsequent psychoanalytical studies. Jacques Lacan (1956) revisits the concept of fetishism within the conceptual registers that form the structure of human psyche which he named the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. In doing so, he also stresses the linguistic component of fetishism and its repercussions on the sexual sphere.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Octave Mannoni’s ‘Je sais bien, mais quand même.’ in *Clefs pour l’imaginaire ou L’autre scène* (1969, 9-33) discusses the linguistic and rhetorical structure of the fetishistic phenomenon, introducing the ‘déli’ and its corollary, the ‘demi-croire’ (Lambert 2013, 19). Later psychologists, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, look at the importance that objects can have in children’s development. Klein formulates the ‘Object Relations Theory’, which she develops throughout her study *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* ([1932] 1975), and focuses on how the relationship the child can establish with an object<sup>8</sup> plays a fundamental part in his or her psychological development and capability of forming interpersonal relationships. Likewise, Donald Winnicott’s ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional

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<sup>5</sup> Böhme, however, shows that the interest in fetishist perversion is actually ever-present in the psychoanalyst’s work. See Böhme’s chapter ‘Fetishism and Psychoanalysis’, in (2014, 313-326), partly discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> Initially, fetishism was conceived exclusively as a ‘male’ pathology. Only recently, studies such as Apter (1991), Krips, (1999), Fedi (2002), and Fernbach, (2002) are indicative of a new conception of fetishism in feminist terms. For more details, see Fusillo’s overview in (2012, 15-33).

<sup>7</sup> See Böhme (2014, 336).

<sup>8</sup> With this word, Klein also indicates people or body parts. For more on this, see Klein ([1932] 1975).

Phenomena' (1953) argues that the relation with toys helps the child discern the difference between reality and imagination, and contributes to his or her psychological growth (the 'transition' of the title), and capability to distinguish the concrete from the abstract world.

In both the Italian and the international contexts, the productivity inherent in these theories of fetishism started to be applied to other disciplines, cultural studies being exemplary of this. Leo Bersani (1986) investigates the connection between figurative arts, literature and sexuality through a comparative study of French and Italian texts and visual art products. Emily Apter's (1991), Emily Apter and William Pietz's (1993), and Laura Mulvey's (1993) studies are staple examples of the fruitfulness of this concept in fields like literature and film studies. In the Italian context, other than the studies by Francesco Orlando and Massimo Fusillo, we find Mario Perniola's famous *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico* (1994), which discusses the issue of objects in contemporary art practices and scientific discourse, Remo Bodei's *La vita delle cose* (2009), which explores the inextricable link uniting men and objects throughout history and philosophy.

Similarly to the fruitfulness of Freud's studies on fetishism, Marx's work served as a springboard for the formulation of more theories on the idea of fetishism which also stressed its importance in the context of historical materialism. The Frankfurt School, for example, re-elaborated, developed, and expanded on Marxist ideas, including the notion of fetishism. Walter Benjamin's numerous essays and works such as *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* ([1935] 2002) or the unfinished *Arcades Project* ([1940] 2002) explored to different degrees the relationship between modernity, mass-production, cultural production, and fetishism. Likewise, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer illustrated the commodification and fetishisation of culture in the 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002, 63-93), showing how the consumption of mass-produced cultural goods goes hand in hand with the spread of fetishism in mass-society.

Like psychoanalysis, Marxism was applied to different disciplines throughout the twentieth century. This was the case for French social scientists gathered around the Parisian École Pratique des Hautes Études, like Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. Barthes' *The Fashion System* ([1967] 1990) and Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* ([1968] 1996), for example, combine Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiology with the study of the circulation and impact of mass-produced objects in contemporary French society. Other examples of works such as these might include Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgment of Taste* ([1979] 1996), a study on the relationship between taste and social class, or Guy Debord's theorisations on the spectacularisation of consumption in *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2014). Both Bourdieu and Debord will be discussed below.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For analyses of these authors see Böhme's chapter on Marxism (2014, 223-295).

Both the psychoanalytical and the Marxist frameworks, and before them the anthropological theories, consider fetishism in derogatory terms, as if it were symptomatic of moral corruption, sexual perversion, or the progressive imposition of a capitalist productive system. In the past thirty years, however, this prejudicial attitude has started to shift. Understanding fetishism solely as a perversion or a superstition is now seen to sabotage its productivity, flatten out the complexity that it conceals, and prevent it from being a key to the interpretation of the modern relationships that individuals have established with the world of objects. Fetishism is thus being redefined as a new interpretative model which can offer novel and unexpected insights into a wide range of cultural products and phenomena. It is for this reason that scholars such as Bruno Latour (1993, 2011), Michel Serres (1980), Hartmut Böhme (2014) and, in the Italian context, Gillo Dorfles (1988), Mario Perniola (1994), and Remo Bodei (2009) propose a redefinition of this idea.

In *Fetishism and Culture* (2014), Böhme emphasises the pervasiveness of fetishistic practices in everyday life, in order to show the discrepancies between its capillary dissemination in our day-to-day lives and our hostile attitude towards it. Acknowledgment of this contradictory state of affairs is accompanied by an invitation to accept and normalise fetishism, since:

[T]he real reason we are no longer permitted to identify anything negative in fetishism, and perhaps the reason for the desire to abolish the term altogether, is directly related to the fact that its practice has exploded in precisely the same way that the number of things has. No theory of modernity could be more wrong than one which identifies modernisation with a linear increase in rationality. (Böhme 2014, 10)

The rising circulation of commodities and their consequent pervasiveness result in their increasing penetration into everyday practices. Contact between commodities and consumers becomes inescapable, and commodities are moved into yet another sphere in which ‘the average person extend[s] the borders of his or herself into more and more’ (Böhme 2014, 5). The social and psychological life of consumers is altered by the presence of things, which begin to be relevant social and cultural presences or, indeed, fetishes.

Following this thought, Böhme writes, ‘[w]hile premodern forms and institutions of magic, myth and cult, religion and festivities begin to disappear in the modern era, *the energies and needs bound up within them do not*. Instead, they are released and now pervade all levels of modern social systems’ (8, my emphasis). The gradual dismantling of myths and religious rituals in modern times does not bring about the elimination of fetishism, because “‘God is dead’ does not pave the way to a secular society, *but rather to the awakening of countless thousands of new gods*’ (9, my emphasis). In this

process, the increasing circulation of mass-produced goods acquires new significance. As the quantity of mass-produced things increases, so does the number of appendages onto which to project the ‘energies and needs’ previously channelled into religious and spiritual practices, even though they are no longer acknowledged as ‘sacred’. The growing circulation of commodities has more than merely economic consequences: their significance transcends their apparently banal concreteness, and affects human subjects not only in emotional but also in spiritual and religious ways. It is only the appearance of rationalism that has increased. The old superstitions have not disappeared; they have taken a new form.

The idea of a modern form of superstition lies at the core of other studies of modernity and fetishism, like Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and ‘Fetish/Factish’ (2011). Not only does Latour share the view that fetishism lies in modern social practices – although it has changed the forms in which it manifests – but he goes so far as to claim that the traditional notion of fetishism and subject-object relations should be revisited and radically altered. He proposes an ontological revision of the relation between subjects and objects, re-defining that relation in terms of intersubjectivities and hybrids. Rather than ontologically and hierarchically separated entities, subjects and objects can be seen as a continuum of *being*, whose relation is grounded on mutual exchange and osmosis.<sup>10</sup> While in psychoanalytical, anthropological, and Marxist thought, fetishism was seen as a disorder based on the unjustified attention and love addressed to inanimate objects, Latour’s point of view radically changes the perspective on the matter. When the separation between subjects and objects is no longer clearly defined, to the extent that the two blend into each other, the understanding of a fetish as something outside the subject, clearly separated from it, and ontologically subordinate to it, needs revision.

The theoretical position held by Latour and other contemporary schools of thought, and their distance from the anthropological, psychoanalytical, and Marxist ideas of fetishism has important conceptual and structural repercussions for this thesis. Conceptually speaking, when the fetishist subject and fetishised objects are ontologically enmeshed, the notion of fetishism becomes redundant. The human emotional and ontological attachment with the object is a given, according to these schools of thought. Fetishism is such an integral element of our day-to-day lives that pointing it out becomes banal. In this thesis, then, an effort has been made to reflect this conceptual shift. Chapters One and Two adopt a traditional definition of fetishism, which is based on a clear distinction between subjects and objects and on the human subject’s unusual attachment to an inanimate object. Chapters Three and Four, instead, problematise this distinction and the perception of objects as inanimate altogether,

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the development of Latour’s thought, see Böhme (2014, 49-68). Latour will be discussed again in Chapter Three in reference to the new materialist school of thought.

sharing Latour's point of view and showing the inadequacy of a traditional understanding of this phenomenon to describe the osmotic relation humans entertain with things.

The problematisation of the categories of subjects and objects, and of their relation in the ways proposed by Latour and Böhme, represents only a small part of the rich and ever-growing philosophical and theoretical debate on the theme. In recent years, new schools of thought have attempted to reframe the human-thing relationship in new terms. Richard Grusin offers an overview of these different approaches in *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015) which presents a far from easy picture of the intricacies of the different theoretical subdisciplines and the way in which they differ from one another.<sup>11</sup> What appears from Grusin's study is the diffraction of different philosophical approaches which is possible to adopt for the reinterpretation of the ontological and epistemological status of the human relationship with the 'thingly' world, and the impossibility of accounting for these new philosophies in their totality.

Other interesting ways have been found to look at the relationship with objects and these include the lens of what we could call 'material disorders'. Hoarding for example represents a theoretical framework to look at the relationship with the objective world. Rebecca Ruth Falkoff discusses this in her study (2021). Through an approach that considers both medical and cultural elements, Falkoff analyses the ways in which hoards and hoarders are portrayed in literary texts and visual products.

Alongside the debate on the different ways to conceive of the relationship between humans and the phenomenal reality, an equally thriving variety of studies is being produced on the theoretical possibilities offered by different materials, often decaying material. An illustrative example of this is the book series *Object Lessons*,<sup>12</sup> edited by Christopher Schaberg and Ian Bogost, the latter an exponent of Object-Oriented Ontology and author of *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (2012).<sup>13</sup> Each book in this series is devoted to the study of a particular type of materiality or of a decayed or alternative materiality, such as *Fat* (2020) by Hanne Blank, *Rust* (2018) by Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Souvenir* (2018) by Rolf Potts, and *Dust* (2016) by Michael Marder. These studies

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<sup>11</sup> Grusin lists: '(1) Actor-network theory, particularly Bruno Latour's career-long project to articulate technical mediation, nonhuman agency, and the politics of things (2) Affect theory [...] (3) Animal studies [...] (4) The assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze, Manuel De Landa, Latour, and others (5) New brain sciences [...] (6) The new materialism in feminism, philosophy, and Marxism (7) New media theory [...] (8) Varieties of speculative realism including object-oriented philosophy, neovitalism, and panpsychism' (Grusin 2015, viii). Grusin also acknowledges that his approach excludes the posthuman disciplines. This school of thought pursues the objective of redefining philosophical investigation by revisiting the notions of subjectivity, objectivity and 'human-ness'. More on these issues will be discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>12</sup> A catalogue of these works can be found at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/series/object-lessons/>.

<sup>13</sup> In *Alien Phenomenology: or, What It's Like to be a Thing*, Bogost defines Object-Oriented Ontology as a philosophy that 'puts things at the centre of being. We humans are elements, but not the sole elements of philosophical interest. OOO contends that nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally. [...] OOO draw[s] attention to things at all scales [...] and ponder[s] their nature and relation with one another as much with ourselves' (Bogost 2012, 6). For more on this, see Harman (2017).

are not only accounts of the relevance of these decaying materials from a cultural, aesthetic, and even social point of view, but they can be used as theoretical frameworks to analyse cultural products such as visual or literary texts.

The attention to material culture has expanded to the literary field too. Bill Brown's 'Thing Theory' (2001), and the issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled *Things* where it appeared, are exemplary of the spread of this interest in literary and philosophical contexts and invite reflection on what Fusillo calls the 'valori simbolici e sociali [delle cose] e sulla loro inspiegabile energia, che si rifrange sulla nostra vita emotiva' (Fusillo 2012, 31). By applying his considerations to English modernist texts, Brown demonstrates the productivity of an approach that looks at things and paves the way for a variety of works similarly interested in analogous kinds of investigation. Maurizia Boscagli's *Stuff Theory* (2014) is grounded on similar premises and investigates the recurrence of 'stuff' in literary and visual works. This kind of investigation has found application in recent years in the study of modern Italian literature.

As mentioned above, while the Italian panorama of the study of objects has long been limited to the study of things in pre-modern literature<sup>14</sup> and, for contemporary literature, has long been dominated by Orlando's *Oggetti desueti* (1993), more recent approaches have expanded the breadth of the subject. Among studies of the relevance of objects in literature, Gian Mario Anselmi and Gino Ruozzi (2008) use a thematic approach and offer reflections on the different objects that appear in literary texts; Paolo Bartoloni's work (2016) combines psychoanalytical concepts with cultural studies and includes different disciplines like photography and literature; Luca Cottini (2018) analyses the cultural, intellectual, and artistic impact of industrialisation; Epifanio Ajello's study (2019) offers examples of literary and philosophical depictions of things from Giovanni Boccaccio to Giorgio Agamben.

An interesting attempt at systematising the increasingly complex research field between Material Culture and Italian literature is offered by Rhiannon Daniels, Anne O' Connor, and Katherine Tycz's article 'Italian Material Cultures' (2020). In introducing and explaining the fruitfulness of a materialist framework, the authors provide an insight into the origin and development of this interest,<sup>15</sup> as well as identifying the latest studies on material culture in Italian studies and the exhibitions and

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<sup>14</sup> Daniels claims: 'some pre-modernists have arguably been attuned to the material for more than half a century, while scholars of later eras have only begun to pay concerted attention to materiality and its conceptualisation in the last decade' (Daniels et al. 2020, 2).

<sup>15</sup> According to Daniels, O' Connor, and Tycz: 'The timing of Italianist engagement with material culture has occurred at different moments amongst different sections of Italian Studies [...]. More recently, when this journal introduced a Cultural Studies issue in 2010, the editor, Derek Duncan, highlighted a commitment to understanding culture "in terms of its materiality, and to focusing on the conditions of its reception, or indeed consumption, as well as its production"[7]. Since then a wide variety of articles, often related to modern Italian culture, have been published in this journal focusing on objects such as simulacra, monuments, photos, fountains, statues, and a train station. Each of these articles pursues different cultural questions while nonetheless sharing a common consideration of materiality as a pivotal element of cultural construction' (Daniels et al. 2020, 2).

conferences on these topics,<sup>16</sup> thus showing the ever-increasing relevance and the profound versatility this subject has in the field of Italian Studies.

This thesis will place itself in this very rich theoretical panorama. However, rather than adopting a sole approach, as most of these works do, it will hinge upon a selection of four different theoretical frameworks and apply them to study a corpus of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian short stories. As these approaches all conceive of the ideas objects and of the phenomenon of object fetishism in radically different ways, this thesis will offer a methodological variety which has not been employed yet in the field of the study of contemporary Italian literature. Combining traditional and modern theoretical approaches, the unique methodological structure devised in these pages will present more nuanced and refined interpretations on the texts by echoing or diverging from the critical literature on the corpus.

## 2. Corpus

The selection of writers and texts in this thesis started from the collection of short stories *Racconti italiani del Novecento* (1983) edited by Enzo Siciliano, which offers a wide but incomplete overview of the production of short fiction in the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Siciliano's collection served as a preliminary to the establishment of possible research avenues and the pursuit of other authors, other collections, and other texts that were concerned with the representation of objects and were produced between 1930 and 1959. The selection eventually narrowed down to seven authors: Dino Buzzati (1906-1972), Italo Calvino (1923-1985), Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973), Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979), Elsa Morante (1912-1985), Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), and Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998).

The initial assessment of the corpus to investigate in this dissertation comprised of other texts by these seven authors or texts by other authors. This is the case for collections such as Carlo Emilio

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<sup>16</sup> In their article, Daniels, O'Connor, and Tycz list for example 'Chiasmi: Cultural Materials/Material Culture' at Harvard and Brown Universities (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 'Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities' (New York, 2016), and 'All Things Considered... Material Culture and Memory' (Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures at the University College Cork, Ireland, 2018). For a more detailed overview on the series of events organised in the field, see Rhiannon Daniels, Anne O'Connor and Katherine Tycz's 'Italian Material Cultures' (Daniels et al. 2020, 2).

<sup>17</sup> Other examples of recent anthologies of modern Italian short stories include Jhumpa Lahiri (2019), conceived as an anthology of Italian short stories for creative writing students and translated into English by Lahiri herself (see the *Introduzione* the collection), and *Racconti italiani del Novecento* (1990) curated by Vincenzo Viola and published by Einaudi Scuola. In both examples, it is interesting to note the pedagogical role often associated to the reading of short stories. For more on the tradition of anthological texts, see Lando (2015) which offers an overview until 1923 and, for a more general, institutional and historical study see, Dal Passo and Laurenti (2017).

Gadda's *La Madonna dei filosofi* (1931) and *Il castello di Udine* (1934), Anna Maria Ortese's *Angeli dolori* (1936), Alberto Moravia's *Racconti Romani* (1954), and Dino Buzzati's *Il crollo della Baliverna* (1954). Other works by other authors included Massimo Bontempelli's «522» *Racconto di una giornata* (1932), Natalia Ginzburg's *La strada che va in città e altri racconti* (1942), Alberto Savinio's *Casa «la Vita» e altri racconti* (1943) and *Tutta la vita* (1945), Alberto Arbasino's *Le piccole vacanze* (1957). These texts were not excluded because they do not contain significative objects. The final selection was made with the intention of guaranteeing a degree of variety in the type of object analysed and a coherence with the theoretical approach selected. For example, Chapter Three could have included a discussion of the cars and the furniture appearing in Savinio's and Bontempelli's works. This, however, would have created a repetition of the type of objects found in Buzzati's and Landolfi's texts. The final exclusions or inclusions of texts, then, were made with the aim to explore as many different objects as possible, and to avoid redundancy.

This selection of authors and texts must also be understood in conjunction with the chosen theoretical frameworks. Parallel to the study and selection of the primary texts, a more theoretical investigation took place. Its objective was the selection of frameworks that could be applied to the study of the objects found in the primary texts. The texts were chosen with the theoretical premises in mind, which meant selecting those writings that were thought to benefit the most from the theoretical insights offered by the frameworks. In turn, the theoretical approach was adapted and developed each time to better examine the dynamics in place in these texts. Texts and theories established a dialogue. Like interlocutors, they responded to each other's inputs and affected one another.

This process reveals the rationale behind the chapters in this thesis. Rather than using an author-specific approach, where one chapter deals with one author, this thesis is structured in textual clusters. The intention is to group texts that show similar interests in the depiction of things or texts that problematise the relationship with the objectual world in similar ways.<sup>18</sup> These theoretical approaches are the main hermeneutic tools for the textual analyses in the thesis, but critical literature is still important for the avoidance of misinterpretations or distortions of the texts. The same theoretical approach could have included more texts by the same authors. Vice versa, the same text might offer cues to be analysed in other frameworks offered here. All the interpretative possibilities, however, could not be undertaken within the limits of this thesis. The structure of this thesis, which responds to both theoretical and textual requirements, can thus find further application to other texts and other authors.

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<sup>18</sup> A case in point are the epistemological interests shared by both Carlo Emilio Gadda and Italo Calvino, who both had a scientific background and informed their writing with an ideological and philosophical system profoundly influenced by science. This discipline had direct consequences in their depiction of objects, in that things often become one of the vehicles *par excellence* to convey and illustrate the epistemological systems underlying their works. Similarities such as these can be found across the various writers composing the corpus, which contribute to its cohesion and coherence.

## 2.1 Critical Overview of the Corpus

This section will be devoted to an overview of the critical literature of the authors under examination and is divided into two subsections. The first part will introduce Calvino, Gadda and Moravia, whose selected texts can be considered realistic when compared to the short stories chosen from the collections of Buzzati, Landolfi, Morante and Ortese, presented in the second part of this overview. The sequence in which these authors are presented here is alphabetical and does not reflect the order in which they are discussed in this thesis.

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Critical work on Italo Calvino's short stories is limited when compared to secondary literature on the longer fiction. The main study of the short fiction remains *Difficult Games* (1990) by Franco Ricci. Works such as Dana Renga's (2003), Ulla Musarra-Schröder's (1996), Martin McLaughlin, Birgitte Grundtvig and Lene Waage Petersen's (2007) and Vito Santoro's (2012) have dealt with different collections and aspects like semiology, photography, cinema, and socio-economics. Though holding an important position in Franco Ricci's work, the theme of objects has only partially attracted critical attention and it has never received systematic analysis. A more recent critical strand has studied the decayed and disposed-of objects within the context of eco-criticism. This is the case for works like Niccolò Scaffai's (2017), Serenella Iovino's (2013, 2017) and Elisabetta Rattalino's dissertation (2018), which have focused on the relationship between man and the environment and have used rubbish as a lens through which to observe this rapport. Following on both these tracks, this thesis will show the relevance of Calvino's objects in examples taken from the collection *Gli amori difficili*, in *I racconti* (1958) in Chapter One and the epistemological role played by rubbish in instances from *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1949) and *I racconti* (1958) in Chapter Four.

Whereas the interpretation of the poetics of objects represents a relatively restricted area of the scholarly discussion of Calvino, this is not the case for Carlo Emilio Gadda, given the significant quantity of things which appear in his writings. *The Edinburgh Journal for Gadda Studies* represents a resourceful and unique tool for the investigation of this theme in the author's work, because it offers a wide array of critical works on both Gadda's shorter fiction as well as on the objects in it. This is the case for articles like Federico Bertoni's 'Gioielli' (2002), and Rinaldo Rinaldi's 'Oggetti' (2008). A great deal of attention has been addressed to the psychoanalytical implications of the objects appearing in the author's texts, as Elio Gioanola (2004) observed which shows the fruitfulness of a

psychoanalytical and objectual approach in the exegesis of Gadda's work. Alongside more traditional and established scholarship, more recent studies like Rebecca Ruth Falkoff's article 'Carlo Emilio Gadda's Junk and Other Vibrant Matter in Milan and Maradagàl' (2014) have paved the way for new research avenues, which have shifted the attention to other forms of materiality that appear in the author's work. In Falkoff's study, critical attention is no longer addressed to objects *per se*, but rather to their accumulation in these texts. The critical and theoretical approach to the author's work in this thesis will move in similar directions. In Chapter Two, the depiction of socially connoted objects becomes indicative of the characters belonging, or desire to belong, to a certain social class. In Chapter Four, the progressive decay and eventual pulverisation of objects has important epistemological implications.

In Alberto Moravia's works, objects have often been interpreted as indicators of social status. This is the case for Bruno Basile (1982, 121-172), Luciano Parisi (2008), Ugo Dotti (2012), and Annibale Rainone (2014), to name a few. These works detect the presence of socially connoting objects in the writer's work, and consequently highlight the author's position in relationship to the bourgeoisie. Works such as Alessandra Grandelis' (2016) interpret the writer's representation of objects as directly linked to his pictorial interests and to his being a representative of the modernist sensitivity. Far from making any attempt to label Moravia, as Grandelis does, this dissertation further investigates the material presence and the relevance of 'things' in the short stories taken from the collections entitled *La bella vita* (1935) and *L'imbroglione* (1937), both collected in the volume *Romanzi e racconti 1927-1940* (2000).

Elsa Morante, Dino Buzzati, Tommaso Landolfi, and Anna Maria Ortese have often been understood as writers who used fantastic or magical realistic expressive modes, especially in their short fiction. The relevant critical literature is thus often linked to the genre of the fantastic.

Dino Buzzati's short stories have indeed been interpreted extensively in the context of the fantastic. Stefano Lazzarin's (2002, 2008 a, 2008b), Lenka Papoušková's (2009), and Silvia Zangrandi's (2014) studies are exemplary of this type of investigation. The depiction of the objectual world presented in Buzzati's fiction has been partly investigated by Lydia Pavan (1994), Maria Polesana (1997), and Stefano Lazzarin (2008). The new materialist point of view, which will be used to analyse Buzzati's short stories, has yet to be employed for the interpretation of the objects in the shorter fiction selected here. This thesis considers examples from the collections *In quel preciso momento* (1950) and *Sessanta racconti* (1958).

The study of Tommaso Landolfi's non-realistic aesthetic is inextricably combined with considerations of his style. This is shown in works like Marcello Carlino's (1998), Leonardo Cecchini's (2001), Simone Castaldi's article (2010), and Paolo Zublena's (2014) which centres on intertextuality

and linguistic issues. The theoretical approach often used for the investigation of the author's works is psychoanalytical, as can be clearly seen in Cecchini's study. Unlike this more traditional approach, this thesis examines the representation of lively matter in the collections *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* (1937), *Il mar delle blatte* (1939), and *La spada* (1942).

Elsa Morante's *Racconti dimenticati* (2002) will be considered. This posthumous collection contains short stories dated between 1937 and 1947 scattered in magazines and newspapers, together with the short stories published in *Il gioco segreto* (1941). When compared to novels by Morante, the collections of shorter fiction have received less critical attention. Elena Porciani's works (2006, 2014, 2019) offer insights not only into interpretations of the texts, but also into the complex philological reconstruction of these collections. Cesare Garboli's work (1995) served as a reference point for studies like Silvia Zangrandi's (2014) and Charles Leavitt's (2012), which explore the issue of fantastic literature and the extent to which Morante's works can be described by this category. Insofar as the poetics of objects in the author is concerned, Garboli (2008) and Giuliana Zagra (2006) deal partially with the theme of objects, but do not consider *Racconti dimenticati* studied here.

Like the above-mentioned authors, the discussion of Anna Maria Ortese's short fiction is often linked to the discussion of her non-realist style. This is true of scholarship on the collection considered in this thesis, *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953). Sharon Wood (1995, 169-184) and Vanessa Pietrantonio (2012) deal with the visual deformations that take place in *Il mare non bagna Napoli*. Andrea Baldi (2000) and Francesca Favaro (2011) focus on the representation of pain in the collection, but not specifically on objects. The closest study to the investigation proposed here is Cosetta Seno-Reed's (2013) which identifies the fetishistic role played by certain 'things' in some of the *racconti* included in *Il mare*, though not from the perspective of the mythopoetic power of fetishism presented in Chapter One. To date, no more contributions on this collection and on the interpretation of the role of objects in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* have been found.

### **3. Historical Overview: 1930-1959**

As the purpose of this research is to investigate the modern literary representation of objects and object fetishism, it would be intuitive to address the focus of critical attention to historical periods that feature an increase in the circulation of commodities. In the context of modern Italy, this period correspond to the sixties.

In 1960, in the journal *Il menabò* Italo Calvino published 'Il mare dell'oggettività', written in October 1959. In it, Calvino compared the writer's attitude to the external world of objects at the beginning of the century and in his own time, noting that:

Da una cultura basata sul rapporto e contrasto tra due termini, da una parte la coscienza la volontà il giudizio individuali e dall'altra il mondo oggettivo, stiamo passando o siamo passati a una cultura in cui quel primo termine è sommerso dal *mare dell'oggettività, dal flusso ininterrotto di ciò che esiste*. (Calvino [1959] 1995, 52, my emphasis)

The 'mondo oggettivo' here does not exclusively refer to the 'thingly' world, but more generally to the economic and technological macrostructures and the material proliferation of his time. The production and penetration of goods into all levels of Italian life and the spectacularisation of consumption<sup>19</sup> contributed to the transformation of Italy into an economic power.<sup>20</sup> These economic and historical facts were indicators of incipient globalisation and resulted in a new way of relating to the phenomenal reality 'che annega l'io' (Calvino 1995, 54). The picture sketched by Calvino depicts the economic growth that Italy witnessed between 1958 and 1963, which is described in the Italian historiographical paradigm as the economic miracle.<sup>21</sup> It affected all aspects of Italian life and contributed to the transformation of Italy into the country we know today.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of dealing with that segment of Italian history, which has received wider critical attention, though in relation to short stories, this thesis will take a different stance and investigate the interval between 1930 and 1959. In spite of the long-established historiographical paradigm that considers this time as a fragmented one, an increasing number of scholars are inviting a re-evaluation of this assumption, based on the perception that the continuities identified within this timeframe are more prominent than the discontinuities.<sup>23</sup> As Pierpaolo Antonello noted in *Contro il materialismo. Le "due culture" in Italia: bilancio di un secolo* (2012), for example:

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<sup>19</sup> Guy Debord's theorisations of consumption as a performative spectacle in *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2014) would indeed be appropriate for the interpretation of a period such as this in which commodities have 'succeeded in totally colonizing social life' (Debord 2014, 13). In addition, the proliferation and the pervasiveness of products in this time can be effectively described through the metaphors Jean Baudrillard employs in his introduction to *The System of Objects* (1968) where he compares the attempt to classify the wide plethora of commodities circulating in the sixties to the attempt to catalogue flora and fauna in the natural world.

<sup>20</sup> This growth and increase of production and consumption is however far from univocal, uniform, and generalised. For a more detailed overview see Emanuela Scarpellini's chapter 'Il miracolo economico' in *L'Italia dei consumi: dalla Belle époque al nuovo millennio* (2008, 129-237).

<sup>21</sup> See Ginsborg (2003), Mafai (1997), Petri (2002), Castronovo (2010, 2013). Interesting examples of studies on objects as part of the miracle are Asquer (2007, 2011), Cardini (2007), Meloni (2011), Paris (2013), Carutti (2016), and Garofalo (2018).

<sup>22</sup> See Scarpellini (2008, 129-237).

<sup>23</sup> The years included between 1930 and 1959 are frequently seen as a discontinuous block in the Italian context, primarily because of the violent fracture occurred with the Second World War and the break between fascism and democracy that

andrebbero riconsiderate alcune periodizzazioni stabilizzate e quasi canoniche rispetto alla descrizione della temperie e delle mode culturali italiane per cui si notano, ad esempio, *una continuità di orientamenti epistemologici complessivi fra gli anni '30 e anni '50* dove la fine del fascismo e della seconda guerra mondiale *non ha costituito un discrimine così rigido*, come messo in luce da molti storici, *ma ha solo concesso una maggiore visibilità a autori e temi attivi già nelle decade precedenti*. (Antonello 2012, xxv, my emphasis)

According to Antonello, it is inaccurate to say that there was a cultural and ideological rupture caused by the experience of the Resistance and the Republic, since ‘molti degli schemi ideologici e dei vizi culturali ad essi caratteristici’ (2012, 106-107) continued to exist. In this, his ideological, cultural, and epistemological observations echo the historical studies proposed by Claudio Pavone (1995), Guido Crainz (1996), Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2001), and Stephen Gundle and David Forgacs (2007).

Using the lens of cultural history, Forgacs and Gundle show the continuity of this period through the observation of patterns of consumption. According to them:

there were significant continuities in the ownership, structure, and personnel of key cultural industries [...] and in the forms of state regulation [...], from censorship to the broadcasting monopoly and the government subsidy of theatre and cinema, but also because *patterns of consumer behaviour* carried over from one political phase to the next. [...] We argue that, on balance, the continuities were more significant than the changes. (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 4, my emphasis)

Looking at the way the first mass-produced goods circulated in Italy contributes to understanding the period from 1930 to 1959 as a continuous one, and it illuminates the fundamental role that these years played in laying the basis for the subsequent economic miracle at the end of the fifties. As Forgacs and Gundle state:

We want to modify the commonly held view that the economic miracle (1958–1963) was a unique ‘great transformation’ [...]. When one examines consumption patterns more closely

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presumably divides the pre- and the post-war years in two rather stark blocks. However, as Forgacs and Gundle claim: ‘certain conventional periodizations need to be reassessed. In the first place, the division that political historians of Italy normally make of the twentieth century into three distinct phases, marked by the prevailing type of state—Liberal up to 1922, Fascist to 1943 and (after the transitional period of the war years), Republic from 1946— does not really work for cultural history’ (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 4).

this view can be seen to distort the facts in two opposing directions. On the one hand it exaggerates the extent of the changes that took place in the miracle period itself [...] on the other, it represents Italian rural society up to the late 1950s as too uniformly 'backward' and static and underestimates the extent to which cultural modernization had already begun to affect people outside the main cities. In the light of these objections, the period from 1936 to 1954 needs to be seen afresh as part of a longer wave of cultural modernization. (Forgacs and Gundle 2007, 4)

Amongst the factors that determined the continuity of this time was the increasing circulation and production of goods, which had started to penetrate the social, cultural, and ideological fabric of the country in a more consistent fashion. Forgacs and Gundle's observations are supported by a variety of more factual, statistical works, as well as studies which attempt to retrace the factors that determined the economic rise of the time, by observing the diffusion of specific objects of consumption across Italian society.<sup>24</sup> Emanuela Scarpellini's book (2008) is an example of one such work.

Unlike Forgacs and Gundle's work, Scarpellini did not base her research on interviews, but rather discussed the reasons at the heart of the economic growth of the years 1930-1959. She states that:

la prima [ragione] riguarda il cambiamento delle condizioni di vita. L'urbanizzazione [...] induce una crescita dei consumi commercializzati particolarmente avvertibile per le merci un tempo prodotte all'interno della famiglia [...] un secondo fattore [...] è legato a una differente composizione sociale e a mutamenti nella redistribuzione del reddito. La formazione di una classe piuttosto estesa di lavoratori dipendenti, a scapito di artigiani, commercianti, agricoltori, ha fatto aumentare la propensione al consumo [...] il terzo fattore è il progresso tecnologico. (Scarpellini 2008, 88-89)

Clearly, the economic advancement of that period triggered a series of other social, cultural, and urban changes, which prepared fertile ground for the boom at the end of this period.

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<sup>24</sup> See Carreras and Felice (2012), Felice and Vecchi (2015), Gomellini and Toniolo (2017). According to Felice and Vecchi, the combination of 'very autarchic policies which steered modernization and thus the expansion of the Italian productive base' (Felice and Vecchi 2015, 19) and the 1929 crisis, 'led to a broad reform of the Italian production system. On the one hand, it forced the industrial sector to substitute labor (now more expensive) [...] with capital, and this led to an increase in mechanization; on the other, the calamitous effects of the crisis on the real economy and on finance led to the institutional reorganization of the whole edifice of national capitalism' (20). Despite the dramatic economic decline reported between 1943 and 1945, the reconstruction was faster and more widespread than the pre-war years (Toniolo 2017, 20), and the conditions for a wider circulation of commodities were established anew, thus easing the economic growth. More on this can be found in Felice (2015).

These economic changes had a considerable impact on the social structure as well, not only in the formation of a working class that was employed to support the new productive system, but also in the redefinition of the bourgeoisie.<sup>25</sup> This gradual transformation is particularly relevant for the texts considered in this thesis, because many of them revolve around the bourgeois environment, with a few critical exceptions. Historian Alberto Mario Banti observes that in the twentieth century, terms such as ‘borghesia’ acquired ‘significati vari e spesso contraddittori’ (Banti 1996, x), because ‘il lessico di classe non è nato per descrivere, è nato per inventare realtà; [...] non è nato come parte di un discorso scientifico [...] *ma come parte di un discorso politico*’ (x, my emphasis). Unclarity and ambiguity are an essential part of the attitude that the Fascist regime maintained towards the bourgeoisie.<sup>26</sup> They are also at the root of the need to define this social class, its opponents, and its members anew.<sup>27</sup>

This short historical overview has shown the coexistence of different social, economic, and ideological factors, which formed the background for social, economic, and ideological alternatives to emerge. It can be hypothesised that what identifies this period is exactly its transitional, hybrid nature. This can explain the radically different ideological positions found in the authors of our corpus, which should not be neglected in the analysis of the objects found in these texts. In Chapter Two, for example, the discussion of the works of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Alberto Moravia considers their different ideological positions. While both were opposed to the bourgeoisie, Gadda crafted his critique in ironic and bitterly satirical terms, while Moravia’s opposition appeared more programmatic and rhetorical. Likewise, the attitude displayed by the writers in relation to the material world appears radically different. An author like Gadda has a pauperistic conception of matter, whereby the same object can be used multiple times and adapted to other uses when worn out. Works like those of Dino Buzzati and Italo Calvino already show an engagement with the rising mass consumption of those years and their impact on social structures.

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<sup>25</sup> See for example Banti (1996) and Musso (2002). For an overview on the slightly later period, see Asquer (2011).

<sup>26</sup> As D’Auria shows, Benito Mussolini nourished ‘l’odio contro la vecchia borghesia italiana che si era approfittata della [prima] Guerra’ (2012, 41), which however did not coincide with the intention of siding with the proletarian masses. Fascism was opposed to both the liberalism sought after by the bourgeoisie, and the socialism supported by the working class, but it ‘non riusciv[a] a concretizzare questa [sua] posizione né sul piano ideologico [...] né su quello del legame con le masse, fossero esse proletarie o borghesi’ (D’Auria 2012, 42).

<sup>27</sup> Parallel to the regime’s problematic relationship with the bourgeoisie is the contemporary appearance of so-called ‘piccola borghesia’, ‘associata alla “controrivoluzione dell’alta borghesia” e alla “rivoluzione militare”, andando a costituire la massa di manovra del fascismo che Mussolini aveva a lungo cercato per il suo movimento’ (D’Auria, 2012, 43). D’Auria continues: ‘[I]a guerra aveva creato una classe di “spostati”, gente del popolo e della piccola borghesia che si era abituata a “portare i galloni”, a esercitare un’autorità, e che dopo la guerra si ritrovava in condizioni peggiori di prima della guerra e che non si vedeva riconosciuti i sacrifici fatti al fronte per difendere il paese’ (41). The intermediate position of this social class between ‘proletariato’ and ‘borghesia’, the ‘piccola borghesia’ was used strategically as a pawn that the regime employed because it lay at the cross-roads between ‘capitalismo, [e] proletariato, come il terzo tra i due litiganti’ (43).

So, while it is possible to share the understanding of the timeframe from the 1930s to the 1950s as unitary based on the historical, social, political, and economic elements, it is also necessary to emphasise its transient nature. Recognising it as a time of transition can help to explain the co-occurrence in these texts of different and, at times, contrasting elements.

#### 4. The Italian Short Story: A Problematic Genre

Studying the representation of objects and of the phenomenon of fetishism in short stories is justified for a series of formal and historical reasons. Investigating short stories allows the consideration of a wider sample, and the selection of a literary genre whose formal features resonate with the fragmentary and synecdochic nature of the phenomenon of fetishism. Furthermore, there appears to be a gap in the study of short stories of this period. While the works of Arrigo Stara (2010) and Sergio Zatti (2010) are centred on the beginning of the twentieth century, Massimiliano Tortora (2014) offers an analysis of the second half of the century and in particular on the years of the economic miracle. The in-between position of the texts investigated in this thesis helps to explain the variety of different and contrasting features found in this corpus and makes the research into this period crucial.

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In the Italian literary canon, scholarly discussion on the short story has often taken place using the more established genres of the *novella* and the *romanzo* as touchstones for the definition of the *racconto*.<sup>28</sup> Because of its identification by way of opposition to more formalised genres, for a long time its status has been seen by both scholars and writers as ‘una debolezza, una mancanza: o mero esercizio in funzione di opere maggiori, o pratica venale, o ripiego dovuto all’impraticabilità di generi più alti’ (Pellizzi 2005). Recently, scholars have re-assessed this understanding and deemed the genre

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<sup>28</sup> Stara discusses this in his article (2010), where he states: ‘La forma breve, nelle diverse teorizzazioni che si succedono dall’inizio del Novecento, tend[e] sempre a caratterizzarsi in maniera oppositiva, ossia come non-fiaba, non-romanzo, quasi che solo in questo modo le fosse possibile dotarsi di [...] identità autonoma’ (Stara 2010, 34).

When undertaking a discussion of the genre of the short story, it is necessary to outline the state of this genre in the contemporary Italian context. The critical debate on the short story has long been dominated by the structuralist paradigm. Marchese, *L’officina del racconto: semiotica della narratività* (1990) has been considered the only text comparable to the international narratological examples of Todorov, *Théorie de la littérature* (1965) and Genette, *Figures III* (1972). In tune with a structuralist approach to the study of literature, in this work Marchese identifies a series of functions and defines their specific traits, which would enable a full understanding of the literary texts. Because of its uniqueness in the Italian panorama of the time, *L’officina del racconto* paved the way for other similar studies, like Segre (1985) or Vittorini (2005). It is only in recent years that a new, non-structuralist discussion has emerged and engaged a new strand of scholarship in defining the characteristics of the short story. An emblematic example of this is the publication, in 2014, of an issue of *Allegoria* entirely revolving around this genre, edited by Massimiliano Tortora. As the title *Il racconto italiano del secondo Novecento* suggests, this issue is concerned with the development of the genre of the *racconto* in the second half of the twentieth century and relates to a slightly later period than the one investigated here. See Tortora (2014).

of the short story as central to the context of Italian twentieth-century literary production.<sup>29</sup> As Pellizzi claims, '[q]uesto misconoscimento è paradossale, perché la letteratura italiana ha invece "una vera vocazione" come ha scritto Italo Calvino [...] per il racconto breve e per le forme brevi in generale' (Pellizzi 2005).

The theoretical discussions of the parameters defining the genre and its status have been addressed extensively, but do not fall within the scope of this thesis. The aim of this research is not to define what a short story is, but rather to show how shorter forms of fiction produced within the period taken into account are a productive ground to undertake an analysis of objects.<sup>30</sup> Rather than following an immovable definition of the short story, this research will investigate the broader field of short fiction. The terms 'short story', 'racconto', and 'short fiction' will therefore be used interchangeably. This will allow the analysis of a wider body of case studies that stretches from Carlo Emilio Gadda's longer texts to Dino Buzzati's short, fragmentary writings.

While it is clear that the analysis of short fiction allows us to have a wider sample, the reason why this is the best genre on which to conduct research into objects still remains to be clarified. Some insights come from observations on short stories written at the beginning of the twentieth century formulated by Sergio Zatti. Trying to account for the genre's brevity, Zatti connects this feature with the representative intentions pursued by, and limits imposed on, the writers:

[V]enuta meno la possibilità di una visione globalizzante del reale, il racconto restringe il campo della visuale con *l'assunzione di una prospettiva obliqua che tagli i fatti di scorcio* [...] A fronte di quella totalità che non può più essere contenuta ma solo allusa in maniera parziale e obliqua, *il frammento, svincolato da un sistema stabile di riferimenti, acquista piena autonomia e forza emblematica*. È in questa tendenza che si iscrive la fortuna di tutti quei generi [...] che si vogliono parziali, si assegnano limiti e rinunciano ad ambizioni rappresentative perché si pongono piuttosto problemi di rappresentazione. (Zatti 2010, 22, my emphasis)

Rather than conceiving of the shortness as indicative of the short story's subordination to the novel, Zatti underlines the *racconto*'s different position to the reality it depicts. If longer forms such as the

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<sup>29</sup> Guglielmi states: 'Il Novecento del resto degerarchizza i generi. *E questo significa che promuove i generi considerati tradizionalmente minori. In realtà dando uguale dignità ai generi, il Novecento privilegia la ricerca formale* [...] ed è in questo movimento che sembra iscriversi la fortuna di tutti quei generi che come la novella, il racconto o la short story si vogliono parziali, si assegnano limiti e rinunciano ad ambizioni rappresentative perché si pongono piuttosto problemi di rappresentazione' (Guglielmi 1998, VII, my emphasis).

<sup>30</sup> See Barthes (1966), Gillespie (1967), Lohafer, (1983), Guglielminetti (1990) and Giovannuzzi (1999).

novel can be seen as the attempt to provide an accurate, global, and totalising depiction of the world, turning towards the short story corresponds to the selection of one part of it.<sup>31</sup>

The shortness of the *racconto* is certainly one of the features that has attracted most critical attention. While Arrigo Stara interprets brevity as manifesting a new, fragmented, and *partial* way of *being* in the world,<sup>32</sup> the short story's limited length can be interpreted as introducing a different way of *knowing* the world. As phenomenal reality becomes increasingly complex and a direct and mediated relation with its totality is denied, as Zatti claims, the selection of representable fragments can correspond to the selection of snippets of reality that these texts seek to understand and represent. Such epistemological attempts are expressed in the texts through the presence of epiphanies. According to Zatti, early twentieth-century short stories 'si condensano nella ricerca del momento epifanico come sola occasione di cattura e sprigionamento del senso, per quanto effimera e parziale' (Zatti 2010, 21), which takes place unexpectedly and often through the mediation of apparently banal objects. Epiphanies, in fact, 'liricizza[no] il quotidiano (riscattandone l'opacità) ed epicizza[no] il banale restituendo come destino ciò che sembrava appartenere al caso' (21). The epistemological attempt to re-discover and re-connect with an estranged reality can only seldom happen and it does so through the mediation of the banal elements that inhabit everyday life.

Though attention to the everyday and the objects populating it continues in the following decades, in Massimiliano Tortora's view, texts of the period included between 1930 and 1959 are progressively emptied of their epiphanic and epic component. According to him, the influence of 'nuovo realismo' manifests itself through the presence of 'una struttura narrativa più tradizionale, compatta e in sostanza poco sperimentale, e soprattutto [...] un codice più comunicativo, referenziale, diretto' (Tortora 2014, 14). This in turn would suggest that the narrative devices of the beginning of the century make space for new, plainer structures, where the narrative gaze is directed towards external reality in more prosaic terms.<sup>33</sup> Thus the 'soggettivismo che aveva imperato nella prima parte del secolo'

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<sup>31</sup> The isolation of a *pars pro toto* resonates vividly with the phenomenon of fetishism. As will be seen, fetishism relies on the selection of a fragment of something or someone which is progressively invested with erotic, psychological, social, religious or economic meanings. The fact that 'il frammento [...] acquista piena autonomia e forza emblematica' (Zatti 2010, 22) not only describes the position of the *racconto vis-à-vis* reality, but also the process of selection of an object that becomes a fetish.

<sup>32</sup> Stara argues: 'Dal punto di vista teorico si stabilisce la necessità di stabilire una distinzione che prescinde dalle sole questioni di forma e contenuto per trasformarsi in un dato quasi ontologico [...] ossia in un problema di diverso radicamento nel mondo, di accettazione di un punto di vista parziale e non socialmente rappresentativo su di esso, dell'intensità di uno sguardo che sacrifica ogni ambizione di completezza per andare dietro all'effimero, al fugace, al rifiutato, a quanto la Storia [...] ha definitivamente sconfitto e abbandonato nei margini' (Stara 2010, 36).

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, quoting Edgar Allan Poe's definition of the short story as '“plot-oriented” dove “plot-oriented” vuol dire che il suo centro di gravità è appunto l'epilogo', Zatti claims that the structure of these short stories revolves around the 'pregnanza di senso [...] resa possibile dalla forza retorica sprigionata dal finale' (Zatti 2010, 18).

According to Tortora, then, the plot-oriented structure is soon replaced by a plainer one which does not use the end of the short story as a device to release the narrative tension, as Poe suggested. He states: '[I]l racconto italiano, in quel ventennio che si distende dal dopoguerra ai primi anni Sessanta, si inserisce all'interno di quel “nuovo realismo” avviato già da *Gli indifferenti*, e proseguito con progressive evoluzioni (passando dunque anche attraverso la stagione del neorealismo) fino

is replaced, in the short-form works produced between 1945 and 63, '[dal] personaggio e [dal] suo inserimento nella realtà sociale' (20). According to Tortora, this implies that the everyday objects of these depictions enter the texts only insofar as they are inhabitants of the characters' social environment, rather than triggers for the 'cattura e sprigionamento del senso', as Stara would have it.

The analysis of this corpus reveals that, despite being in the period analysed by Tortora, the texts composing this corpus hardly fall within the generalised categories he proposes. In Moravia and Calvino's texts, for example, objects function as reality checks that the characters use to help them abandon their delusional relationship with a beautified reality and embrace a genuine and direct relationship with it. In other cases, such as the instances offered by Buzzati and Landolfi, common objects transport the characters far from reality, to a fantastic world of animated matter and lively objects. In short, they are bidirectional channels or diaphragms, which transport the characters from a realistic, phenomenal world to a fantastic, mythical dimension and vice versa. Tortora's statements fail to describe the complex and mixed features of this transitional period, as much as Stara and Zatti's studies do not account for the specificity of the type of epiphanies found here.

## 5. The Literary Panorama: Realist and Non-Realist Modes of Representation

The discussion of the genre of the short story has drawn attention to the coeval development of realist literary modes. As seen above, Tortora underlines the predominance of this expressive modality from the post-war years until after the sixties.<sup>34</sup> The history and the development of realism in twentieth-century Italian literature, however, started earlier than that, and responded to a series of international influences as well as national factors.<sup>35</sup>

As many scholars have pointed out, the Fascist regime pursued an ambiguous and contradictory cultural programme,<sup>36</sup> to which the realist sensibility readily offered a malleable and adaptable confusion of ambiguous contents. This has been effectively illustrated by Ruth Ben-Ghiat, in her article

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a *La giornata di uno scrutatore* di Calvino. E la cifra realistica ripone al centro del testo il mondo tangibile, gli eventi concreti e non solo mentali, la realtà sociale. Inoltre l'irruzione del reale e l'esigenza di raccontarlo impongono una struttura narrativa più tradizionale' (Tortora 2014, 13-14, emphasis in the original).

<sup>35</sup> Calling into question the term 'neorealism' is far from an easy choice, because of the wide discussion on the nature, the chronology, and the protagonists of the neorealist sensitivity. To further understand the features of this expressive mode, see for example Muscetta (1976), Corti (1978), Falcetto (1992), Re (2006), Garrone (2015), and De Nicola (2016).

<sup>36</sup> See Antonello, 'Gli "eccentrici" anni '30' in *Contro il materialismo* (2012, 105-138): '[E]sigenze di carattere politico-strategico e pragmatico imposte dalle particolari circostanze storico-economiche in cui l'Italia si trovò a operare e che corrispose sia a una generale "confusione" della politica culturale fascista sia all'emergere di un generale scetticismo fra le nuove generazioni. Molti giovani scrittori e intellettuali del periodo, infatti, al di là di una adesione opportunistica e di facciata al fascismo, opereranno in senso ideologicamente autonomo, proprio per l'altro grado di "manovrabilità" permessa dalle dichiarazioni spesso contraddittorie sulla funzione politica della cultura da parte del regime' (Antonello 2012,

(1995). Through studies of writers like Alberto Moravia, she shows that the ‘polysemic quality of the category of realism’ (Ben-Ghiat 1995, 532) enabled ‘Italian intellectuals living under fascism a large degree of manoeuvrability in their declarations on the political function of culture’ (532). The ambiguity that Italian intellectuals pursued in their writings was strategically reinterpreted as antifascist after the fall of the regime (532). These observations show that the development of the realist aesthetic is utterly protean. Its capacity to respond to very different ideological requirements, pro or antifascist, can account for its duration in the period considered here.

The study by Ben-Ghiat contributes not only to the understanding of the ambiguities and manipulation that the new forms of realism underwent, but also offers insights into the main principles sustaining this new sensibility. As Lucia Re notes, the ‘solipsism and evasiveness of bourgeois cultural production’ (Re 2006, 633) is discarded and substituted by ‘the desire [...] for a more direct relationship between the observation and representation of reality [that] sparked interest in the techniques of reportage and nonfiction cinema’ (633).<sup>37</sup> The ‘obsession with the real’ requires the adoption of adequate representative tools, which are offered, according to Emanuela Garrone, by ‘la poetica dell’immediatezza’, namely ‘il desiderio di non frapporre il nulla, o il meno possibile, tra l’idea e la sua realizzazione’ (Garrone 2015, 27). The interest in directing the focus of attention onto external reality and its analytical observation implies its detailed description, and the deep investigation of its most familiar aspects. This can explain the increasing emphasis placed on the world of objects, and the interest in depicting them in all their concreteness. By circulating more consistently and playing an increasingly important role in everyday practices, objects became part of the focus of investigations pursued by intellectuals enticed by realist modes of representation. Their integration within the everyday is at the root of their increasing importance and pervasiveness in the writings forming this corpus.

As pointed out in the previous section, this thesis argues that the directness and immediacy sought in literary depiction does not correspond to a loss of epiphanic potential, but rather to its redefinition. Epiphanic objects become diaphragms capable of connecting realist and fantastic dimensions, which coexist like two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, despite being one of the dominating expressive modalities, the realist aesthetic is far from being the only one found in the period. Throughout this time other non-realist tendencies, such as the fantastic and the surrealist aesthetics, start spreading.

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106). Amongst the wide body of secondary literature on this topic, see Garin (1974), and Ben-Ghiat’s studies (1996, 2000, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> The osmotic exchange between literature and cinema is fundamental to the understanding of the principles sustaining this new expressive tendency, as Garrone and Re, amongst many others, have pointed out. As Re underlines, it is no coincidence that one of the most illuminating contributions to the understanding of realist aesthetics comes from a cineast such as Zavattini. She explains how ‘he argued that plot had to be replaced with a purely documentary portrayal of the randomness and sluggishness of events in real time and space and of real people, while he suggested the filmmaker should patiently follow, waiting for things to happen’ (Re 2006, 107).

As Tortora argues ‘negli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta conosce una sua fortuna particolare il genere surrealistico e fantastico, tanto da riguardare sia autori che a questa macroarea possono essere legittimamente ricondotti, sia novellieri che per formazione e per gran parte della propria produzione appartengono *in primis* ad altre “famiglie” letterarie’ (Tortora 2014, 28). This is the case for Alberto Moravia and, to a certain extent, for Italo Calvino with his neorealist short fiction, who are traditionally associated with the ‘family’ of realist fiction. However, they not only produced non-realist or surreal writings, but even in their realist fiction objects become a doorway to a deeper, less idealised understanding of phenomenal reality.

The origins, the genealogy, and the ramifications of these expressive modalities continue to be widely debated.<sup>38</sup> However, it is not in the scope of this thesis to designate the short stories appearing in the corpus as either realist or non-realist. In tune with this intention, the notions of fantastic or surrealist genres will be substituted by Remo Ceserani’s idea of the ‘fantastic mode’. This is defined as ‘un insieme di procedimenti retorico-formali, atteggiamenti conoscitivi e aggregazioni tematiche, articolazioni dell’immaginario storicamente concrete e utilizzabili da vari codici linguistici, generi artistici o letterari’ (Ceserani 1996, 8). This definition will be particularly useful when dealing with Tommaso Landolfi and Dino Buzzati, who have long been associated with the genre of the fantastic. Rather than seeing them as exclusively belonging to a specific literary genre, which runs the risk of flattening out the complexity and the contamination of registers found in their texts, it will be more productive to consider them as displaying alternative and revisited features of the fantastic mode.

In the context of realist literature, the representation of objects is justified by the interest in depicting external reality. A different dynamic governs the things that appear in non-realist texts. Traditionally, within the framework of fantastic literature, objects are important textual presences when they serve as mediators. According to Ceserani the mediating object is ‘un oggetto che, con la sua concreta inserzione nel testo, diventa la testimonianza inequivoca del fatto che il personaggio-protagonista ha effettivamente compiuto un viaggio, è entrato in un’altra dimensione di realtà e da quel mondo ha riportato l’oggetto con sé’ (Ceserani 1996, 81). In non-realist depictions, things are not central to the literary representation because of their *being* in the world. They conceal the possibility of going *beyond* it to open up new and alternative dimensions.<sup>39</sup> The function of the mediating object introduced

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<sup>38</sup> Other than Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (1996), see for example Gubert (2003), Billiani and Sulis (2007), Lazzarin (2008a, 2008b, 2014). This is only indicative of the scholarly production on the fantastic and it is far from accounting for the variety of non-realist expressive modalities in place at the time. More bibliographical indications will be found in Chapter Three.

<sup>39</sup> In this sense, the mediating object partly recalls the features of the epiphanic object as briefly mentioned in the discussion on the genre of the short story. Luperini talked about this on *L’incontro e il caso* ([2007] 2017) in reference to the epiphanies found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). He writes: ‘La materia [...] sarebbe solo l’ombra e il simbolo di un’idea, di una verità, in cui in qualche modo risplende ancora uno scopo divino [...] La cosa si carica così di un super-significato, di una radiosità che ne rende possibile la *claritas* e che ne rivela [...] la *quidditas*, vale a dire l’essenza

by Ceserani does not cover the variety of ways in which objects are portrayed in the non-realist fiction in the corpus. In the examples taken from Landolfi and Buzzati, objects possess a transitional, rather than a ‘testimonial’, function, enabling a move between a phenomenal and a mythical dimension. What Ceserani’s explanation emphasises about the texts studied here, however, is the alternative gaze cast upon objects. They are not simply inanimate inhabitants of the objectual world observed by the narrator, but they become enlivened material presences.

In the 1930-1959 period, then, the literary representation of objects takes place through a mixture of realist and non-realist modalities. Although in these pages an effort has been made to draw a distinction between these modes of representation, it is also true that in these texts they often intertwine and contaminate one another, making the picture of the literary background of this time more complicated. Regardless of their realist or non-realist intentions, the literary texts of this time show an interest in including the world of objects within their orbit and in finding diverse expressive modalities to describe them.

## **6. Thesis Structure: Overview**

With these premises in mind, this thesis is organised in four chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One re-elaborates and expands on the psychoanalytical notion of fetishism offered by Fusillo (2012). Starting from Freud’s notion of the fetish as an object chosen to defuse the fear of castration, Fusillo’s reflections focus on the creative potential contained in this concept. By investing an object with emotional, sexual, or memorial significance, the fetishist turns fetishes into elements of his or her own personal fiction. The process of the selection of fetishes shares a great deal with the process at the base of narrative production. This theoretical introduction serves as an interpretative framework for the analysis of short stories by Elsa Morante, Anna Maria Ortese, and Italo Calvino. In the first section, Morante and Ortese’s short stories will be introduced as offering examples of objects that acquire a memorial or poetic function. The protagonists of these texts are engaged in a process of self-discovery; the objects they use or desire serve as props to help them retrace the origins of their artistic inclinations (Morante) or to investigate the grim reality of their social conditions (Ortese). The second

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profonda. [...] E tuttavia la sublimazione lirico-simbolica non è l’unico esito possibile dell’epifania. D’altronde la rivelazione epifanica non era nata certo con queste caratteristiche di eccezionalità’ (Luperini 2017, Kindle edition, emphasis in the original). Like the epiphanic object, the fantastic object is invested with new meanings and it reveals itself in a completely different and estranged light. This recalls interesting parallels between the epiphanic object and the uncanny objects often found in fantastic narratives.

part of the textual analysis will focus on Calvino's representation of objects as social and erotic mediators, with examples taken from the collection *Gli amori difficili*. The protagonists of Calvino's fiction are uncomfortable in the reality that surrounds them, and they use objects as tools to mediate the indirect relationship they have with the environments and the people around them.

Chapter Two offers a reflection on the social meaning of objects. Starting with Hartmut Böhme's development of the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism, the theoretical introduction focuses on the philosophical and sociological contributions offered by Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1996). Despite its sociological nature, Bourdieu's work underlines the connection between the appreciation of specific objects, or desire to possess them, and the possessor's sense of belonging to a social class. The connection between material properties and social classes is used for the analysis of the short stories of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Alberto Moravia. The textual analysis firstly illustrates Gadda's scathing and ironic depiction of the Milanese working class and bourgeoisie through the portrayal of their clothes or pieces of furniture. Subsequently, it deals with Moravia's representation of characters that move in the orbit of Roman bourgeoisie and use objects as a way to claim or problematise their belonging to it.

Chapters Three and Four offer examples taken from contemporary theoretical frameworks, analysing the texts through an innovative understanding of the subject-object relationship or through specific material configurations, such as dust and rubbish. Chapter Three starts with a discussion of the expansion of new schools of thought interested in shifting the focus of their investigation from ontology, or the study of the nature of being, to so-called objective epistemology, which is the attempt to embrace non-anthropocentric, non-binary ways of knowing and conceiving of the world. Michel Serres' theory of the quasi-object and Bruno Latour's *actant* and actor-network-theory are introduced as examples of such epistemologies, because they conceive of phenomenal reality as intermingled and of human and nonhuman beings as no longer organised according to human hierarchies and structures. Such an interconnected understanding of the world is also the basis of Jane Bennett's new materialist theories, which revolve around the notion of vibrant materialism as the capacity to capture the liveliness and the vibrancy of nonhuman matter. Tommaso Landolfi and Dino Buzzati have been ascribed to the genre of the fantastic. However, in tune with what stated above, the notion of genre will be replaced by mode. The theoretical considerations offered in this chapter will expand on and redefine such mode, which can be re-interpreted as an attempt to direct critical attention to nonhuman, alternative worlds. These ideas will then be applied to the analysis of short stories by Tommaso Landolfi and Dino Buzzati. Landolfi's short stories address a great deal of attention to the secret lives of things, such as pieces of furniture or natural elements. Buzzati's texts look at the interaction between

humans and technological objects like telephones and cars, and at the replication and problematisation of human dynamics in nonhuman contexts.

Chapter Four looks at decaying matter and objects which take the shape of dust and rubbish. The theoretical framework hinges on philosophical premises like those in Chapter Three. Here too the relationship between object and subject is re-thought in terms of ‘relationality and entanglements’ (Boscagli 2014, 20). Sharing the theories offered by anthropologist Mary Douglas and historian Joseph Amato, this section supports the premise that the study of liminal and discarded material can reveal social dynamics and uncover the epistemological principles underlying certain social groups. This sheds a new light on the writings of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Italo Calvino. The textual analysis focuses first on Gadda’s depiction of dust as indicative of an inadequate epistemological system based on the positivist ambition to pursue complete comprehension of reality in the totality of its manifestations. Subsequently, it focuses on the appearance of waste in two of Calvino’s short stories and interprets it as the by-product of an attempt to order reality following clear-cut categories. The attempt to rationally understand and order the real lies at the heart of the production of waste and of the creative process.

This is followed by a brief Conclusion, which attempts to retrace the overarching themes dealt with in the thesis and to highlight the recurring motifs found in the different chapters.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Objects as Sources of Creativity:

Elsa Morante, Anna Maria Ortese, and Italo Calvino

#### 1. The Mythopoetic Power of Fetishism

Fetishism revolves around the investment of banal objects with new, multifarious, and, at times, erotic meanings. This makes this phenomenon particularly versatile and applicable to different domains and subjects. The creative element inherent in this idea has often been employed as a productive interpretative framework for the analysis of literary, filmic, and cultural products,<sup>1</sup> as Fusillo has shown in his study (2012). Here the scholar promotes a new understanding of fetishism and shows how it can serve as a useful tool for the study of cultural and artistic phenomena. By critically engaging with the Freudian idea that fetish springs from the fear of castration,<sup>2</sup> Fusillo claims that the link between this perversion and artistic creativity is crucial:

È un concetto già abbastanza implicito nella teoria di Freud che riteneva il feticismo frutto di una negazione ambivalente della realtà, controbilanciata da una sostituzione simbolica: quindi

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<sup>1</sup> As fetishism proposes a re-semanticisation of and emotional investment in apparently banal objects, its importance has been investigated in film and cultural studies. The following are a few examples from this growing field: Kaplan (1983), Mulvey (1989), Apter (1991), Pietz and Apter (1993), Fernbach (2002), and Taylor (2003). For a more detailed overview on the variety of studies on this issue see the introduction to Fusillo's study (2012) and Böhme's chapter on Psychoanalysis, 'Fetishism, Sexuality, and Psychoanalysis' (2014, 296-385).

<sup>2</sup> In 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' ([1905] 2001) Freud categorised fetishism simply as a perversion. It is only with the essay 'On Fetishism' ([1927] 2001) that this notion finds a more detailed explanation. This phenomenon is described as the result of the dread that originates at the sight of the woman's lack of penis: '[W]e see that the perception [of the woman's lack of penis] has persisted, and that a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal. [...] Yes, in [the fetishist's] mind the woman has got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor' (Freud 2001, XXI, 154). The realisation of a possible castration triggers the process of disavowal or, in Freud's own words 'Verdrängung' (153), which requires a 'very energetic action to be maintained' (153). The substitute for the void left by the woman's lack of penis, however, remains a 'token of triumph against the fear of castration' (154). According to this definition, then, the fetishistic compulsion needs to be based on the perception of an absence: only after acknowledging, fearing, and consequently denying the emptiness can the fetishistic response be triggered. In so doing, the fetish functions both as a revealer and concealer of the woman's castration. It stands for something that was never there, but it is perceived as an absence nonetheless, and as such it tends to be covered or substituted by something else. Like a monument, it both commemorates a loss and tries to cover it with its own presence. The importance of the act of altering the real as a consequence of its threatening quality is made even more explicit in *Civilization and its Discontents* ([1930] 2014) where Freud maintains that the search for pleasure and the disavowal of unpleasant realities corresponds to the attempt to modify the surroundings by way of a comforting fictionalisation. The elements corresponding to such an external reality are not denied, but rather are progressively invested libidinally in the way that most suits the subject's psychological and emotional needs.

da quella creazione di mondi alternativi che è da sempre una delle funzioni precipue dell'arte.  
(Fusillo 2012, 9)

By selecting a 'token against the fear of castration' (Freud [1927] 2001, XXI, 154), fetishists 'riescono a innalzare il proprio oggetto al rango sublime della Cosa' (Fusillo 2012, 23), and erect a monument that both reveals and conceals the absence of the 'Cosa'.<sup>3</sup> It is fear of the absence that enables a creative substitution to take place. The threat and the disavowed emptiness are elements that allow '[al] feticista [di essere] più appagato del nevrotico perché capace di decantare le proprie ossessioni. E anche questa è chiaramente una caratteristica creativa' (21). '[I]l punto di partenza è una *pienezza poi perduta*' (21, my emphasis) which ultimately allows the fetishist to 'proiettare sulle cose un insieme fitto di attese, simboli e valori affettivi: fenomeni che si trovano spessissimo nella letteratura e nel suo tematizzare il mondo arcano degli oggetti' (22). This substitution, according to Fusillo, is comparable to a process of artistic invention and becomes the starting point for the creation of alternative worlds.

The acknowledgment of an absence is a fundamental part of the process in which the fetish contributes to the creation of a fake sense of wholeness: 'il feticcio non sarebbe che una contraffazione, inevitabilmente legata ai meccanismi dell'alienazione e della modernità' (Fusillo 2012, 21, my emphasis). Fusillo clearly maintains a Freudian matrix as the main structure of his theory. The Freudian definition of the castration, the 'token of triumph over the threat of castration' (Freud 2001, 154), and the 'energetic action to maintain the disavowal' (154), which constitute the phases of the fetishistic compulsion, are re-interpreted by Fusillo as the recognition of the absence, the search for a surrogate, and the fabrication of a fiction (Fusillo 2012, 21-22).

Fusillo draws on Freud's theorisation to show how these creative and substitutive mechanisms:

[r]uotano intorno al concetto fondamentale di negazione: il feticista saprebbe bene dell'inesistenza del fallo materno, ma nello stesso tempo la negherebbe, per paura della castrazione, contro cui elabora la strategia sostitutiva del feticcio. 'So bene che non è così, ma ciononostante...': è un modello di comportamento che non ha poco a che fare con la creatività artistica e con la creazione di mondi alternativi. (Fusillo 2012, 24)

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<sup>3</sup> In *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire ou l'Autre scène* (1969), Mannoni famously coined the phrase 'Je sais bien... mais quand même' (1969, 9-33) to express the ambivalence of the fetishist's position. He or she knows full well that the fetish is a made-up construct, but he or she believes in it, nonetheless.

In fact, he states ‘[p]roprio in questa idea di decantazione [legata all’innalzamento del proprio oggetto al rango della Cosa] si può trovare un parallelismo con l’attività artistica e con la scrittura letteraria’ (23). The investment of ‘attese, simboli e valori affettivi’ (22) in inanimate things is part of the process of artistic sublimation, which is responsible for the transgression of the boundaries between ‘animato e inanimato, fra materiale e immaginario’ (22). Projecting human-like qualities and attributes onto inanimate objects shows the emotional energy they become invested with and their function as mediators between the characters and the external world.

Analysis of the texts selected in this chapter mostly refers to categories outlined in Fusillo’s chapters ‘Oggetto memoriale: tra ferita e catarsi’ (Fusillo 2012, 47-76) and ‘Creare mondi: la forza mitopoietica degli oggetti’ (97-110). They offer examples of the memorial object, namely objects that are reminiscent of a lost and traumatic past and become the material receptacle of emotional and psychological values. At the same time, the mythopoetic power of the fetish refers to its becoming a narrative trigger. As a matter of fact, characters start fantasising over the objects, they use them as the inspiring starting point to create their own narrative. In a way, then, characters become narrators of a narrative triggered by the fetish. Despite the inherent differences in the memorial and the mythopoetic functions, it can be noted that they both revolve around the recreation of an alternative narrative dimension. This will illuminate the dynamics taking place in the texts under investigation, where objects are used as a way to connect the character to a lost past or to plot an alternative narrative universe.

The following textual analysis will include examples from Elsa Morante’s *Racconti dimenticati* (2002),<sup>4</sup> Anna Maria Ortese’s *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ([1953] 1994) first published in 1953, and two short stories from Italo Calvino’s *Gli amori difficili* ([1958] 1992) published in 1958 as part of *I racconti* and in 1970 as an autonomous collection.<sup>5</sup> In Morante’s and Ortese’s texts, objects are used by the characters to escape the unpleasantness and unwelcoming nature of the world around them. They are also employed as reminders of the characters’ socio-economic backgrounds, and explanatory elements of their creative and artistic tendencies. In Calvino’s texts, objects have a protective and epistemological function. They serve as shields that the characters use to protect themselves from the erotic and social threat posed by the external world. At the same time, they are also used by the maladjusted and aloof protagonists of Calvino’s fiction as tools to comprehend their surroundings intellectually and rationally.

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<sup>4</sup> This text was not granted release by Morante. It is a posthumous collection of earlier short stories that the writer published in newspapers and earlier collections. The philological history of this text is rather complex and has been explained in detail by Garboli, ‘Dovuto a Elsa Morante’ (2002, v-xvi) and Babboni, ‘Note al testo’ (2002, xvii-xx), at the beginning of *Racconti dimenticati*.

<sup>5</sup> For more editorial information see Falcetto, *Note e notizie sui testi*, in Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti* (1992, II, 1437-1441).

## 2. Memorial Objects in Elsa Morante and Anna Maria Ortese

Explaining Elsa Morante's productive relationship with the discipline of psychoanalysis, Marco Bardini notes that her knowledge on the subject derived from 'il contatto diretto con altri intellettuali presenti a Roma in quel periodo [negli anni Trenta]' (Bardini 1990, 177), who included her husband Alberto Moravia.<sup>6</sup> As well as Bardini (1990), scholars such as Giovanna Rosa (1995) and Elena Porciani (2014) have noted that, by the end of the thirties, Morante showed a 'maggiore familiarità con Freud, anche se probabilmente tramite la lettura di testi divulgativi italiani più che attraverso il contatto con l'originale' (Porciani 2014, 162). Traditionally, the study of her open references to psychoanalytical ideas has revolved mainly around works such as *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), *Lo scialle andaluso* (1963), and *Aracoeli* (1982) where the themes of ghosts and dreams, amongst others, have been interpreted as manifestations of the Freudian idea of the return of the repressed and of the characters' latent libidinal energy.<sup>7</sup> Recently, thanks to the work of scholars such as Porciani, the study of these motifs has also been applied to earlier short stories which have been seen as a testing ground for the writer's first attempts at depicting some of these psychoanalytical concepts. Porciani (2006) looks at the neglected work dated between 1933 and 1941 and investigates the recurrence and the relevance of the motif of the ghost and the dream. Like Porciani's critical premises, the aim of the next few pages is to consider the writer's earlier work. They will move from the study of the erotic and poetic potential of ghosts and dreams to look at the objects which appear in the short stories. They will analyse the creative power inherent in the objects inhabiting these 'memorie parabio-grafiche, sospese tra autobiografia e *fiction*' (Porciani 2014, 192) and investigate how the characters' attachment to them is intertwined with literary and narrative creation.

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Elsa Morante's 'I miei vestiti' ([1939] 2002) belongs to the category of texts placed at the crossroads between fiction and autobiographical writing. The events reported in these pages by the first-person narrator may well be identified as revolving around a re-elaboration of young Elsa's life. Lacking a clear plotline, this tale is more a reflection on the creative drive which animates the young protagonist at the sight of a piece of fabric and on the narcissism she displays as she wears clothes

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed overview on the reception and circulation of Freudian ideas in the Roman environment to which Morante belonged, see Bardini (1990). For a more general overview on psychoanalysis in the Italian literary context, see David (1966), where he also discusses Morante's debt to the Freudian works that circulated at the time; Diazi and Sforza Tarabocchia (2019).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Lugnani (1990), Scarano (1990), and Lombardo (2016). An overview on the Freudian critical tradition with regard to Elsa Morante's texts is offered in Brogi's article 'Per Elsa Morante' (2015). The dream motif has received particular critical attention. See for example, Farnetti (1993), Rosa (1995), Blelloch (1990), Berardinelli (2000), Serkowska (2002), and Porciani (2019) to mention just a few.

designed by herself, following the suggestion of an invisible presence she calls the ghost of the past.<sup>8</sup> Triggered by the inspiration coming from the ghost, her imagination beautifies and enlivens what is no more than an apparently dull piece of cloth and turns it into an extravagant and unique garment.

At the beginning of the short story, the text reads: ‘io, dopo i dieci anni, mi distinsi da [le mie compagne di classe] per la mia ferma aspirazione ad una sontuosità regale’ (Morante 2002, 228) stimulated by ‘l’ombra [di] un monarca o semplice gentiluomo’ (228), her ancestor. She then explains how the sartorial process of creation takes place, how inspiring simple pieces of fabric turn out to be, and their endless creative potential. She reveals that:

[q]uando mia madre mi proponeva: ‘Adesso ti facciamo un bel cappottino nuovo con questa vecchia coperta da letto’, ovvero ‘con la giacca grigia del papà’, *l’anima mia prendeva a fantasticare*. Essendo la coperta da letto di un color sanguigno, subito *il solito fantasma dell’antenato* con lusinghevoli modi mi proponeva un manto di porpora guarnito di ermellino. Esigevo dunque un mantello alla moschettiera, e lo guarnivo intorno con pezzi di uno spelacchiato coniglio bianco. E così avvolta uscivo, nei copiosi miei riccioli, imbronciata. Che avrà detto di me la città? Lo ignoro. (Morante 2002, 228 my emphasis)

While it is true that her aspiration to customise her own clothes is a consequence of her supposedly aristocratic lineage and is genetically preserved in her blood, it is also true that her creativity does not spring naturally, but rather is inspired by an external, supernatural and yet very familiar (in a literal sense) entity.<sup>9</sup> This presence, temporally and spatially distant, is depicted as the trigger for her creative insights and allows her to set her fantasy free. The creative process is foreign to young Elsa, because it is inspired by another entity. At the same time, it is extremely intimate and personal in that it is an integral part of her own persona, a constitutive and hereditary element of her biological body.

The way the ‘tirannico fantasma’ inspires such sartorial creations is by means of poetry, as if the poetic word were literally intertwined with the fibres of the girl’s clothing:

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<sup>8</sup> In relation to these texts by Morante, in *L'alibi del sogno*, Porciani observes that ‘[c]on il sogno [...] ci si ricollega all’origine, si recupera la memoria delle nostre radici più intime e, cedendo alle suggestioni dell’oniologia romantica, anche anteriori’ (Porciani 2006, 120). Although in ‘I miei vestiti’ we do not find the motif of the dream, the theme of the link with the past seems to be a recurring one and appears to be used as a justification for the uniqueness and the extraordinariness of the protagonist.

<sup>9</sup> The allusion to this nonhuman presence can be framed within the context of the supernatural entities appearing in Morante’s texts which have been interpreted as manifestations of the return of the repressed. They have been widely explored by studies such as Porciani (2014) which considers the presence of the uncanny religious in Morante’s fantastic literature. These aspects are usually referred back to *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), where the idea of the ‘family ghost’ reappears more vividly; but as is clear from this example, this motif makes its appearance in Morante’s work long before the novel. This goes to validate Porciani’s thesis that Morante’s earlier writings bear the traces of the subsequent, mature *oeuvre* and that this earlier part of her work should for this reason be investigated more thoroughly (2006).

Mi parlava, credete, in poesia, e forse mi diceva: – O cara, illumina codesto grembiulino banale con una fiammata di rosso. O ultimo rampollo, non essere una insipida scolaretta. Somiglia tu, o bambina, ad una montagna in fiore, ad una accesa aurora. Ecco, prendi queste salviettine da merenda e trasformale in volanti, quasi tante alucce, per la tua sottanina. (Morante 2002, 230)

The raw materiality of the fabric is no longer identifiable as ‘una vecchia coperta da letto’, because it is enlivened and embellished with familial poetry. A fundamental parallel is thus established: the ancestor’s spirit that speaks in verses inspires and enhances the protagonist’s creativeness and leads her to materialise her lively imagination through the creation of original garments. Following Fusillo’s understanding of the projection of fetishistic values onto objects as a process that is similar to artistic creation, because ‘entrambe partono dall’eterogeneità e alterità delle cose fisiche per intesservi sopra racconti, simbologie, passioni’ (Fusillo 2012, 31), the creative process highlighted in ‘I miei vestiti’ hints at an ulterior level of complexity. The object in fact is not simply invested with ‘racconti, simbologie, passioni’. It materialises them. What appeared to be sterile and raw material is re-converted into an aesthetic and very concrete product. The etymological meaning of poetry, from the Greek ‘poietes’ meaning ‘to make’, is re-established. The act of making poetry is materialised. It is *made into* clothes. It is thus possible to argue that ‘I miei vestiti’ is a short story about the creative process, the factors involved in the creation of poetry, and the creation of a poetic persona.

The process of making and the display of clothes created with ‘antichi velluti cangianti, ornate allo scollo di fiorellini di pezza tutti acciaccati’ (Morante 2002, 228) also plays a relevant part in the performance of the young protagonist’s social role. The evocation of so distant a past responds to the little girl’s attempt to distance herself from her peers and to the desire to stress her uniqueness. She labels herself as a peculiar and solitary girl who observes ‘con occhi ladri [...] i figurini francesi, interpretandoli ad uso della mia propria persona’, and consciously rejects integration with her peers: ‘quali spiriti smalizati, mi saltarono intorno con guizzi maligni. [...] E intanto risa soffocate correvano, e voci mi pungevano da ogni parte’ (229). Her firm resolution to reject the fashion sense of her time and to adopt a style evoking a more glorious past corresponds to the active rejection of her contemporaneity and estrangement from the society to which she is supposed to belong.<sup>10</sup> Porciani observes that in this short story:

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<sup>10</sup> The self-isolation from her classmates, together with her eccentric taste show not only the character’s strong and narcissistic sense of self, but also her attempt to resist what Karen Pinkus defines as the penetration of popular imagery into the collective unconscious. See Pinkus (1995, 2).

Elsa rappresenta sé stessa da piccola come un carattere fantastico la cui propensione a evadere nei sogni ad occhi aperti si spiega con il rifiuto della ‘mediocrità’, di un mondo reale insufficiente ad appagare l’enormità dei suoi desideri [...]. *A loro volta, i desideri sono amplificati dalla sostanziale solitudine, dall’incapacità di essere in sintonia con il mondo esterno*: durante la recita scolastica la superiorità nei confronti delle compagne si abbina alla visione di sé stessa ‘lontana da tutti, in un’ombra nera e piena di lampi, un fenomeno della creazione’. (Porciani 2006, 193, my emphasis)

The sensitivity that characterises the child and allows her to form a connection with the ghost of the past is also the sign of her isolation from her peers. The ‘antichi velluti cangianti’, the ‘grembiule banale [illuminato] con una fiammata di rosso’ represent not only the embodiment of poetic inspiration and the expression of the protagonist’s intellectual and physical heritage, but they make material the social distinction and the consequent isolation of the protagonist from her peers. The clothes manifest her desire to be truer to her own aspirations. They also trap her in an impasse in which she finds herself isolated from the rest of the community around her. Porciani argues that this isolation and the perception of her difference feeds into the cycle of poetic creation:

La contrapposizione tra la superbia del piccolo ‘genio’ Elsa e le ‘modeste compagne’ è subito dichiarata con forza. Altrettanto rapidamente, però, si intuisce il soggiacente disagio psicologico della bambina, che risponde a un bivalente meccanismo di amore e odio di sé, destinato a ripresentarsi in un articolo del 1950, in versione adulta, nella figura del ‘narciso infelice’ Ludovica: ‘ella non piace a se stessa, si giudica brutta, sgradevole, ignorante, e non dubita che anche gli altri siano della sua stessa opinione’, anche se in fondo ‘si adora’ [...]. Proprio questo conflitto interiore, in cui l’insicurezza e un divorante bisogno di amore si alleano con la superbia e l’orgoglio, costituisce il presupposto per la dichiarata tendenza alla fantasticheria. (Porciani 2006, 192)

The familial and poetic significance of the fabric in this short story can be read through what Fusillo defines the ‘oggetto memoriale’ and describes as follows:

L’oggetto memoriale è quello in cui più si esplica una delle due component fondamentali e antitetiche del nostro percorso, la tendenza cioè a proiettare *sugli oggetti valori affettivi ed*

*emotivi* che coesiste con la tendenza a *valorizzarli invece nella loro autonoma e brutta materialità*. (Fusillo 2012, 47, my emphasis)

The pieces of fabric that are subsequently transformed into the little girl's garments belong to the domestic sphere: old blankets and shirts repurposed to fit the protagonist's idea of a garment. They are a stratification of familiar, affective, and emotional meanings, but they are also appreciated for their unique material qualities. By following the ghost's suggestion to, for example 'illumina[re] [il] grembiolino banale con una fiammata di rosso' (Morante 2002, 229-230), the individual qualities of the fabric are enhanced and are given a value that does not conflict with the emotional meanings projected upon it. These meanings and the material valorisation of the fabric by young Elsa do not conceal antithetical functions, as Fusillo maintains. They *complement* each other and make the object even more pregnant with meaning.

When he analysed Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Fusillo observed that the depiction of the past in the novel takes place mostly through the description of the objects. He wrote that 'l'ossessione per il passato non è solo un tratto caratteriale di [Miss Havisham] [ma] è un motivo ricorrente di tutto il romanzo, che non fa intravedere nessuna speranza di riscatto e di mobilità sociale' (Fusillo 2012, 54). The depiction of non-functional objects which belong to the category that Orlando defines 'logororealistico' is helpful to 'negare ogni mito di produttività capitalistica, segnando la delusione delle grandi attese' (55). The representation of these dysfunctional objects preannounces the failure of the great expectations and the impossibility of social advancement for the protagonist.

'I miei vestiti' does not present the same level of social and political engagement as Dickens's novel, but the Morantian text resonates with Fusillo's considerations, insofar as the past perpetuates itself through the display of specific objects, clothes in this case. Fusillo observes that:

[i]n *Grandi speranze* ci troviamo piuttosto di fronte a una coralità di oggetti [...] che certo materializza un'ossessione mentale legata alla vita privata del personaggio, ma nello stesso tempo assume anche una connotazione sociale di rifiuto del mondo contemporaneo e della sua produttività esasperata. (Fusillo 2012, 55)

We could make a similar point about this short story. The fetishised clothes become the custodians of the protagonist's identity. They embody the past she wants to belong to and express her rejection of life in the contemporary community of her peers. The social function of this type of fetish is to incorporate oneself into or liberate oneself from the surrounding community.

The ‘oggetto memoriale’ as codified by Fusillo has a memorial and a material function. In ‘I miei vestiti’, the fabric has a strong identity-giving value, which is intertwined with the emotional and sentimental meanings cast upon it by the protagonist. Both these functions are undertaken by the object which appears in Anna Maria Ortese’s ‘Un paio di occhiali’, published in *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ([1953] 1994). This text, described by Baldi as ‘una fantasia di appagamento del desiderio [che] innesca la narrazione’ (Baldi 2000, 85), revolves around a short-sighted little girl, Eugenia, as she waits to be given her glasses.<sup>11</sup> Coming from a poor family, the protagonist is depicted as dreaming about the glasses and fantasising about the kaleidoscopic reality she will eventually be able to see around her. The short story, however, closes on Eugenia’s bewilderment and anguish as she sees through the glasses that her surroundings are in fact much poorer and less vibrant than those she had hoped to see.

The story starts with a flashback which portrays the young girl while she tries on the glasses at a luxurious optician’s shop. When she first wears them, the world around her appears to be much more vivid and lively than the shadowy and blurred reality she was used to perceiving. The chromatic notes enlivening this environment introduce the kaleidoscopic quality of the world in via Roma:

[S]ul marciapiede passavano, nitidissime, appena più piccole del normale, tante persone ben vestite: signore con abiti di seta e visi incipriati, giovanotti coi capelli lunghi e il pullover colorato, vecchietti con la barba bianca e le mani rosa appoggiate sul bastone dal pomo d’argento; e, in mezzo alla strada, certe belle automobili che sembravano giocattoli, con la carrozzeria dipinta in rosso o in verde petrolio, tutta luccicante; filobus grandi come case, verdi, coi vetri abbassati, e dietro i vetri tanta gente vestita elegantemente. (Ortese 1994, 16-17)

The first use of the glasses corresponds to an overwhelming sensory experience, as ‘Eugenia assiste al tripudio di uno spettacolo borghese irradiante vitalità, scandito da ritmi ordinati e festosi di un allestimento quasi favolistico’ (Baldi 2000, 86).

The disappointment lurking behind her initial happiness, however, is anticipated by the reaction of the adults around her, such as her aunt. The woman’s mantra-like expression ‘ottomila lire vive

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Vilma de Gasperin adding to Sharon Wood’s observations, comments on the textual aetiology as follows: ‘both the motif of the glasses that reveal the ugly reality destroying any previous illusion, and the name of the protagonist Eugenia, suggest an intertextual reference to ‘The Spectacles’ by Edgar Allan Poe, where the male protagonist falls madly in love with the elderly Eugénie Lalande, until he wears the revealing spectacles that will save him from an unsuitable marriage’ (de Gasperin 2014, 139).

vive' recurs throughout the text as an ominous reminder of the object's incongruity in so poor an environment. As was the case in Morante's short story and as Fusillo showed in relation to Dickens, the object becomes a social marker. The glasses make material a comfort that is foreign to Eugenia's social extraction. They are foreign to the deprivation and indigence of her family. In *Great Expectations*, Fusillo recognised the impossibility of social advancement by observing the recurrence of obsolete objects appearing in the text. Here, the opposite process is taking place. It is the novelty and the material luxury embodied in the glasses which act as a reminder of the impossibility of social improvement. As Baldi notes: '[a] proiettare ombre di dubbio su troppo agevoli confort è la stessa condizione della bambina, il cui "rapimento" deve presto scontrarsi con la raggelante diffidenza di adulti e coetanei, immunizzati contro miraggi di riscatto o avversi a qualsiasi mutamento dei destini sociali' (Baldi 2000, 87).

The description of the 'bruta materialità' of the glasses also confirms their foreignness in Eugenia's circle. As soon as they are introduced, the narrator describes them as '*una specie d'insetto lucentissimo, con due occhi grandi grandi e due antenne ricurve, scintilla in un raggio smorto di sole, nella mano lunga e rossa di donna Rosa [...]. Poi, in silenzio, li posò sul viso di Eugenia, che estatica tendeva le mani, e le sistemò con cui quelle due antenne dietro le orecchie*' (Ortese 1994, 32, my emphasis). Far from the fashionable and alluring power these 'cerchietti dorati' exercised on the protagonist in the first part of the story, the glasses are now turned into a threatening and uncanny insect, 'qualcosa di perturbante e di minaccioso' (Seno Reed 2013, 121). Their disturbing potential is particularly evident in the last part of the short story, where Eugenia's sight provides the image of a dazzling and labyrinthine environment:

[C]on le labbra bianche, voleva sorridere ma quel sorriso si mutava in smorfia ebete. Improvvisamente i balconi cominciarono a diventare tanti, duemila, centomila; i carretti con la verdura le precipitavano addosso; le voci che riempivano l'aria, i richiami, le frustate, le colpivano la testa come se fosse malata; si volse barcollando verso il cortile, e quella terribile impressione aumentò. Come un imbuto viscido il cortile, con la punta verso il cielo e i muri lebbrosi fitti di miserabili balconi; gli archi dei terranei, neri, coi lumi brillanti a cerchio intorno all'Addolorata; il selciato bianco [...] cominciarono a torcersi, torcersi e confondersi, a ingigantire. (Ortese 1994, 33)

Far from their initial luxurious frame 'Tutto dorato! [...] lucente lucente!', the spectacles are now turned into 'due cerchietti stregati', which prevent Eugenia from making sense of and accepting the reality surrounding her. The disgust and the dizziness provoked by the environment is so strong that

‘fu Mariuccia per prima ad accorgersi che la bambina stava male, e a strapparle in fretta gli occhiali, perché Eugenia si era piegata in due e, lamentandosi, vomitava’ (Ortese 1994, 33).

The role of the glasses in this short story is not limited to the memorial function. It extends to a more creative one. This can be observed when Eugenia wears them and observes the colourful and glamorous reality of via Roma, which is at the heart of her misunderstanding. She starts to believe that her personal and familiar reality is also at least as lively as the view from the shop, and does not realise the poverty and the destitution affecting her and her family’s lives. It is precisely based on such a misleading memory that the process of fetishisation of the glasses will take place.

A useful tool for the analysis of this fetishistic transfiguration comes again from *Feticci*. One of the definitions chosen by Fusillo to illustrate the creativity concealed in the process of fetishistic investment is the ‘mythopoetic power of fetishism’, namely the capacity of object fetishism to act as a trigger for the process of narrative production. The example the scholar chooses to introduce this idea is Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856), where a great deal of narrative attention is addressed to the ‘oggetti-feticcio della moda parigina’ (Fusillo 2012, 98). According to Fusillo, in several instances in the novel ‘*a partire dalla bruta materialità della materia [...] Emma costruisce un racconto, seguendo un procedimento primario della narrativa*’ (102, my emphasis), which consists of ‘la valorizzazione del dettaglio’ (29). The protagonist uses luxurious and fashionable objects as material remedies to mentally escape the provincial life of squalor and solitude in which she feels trapped. Emma becomes the demiurge of her private and ideal dimension, where the objects she is surrounded by acquire new meanings and recall the more luxurious and grandiose universe she longs to inhabit. Commenting on the relation Emma establishes with these objects, Fusillo writes: ‘un intreccio fittissimo [esiste] tra soggettivo e oggettivo’ (98), so that objects become ‘interlocutori delle nostre ossessioni mentali, e produttori di fantasie, storie, immagini’ (100). Stylistically, such a process is based on heterogeneity, the mingling of ‘la gerarchia fra soggetti nobili e soggetti umili, fra narrazione e descrizione, fra primo piano e sfondo’ (102), which replicates the fetishistic confusion that blurs the boundaries between subjects and objects and between reality and fantasies, and hints at the continuity established between these elements.

The process taking place in ‘Un paio di occhiali’ can fruitfully be compared to Emma’s desire to beautify the world she inhabits through the production of narrative developments that spring from specific objects. The narrator of ‘Un paio di occhiali’ reveals that Eugenia was eagerly waiting for those precious glasses framed in ‘un filo dorato’ (Ortese 1994, 26) and ever since she first tried them on, ‘aveva vissuto in una specie di rapimento, in attesa di quei benedetti occhiali che le avrebbero permesso di vedere tutte le persone e le cose nei loro minuti particolari’ (18). Clearly, they are progressively invested with a series of expectations and become the concrete promise that will open up

to the child a new universe of stunning visual experiences. In Cosetta Seno Reed's words, 'gli occhiali diventano per Eugenia, memore dell'esperienza vissuta dall'ottico, una sorta di "feticcio" che le consente di credere in un mondo bello e felice' (Seno Reed 2013, 121) and mentally create a distorted perception of reality.

Further proof of this hypothesis comes from those instances in which the protagonist is not wearing the glasses and yet imagines her surroundings to be as colourful and lively as they were in via Roma, at the optician's shop. Sent by her aunt to the tobacco shop, for example, Eugenia looks up without the lenses and:

[S]corse quel bagliore caldo, azzurro, ch'era il cielo e sentì, *senza però vederla chiaramente*, la festa che c'era intorno in alto, i balconi erano tutti ingombri di cassette fiorite, e alle inferriate penzolavano, come gualdrappe di cavallo, come bandiere, coperte, imbottite, gialle e rosse, straccetti celesti di bambini. (Ortese 1994, 23-24, my emphasis)

The description of the poor neighbourhoods where the girl and her family live is similar to the first landscape that the protagonist observes from the optician's window, brimming with life and animated by '[una] festa'. Here, however, we are in Neapolitan slums, far from the luxury of via Roma.

The same abundance of detail characterises her stay at the house of the Marchesa, where, despite her short sightedness, she notices a considerable amount of:

cose belle, fini! Come nel negozio di via Roma! E lì, proprio davanti a lei, un balcone aperto, con tanti vasetti di fiori. Uscì sul balcone. Quant'aria, quanto azzurro! Le case, come coperte da un velo celeste, e giù il vicolo, come un pozzo, con tante formiche [...] E intorno, quasi invisibile nella gran luce, il mondo fatto da Dio, col vento, il sole, e laggiù il mare pulito, grande... . (Ortese 1994, 30)

The memory of the vision acquired through her improved sight is superimposed onto the unclear, blurred shapes Eugenia observes around her. In Fusillo's words, Eugenia 'attiva trasfigurando' the reality around through the fetishised idea of the glasses which become 'il propulsore di un racconto' (Fusillo 2012, 110).

In this regard, Seno Reed has noticed how this narrative can be fully inscribed within Ortese's 'avventuroso realismo', because 'Eugenia grazie agli occhiali è pur entrata nel "meraviglioso", ma se quel meraviglioso implicava [...] un mondo di fate e principi, ora [...] comporta la presa di coscienza di una realtà ostile in cui la meraviglia si trasforma in angoscia' (Seno Reed 2013, 125). The magical

effect of the glasses does not beautify the world around the protagonist when she is wearing them. They rather show her the misery in which she lives, which she had overlooked because of her poor sight and sublimated through her creativity. The last words uttered by the protagonist further prove the point. Eugenia's exclamation 'Mammà, dove stiamo?' (Ortese 1994, 34) has been interpreted by Seno Reed as 'una non accettazione del presente e sono quasi una flebile accusa a quell'umanità cenciosa che la circonda che anche a quel degrado si è abituata, tanto da non notarlo più' (Seno Reed 2013, 124).<sup>12</sup>

Eugenia's fetishisation of the glasses can only take place *in absentia*. The thrilling and exciting vibrancy of the spectacles and the promise of a colourful world can only be enjoyed when she is not wearing them. Her creative and beautifying impulse, which feeds on the memory she made during the first time she wore them, creates alternative, fantastic dimensions, but these alternative worlds do not correspond to what can be observed through the glasses. The excitement vanishes as soon as they are used to investigate the world epistemologically. Once Eugenia realises that what she had been perceiving as shadows and shapes do not correspond to the colourful reality of the city she had hoped to discern, the return to an enchanted and childlike illusion is negated.<sup>13</sup> The glasses mark a traumatic entry into the grown-up world that ends up supporting zia Nunziata's disillusioned and bitter words: 'Figlia mia, il mondo è meglio non vederlo che vederlo' (Ortese 1994, 18).

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<sup>12</sup> The analysis of the glasses and of their impact on the protagonist stimulates important sociological considerations. The collection *Il mare non bagna Napoli* contains other more reportage-like texts such as 'Il silenzio della ragione', which depicts the shocking degradation afflicting post-war Neapolitan neighbourhoods. Although 'Un paio di occhiali' appears to be far from the style and tone of these more factual writings, it is still engaged in these issues and it does so through the use of the fantastic and, more specifically, by turning 'la meraviglia in angoscia' (Seno Reed 2013, 125) as Seno Reed claims. In the light of these considerations, the sociological role of the glasses should appear more clearly. Their use at the optician's shop shines a light on the bourgeois and metropolitan environment of via Roma and prompts Eugenia to extend such enchantment to the entire world. The dramatic clash between expectations and reality not only illuminates Eugenia's personal experience but casts a more general light onto the issues afflicting the poor in Naples.

<sup>13</sup> In analysing 'Un paio di occhiali' and the later short story 'Un incendio' (1960), de Gasperin observes: 'both stories centre around a child protagonist and narrate the formative transition from an earlier state of delusory bliss to a state of knowledge of the misery of reality, depicted as extreme poverty in "Un paio di occhiali", and as emotional disillusion in "L'incendio". The state of innocence-ignorance of reality is symbolized in the one by myopia (Eugenia is "quasi cecata" [almost blind]) and in the other by stupidity (Papele is "deficiente" [stupid]), while the sudden realization of reality for the two child protagonists is symbolized by a new pair of glasses for Eugenia and by a hidden letter for Papele. Through these means, at the end of each story the two children can see and understand respectively, but with this they have lost the lightness and happiness that derived from not seeing and not understanding reality' (de Gasperin 2014, 138).

### 3. The Object as Social and Erotic Mediator: Two Examples from Italo Calvino's *Gli amori difficili*

Because of Calvino's scepticism towards psychoanalysis,<sup>14</sup> the short stories collected in *Gli amori difficili*, one of the sections of *I racconti* (1958),<sup>15</sup> have been interpreted through a Freudian or Lacanian approach only relatively recently. Scholars such as Guido Bonsaver (1994), Robert Rushing (2006), and Alessandra Diazzi (2014) interpret a selection of *avventure* through a typically Lacanian framework and underline the importance that desire plays in these short stories. Barbara Spackman (2008) and Bridget Tompkins (2015) adopt a more Freudian standpoint and focus on the notion of desire, absence, and the 'Pygmalion syndrome' which affects the male characters throughout Calvino's shorter works.

Franco Ricci's influential work (1990) revolves around a similar psychoanalytical premise, but it also considers the defining and mediating role that objects have in the entire collection. Ricci's argument stems from Calvino's introduction to the 1970 edition of *Gli amori difficili*, where the writer defines this work as based on:

una difficoltà di comunicazione, una zona di silenzio al fondo dei rapporti umani [...] nella maggior parte dei casi [il termine 'avventura'] indica soltanto un movimento interiore, la storia di uno stato d'animo, un itinerario verso il silenzio. Va detto che per Calvino questo nucleo di silenzio non è soltanto un passivo ineliminabile in ogni rapporto umano: racchiude pure un valore prezioso, assoluto. (Calvino 1992, 1289)

Solitude, incommunicability, and silence are the result of the characters' ineptitude; their incapability of voicing their desires often condemns them to loneliness and isolation. Ricci writes that the characters of *Gli amori difficili* 'lack both a sense of past and a sense of self, and are overwhelmed by the objects which surround them' (Ricci 1990, 9), which are interpreted as a reflection of their 'modern labyrinthine existence' (64), as well as props that sustain their 'self-referential universe' (65). The role played by the objects of these short stories is far from secondary. They become the mediators of the characters' relationship to the outside world, they 'legitimize [...] [the characters'] existence;

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding this, Diazzi writes that: 'Despite this pervasiveness of desire, its relationship with Calvino's works has suffered general neglect, as in the case of all sorts of psychoanalytic connections. This phenomenon is due to both some resistance of the author himself on these specific themes, and to a critical approach that still follows what we may call a "vulgate" reading of Calvino: consciously or not, all aspects that may run the risk of undermining Calvino as an iconic figure of rationalist and scientific writer [...] are often undervalued' (Diazzi 2014, 167). For a more detailed overview see Spackman (2008) and Diazzi (2014).

<sup>15</sup> See note 5 of this chapter.

[they] protect [them] from the outside world by providing a codified shield of coherence' (65). The 'pienezza ormai perduta' (Fusillo 2012, 21) that Fusillo mentions as the fundamental element in the fetishistic phenomenon can be recognised in *Gli amori difficili* in the characters' deficient and mal-adjusted relationship to their surroundings, from which they feel completely disconnected. The lost communion with the social body or the inept relation with their romantic interests pushes the characters to attempt to bridge that gap through objects.

This is what happens in 'L'avventura di una bagnante' ([1951] 1992), which offers an illustrative example of the comforting and protective power concealed in garments. The adventure revolves around Isotta Barberino's misfortune as she realises she has lost her bikini while swimming far out at sea. This apparently comic event is in fact deeply traumatic for the protagonist, whose sense of mal-adjustment is increased by her sense of guilt and shame in perceiving her cumbersome physical nudity. She is eventually rescued by an old man and a boy who help her back to shore.

The short story opens with the protagonist's sensation of shame and discomfort:

Facendo il bagno alla spiaggia di \*\*\*, alla signora Isotta Barberino capitò un increscioso contrattempo. Nuotava al largo, e quando, parendole tempo di tornare, si girò verso riva, s'accorse che un fatto senza rimedio era accaduto. Aveva perso il costume da bagno. Non poteva dire se le fosse caduto proprio allora, o se già da un po' stesse nuotando senza; *del nuovo due-pezzi che portava, le restava solo il reggiseno. A un movimento dell'anca dovevano esserle saltati via certi bottoni, e lo 'slip', ridotto a uno straccetto informe, le era scivolato giù dall'altra gamba. Forse stava ancora affondando a pochi palmi sotto di lei; provò a calarsi sott'acqua per cercarlo, ma il respiro le mancò subito e solo confuse ombre verdi le baluginavano allo sguardo.* (Calvino 1992, 1075, my emphasis)

Like the rest of the short stories that make up the collection, this introspective tale revolves around the protagonist's perception of her solitude and displays the sense of anxiety originating from the realisation of her own maladjustment. Franco Ricci observes that these tales are 'adventures of tragically alienated individuals [who] are overwhelmed by the objects which surround them' (Ricci 1990, 9). In this case, however, it is not the sense of being overwhelmed by the objectual world that exacerbates Isotta's discomfort. It is the perception of the absence of such a prop.

Being deprived of this physical support is also what alters the woman's perception of life on shore. The loss of the swimsuit and the subsequent anxiety provoked by this event have the effect of turning the vision of the seashore into a dizzying mixture of colours and shapes which increase the sense of

disorientation perceived by the woman, who looks at the scene with a growing sense of physical sickness:

[O]mbrelloni a cerchi neri e gialli concentrici gettavano ombre nere in cui i corpi s'appiattivano, e il brulichio dei bagnanti traboccava in mare [...] l'orlo nero della distesa azzurra era mosso da un continuo schizzare di getti bianchi, specie dietro le corde dove ribolliva la marmaglia dei bambini e ad ogni blanda onda si levava un gridio di note subito inghiottite di boato. Al largo di quella spiaggia, lei era nuda. (Calvino 1992, 1077)

The look cast towards the shore flattens out the variety of the life that populates it and synthesises it into a bi-dimensional ('i corpi s'appiattivano') black and white picture, in which the sense of suffocating anxiety is increased by polysyndeton that connects the various elements in the landscape through the conjunction 'e'. The threatening and yet longed-for life on the beach contrasts starkly with the uncomfortable perception of her 'pelle nuda' (Calvino 1992, 1077) and pushes her to day-dream about the well-adjusted and non-naked people around her. The vivacity of the scene at the seafront, however, is not devoid of threats, as can be seen by the ominous recurrence of the colour black, which matches the frightening humanity populating it. Isotta feels vulnerable when facing 'siepi di malizia e sottinteso, un rovelto di pupille *pungenti*, *d'incisivi scoperti* in risi ambigui, di repentine soste interrogative dei remi a fior d'acqua e a lei non restava che fuggire' (Calvino 1992, 1079). The menacing sharpness ('pupille pungenti, incisivi scoperti') of the other beachgoers in contrast to her soft, curved body isolates and stigmatises Isotta's nakedness even more. The danger that materialises around her 'pelle nuda' significantly deepens the gap between the protagonist and her surroundings and banishes her from an integrated sociality which she had initially willingly abandoned.

What, then, is the role of the swimsuit in this context? According to the Freudian definition of fetish, it is identified as an object that takes the place of something else. The fetish can be seen as a 'monument' of 'triumph over the threat of castration and functions as a protection against such threat' (Freud [1927] 2001, XXI 154). Freud continues the analysis by expanding on the process of the identification of the fetish, the criteria for whose selection would seem to be that it was the last object looked at before the discovery of the woman's (mother's) lack of penis.

Freud's theory is based on a male-centred perspective. The fetishist is always a male whose fear of castration pushes him to adopt strategies to overcome that fear. If we were to follow a purely classical Freudian framework, then it could be argued that the protagonist adopts a male-centred approach to her nudity, because she feels the need to wear a garment that covers her shameful body.

Isotta perceives her lack of penis as a threatening fact that exposes her vulnerability and therefore has to be concealed from the rest of the beachgoers. The bikini becomes a shield to keep the monstrosity of her body without penis at bay and comes to be seen as an object that contributes to her integration within the adjusted community of the dressed people.

This interpretation, however, results to be rather limited when we consider the role of the bikini within the social context presented in the short story. Isotta both longs for and fears life on shore because she desires to be included in that sociality, but she also knows that she would need to disavow part of her self and her body to do so. Insights into this dynamic can come from Dana Renga (2003) who suggests that the role played by the swimsuit can be better understood through consideration of the social and cultural changes that were taking place in the years of the economic boom. By ‘propos[ing] connections between subject and world not established according to cultural hierarchies’ (Renga 2003, 372), Calvino suggests a new version of feminine identity. Renga observes how in *Gli amori difficili* female characters are ‘travellers in a defamiliarized order [...] They delicately uncover universal ironies as they manoeuvre through the encoded logic of class and gender in the economic miracle’ (373). The female characters of Calvino’s fiction are caught between a traditional depiction of gender roles and a more liberated understanding of the female identity. Despite their belonging to the ‘new Italy’, they are still trapped within traditional representations of ‘engendered’ family.

The ‘disagio’ provoked at first when she wears the ‘straccetto informe’ is reflective of the discomfort caused by the perception of ‘quest’offensivo corpo nudo le veniva dietro’, which she is clearly not used to displaying in such a fashion, instead reserving it for ‘il segreto carnevale’ shared with her husband (who, however, never appears in the narrative). Intimacy ‘becomes an act “other” to and separate from what the signora would consider normalised behaviour’ (Renga 2003, 375), and confirms the idea that the sexual liberation initiated with the bikini is still far from happening. More revealing of the woman’s body, the bikini is given a double role as a piece of clothing that does not cover the woman’s shapes and simultaneously responds to the need of the protagonist to affirm her physicality and emancipate her sexuality. The bikini, in other words, can be both a liberating and a condemning instrument, promising sexual and social liberation, or social exclusion. As a consequence, clothes in ‘L’avventura di una bagnante’ become a fetish that ‘do[es] not just disguise a repressed secret, but [...] protect[s] from fear, feeling lost, abandonment and being hurt. In terms of the fetishism of fashion, fetishes are about the protective and not the decorative function of clothing’ (Böhme 2014, 379), while also being an element that contributes to Isotta’s own social segregation.

Such a protective and comforting function is even more evident when Isotta perceives the arrival of a long green and orange skirt as her salvation: ‘il ragazzo sollevava una stretta vela verde: una sottana!’ (Calvino 1992, 1083). ‘La gonna verde a fiori arancione’ (1084) expresses a vivacity that

used to characterise life on shore only and is now bringing part of that perceived wellbeing to her also. Being provided with such garments is not only a way to forget ‘i pensieri, il freddo, la paura’ (Calvino 1992, 1084), but also her way to be re-established in an ideal social order in which she ‘makes sense’. Her rescuers, the old man and the child, remove her from her independent solitude by bringing her back to shore in their boat and reintroducing her harmoniously to society. By projecting her point of view on the people on shore, Isotta imagines that ‘chi guardava da terra credeva che quei tre fossero una famigliola’ (1084). Incapable of taking on fully an attempt at complete emancipation, the protagonist decides to embrace the old social balance by symbolically taking on the role of the mother and wearing clothes that deny and cover the sensuality of her body, and manifest her will to be reintroduced within a more traditional social order.

Unlike the child protagonist of Morante’s ‘I miei vestiti’, who refused to make her identity conform within pre-established and pre-defined social roles, the older protagonist of ‘L’avventura di una bagnante’ gives up her aspiration to create her own identity so as to take back the former role of the mother. This shows that garments are used as keys to enter and leave the social sphere by way of conformation to the rest of society, as is the case for Isotta, or by wearing one’s own identity, as is the case for young Elsa. In both cases, clothes are shown to be invested with emotional and emancipating values. Those values, however, condemn both protagonists to loneliness and isolation.

A similar preoccupation with the depiction of human solitude can be found in ‘L’avventura di un fotografo’ ([1955] 1992), where the idea of the fetish is progressively identified with the technological enhancement of the protagonist’s intellectual and sexual impairment.<sup>16</sup> The short story revolves around Antonino Paraggi’s progressively closer relationship with the camera and the parallel erotic relationship he establishes with Bice. The end of the relationship with the woman coincides with the peak of his photographic obsession, which will eventually bring him to madness and isolation.

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<sup>16</sup> Falcetto discusses the problem of the dates connected to this short story in *Note e notizie sui testi*, where he notes: ‘Si tratta, per usare le parole dell’autore, della “«messa in racconto» (come dire «messa in scena») d’un articolo saggistico”. Un primo esempio, dunque, di una trasposizione di generi che diventerà procedimento caratteristico dell’ultimo Calvino, da *Palomar* a *Collezione di sabbia*. L’articolo in questione è *La follia del mirino*, apparso su *Il Contemporaneo* nella rubrica *Le armi, gli amori* il 30 aprile 1955. L’autografo del testo giornalistico è conservato nella stessa cartelletta che raccoglie due stesure manoscritte della nuova versione. Il primo foglio della bella copia reca l’indicazione a matita: “riscritto marzo 1970 sull’articolo del 1955”. Nel 1983 Francesco Maselli realizzerà dal racconto il film *Avventura di un fotografo* [...]. *L’avventura di un fotografo* riprende, modificandoli poco, vari frammenti testuali dell’articolo del *Contemporaneo*, e li trasforma in pensieri e discorsi del protagonista’ (Falcetto 1992, 1450-1451, emphasis in the original). What is missing in this philological reconstruction is the reference to Michelangelo Antonioni’s movie *Blow-Up* (1966), which Calvino knew and introduced in latest version of this short story published in the 1970 edition of *Gli amori difficili* - Calvino admired Antonioni’s works as can be seen in at least two essays: ‘*Le amiche* e Pavese (lettera aperta a Michelangelo Antonioni)’ ([1955] 1995, 1909-1911) and ‘*L’eclisse* di Antonioni’ ([1962] 1995, 1925-1929). The overlap between the writer and the director, however, has not received adequate critical attention.

The conceptual similarity to Roland Barthes' *La chambre claire* (1980) and Calvino's epistemological conception of sight have often led scholars to overlook the osmotic nature of the relationship between the object-camera and the protagonist.<sup>17</sup> 'La macchina fotografica' is both the way in which Antonino Paraggi relates erotically to Bice and the mediator which provides access to the external reality.

At first, Antonino sees the use of this object and the act of taking pictures as the consequence of a biological condition:

Bisogna dire che questo cercare nella fotografia le ragioni d'un suo malcontento – *come chi si sente escluso da qualcosa* – era in parte un trucco di Antonino con se stesso, per evitare di prendere in considerazione un altro, e più vistoso, processo che lo andava separando dagli amici. Ciò che stava avvenendo era che i suoi coetanei a uno a uno si sposavano, mettevano famiglia, mentre Antonino rimaneva scapolo. *Pure tra i due fenomeni intercorreva un indubbio legame, in quanto spesso la passione dell'obiettivo nasce in modo naturale e quasi fisiologico come effetto secondario della paternità.* (Calvino 1992, 1097, my emphasis)

The harshly critical position adopted by Antonino can be connected to his perception of himself as deficient when compared to his friends with families. The object-camera and the photographs it produces reinforce the social bond amongst Antonino's friends, who, unlike him, appear to be part of a 'sociality [...] held together by the circulation of objects' (Schiermer 2011, 83). The character's progressive distance and isolation from his friends are grounded on a biological base – being childless – but lead to technological consequences – not using the camera. As if making up for his physical flaw, Antonino decides to acquire the technological object, so that '[t]he obsession with photography change[s] from one of sarcastic derision to fetishistic obsession' (Tompkins 2015, 94).

The purchase of the camera also corresponds to the beginning of Antonino's romantic and erotic involvement with Bice, who acts as his model during his first photo shoot:

[Bice] [e]ra vestita di lino bianco, con ricami colorati sui bordi delle maniche e delle tasche. Aveva i capelli divisi da una scriminatura e raccolti sulle tempie. [...] La fece sedere in una grande poltrona, e infilò la testa sotto il drappo nero che guarniva l'apparecchio. [...] Ad Antonino parve di vedere Bice per la prima volta. Aveva un'arrendevolezza, nel calare un po'

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<sup>17</sup> The influence that this short story has on Barthes is further proved by the reference to Calvino's short story in *La chambre claire* (1980, 61). Diazzi (2014) offers a concise overview on the relationship between the two.

pesante delle palpebre, nel protendere avanti il collo, che prometteva qualcosa di nascosto, così come il suo sorriso pareva nascondersi dietro lo stesso atto del sorridere [...].

–Non ti prendo, – la sua voce usciva soffocata e lamentosa da sotto la cappa nera, – non ti prendo più, non riesco a prenderti. (Calvino 1992, 1102-1103)

The erotic and romantic component of their relationship is intertwined with the protagonist's deontological reflections on photography:

S'avvicinò a Bice, si mise a sbottonarla sul collo, sul petto, a far scorrere il vestito sulle spalle. *Gli erano venute in mente certe fotografie di donna ottocentesche, in cui dal bianco del cartoncino emerge il viso il collo la linea delle spalle scoperte [...]* Piazzò il riflettore addosso a Bice, avvicinò la macchina, armeggiò sotto il drappo per regolare l'apertura dell'obiettivo. Guardò. *Bice era nuda.* (Calvino 1992, 1106, my emphasis)

As in other short stories in the collection,<sup>18</sup> the erotic and sexual approach to the woman is accompanied by a sense of discomfort caused by the inability of the male character to literally grasp and *make sense of her*: 'Non ti prendo più, non riesco prenderti'. Tompkins observes that the woman is perceived as 'a disruptive element, one that poses some form of danger, real or imagined' (2015: 76) who can trigger the violent reaction of the male protagonist. The form of control adopted in 'L'avventura di un fotografo' is manifested through the use of the phallic 'macchina fotografica a soffietto', which is the mediator of the man's relation to Bice:

Quello che ora Antonino attendeva da Bice dicendole di mettere le gambe e le braccia così e così, non era tanto la semplice esecuzione d'un programma, quanto la risposta di lei alla *violenza* che egli le andava facendo con le sue richieste, una *imprevedibile aggressiva* risposta a questa violenza che egli era sempre più portato a esercitare su di lei. (Calvino 1992, 1104-1105, my emphasis)

Clearly, the protagonist starts becoming obsessed with her, as is demonstrated by the fact that his darkroom was 'pavesato di pellicole e provini [di] Bice [che] s'affacciava da tutti i fotogrammi [...] un'identità frantumata in un pulviscolo d'immagini' (1992, 1107). The camera is both the tool with

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<sup>18</sup> See for example, 'L'avventura di un soldato' ([1949] 2003, I, 319-328), or 'L'avventura di un lettore' ([1958] 1992, II, 1126-1141), where the male character is both seduced and menaced by the female character.

which Antonino protects himself from the erotic threat posed by Bice, and the necessary prop to his erotic interaction with her.

Alongside its rather clear sexual role, the camera also plays an epistemological and prosthetic function in this short story. The profound connection between the man's body, the rationalising eye,<sup>19</sup> and the machine becomes clear during one of the photo shoots, when:

*Antonino sentì la vista di lei entrargli negli occhi e occupare tutto il campo visivo, sottrarlo al flusso delle immagini casuali e frammentarie, concentrare tempo e spazio in una forma finita. E come se questa sorpresa della vista e l'impressionarsi della lastra fossero due riflessi collegati tra loro, subito premette lo scatto, mise un'altra lastra, scattò. (Calvino 1992, 1106, my emphasis)*

The camera and the eye become one seamless *unit*, so much so that looking and taking pictures are the same action. The lens works as an extension of Antonino's eye, as it allows him to try to rationalise the external world. The camera and the man create a cerebral and bodily continuum: the man uses it as a tool, a prosthesis, to enhance his apperception of external reality. Following Isaac Tylim's definition, the camera is a 'technological gadget', the type of objects that 'have acquired the quality of portable fetishes to the extent that the body can now be thought not just as purely organic, but rather as a hybrid body/object, a techno-body that juxtaposes nature and artifice, organic and human-made matter' (Tylim 2012, 471).

The events involving Antonino in 'L'avventura di un fotografo' can be read as a process of self-fashioning into a hybrid form, non-human elements being used as 'an implement or artifact that extends the reach of human capabilities' (Britton 2017, 2501). No physical integration of the protagonist's body with the camera takes place, but the rational and epistemological continuity established with the machine becomes visible once the woman decides to break up with the protagonist.

Bice leaves and Antonino's obsession with her fades away. The protagonist progressively descends into madness and starts filling her physical and photographic absence with photographs of everyday objects: 'Raccoglieva le foto [di] portaceneri pieni di mozziconi, un letto sfatto, una macchia d'umidità sul muro' (Calvino 1992, 1108). This behaviour shows Antonino's epistemological attempt to re-discover and capture the everyday world around him by freezing it and reifying it into pictures. The character's desire to process and grasp the phenomenal reality in its totality is translated

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<sup>19</sup> The epistemological value of the sense of sight in Calvino's fiction has been explored at length. Amongst the seminal studies on this topic are: Ossola (1987), Asor Rosa (1988), Belpoliti (1996), Antonello (1998), McLaughlin, Grundtvig, and Waage Petersen (eds) (2007), Rizzarelli (2008), Carli (2018).

into the attempt to have a complete and full account of the variety of the real by means of pictures. Antonino's madness reaches its apex when he speculates that:

‘Forse la vera fotografia totale [...] è un mucchio di frammenti d’immagini private, sullo sfondo sgualcito delle stragi e delle incoronazioni’. Piegò i lembi dei giornali in un enorme involto per buttarlo nella spazzatura, ma prima volle fotografarlo. *[V]oleva che nella sua foto si potessero riconoscere le immagini mezzo appallottolate e stracciate e nello stesso tempo ancora la loro concretezza d’oggetti carichi di significato, la forza con cui s’aggrappavano all’attenzione che cercava di scacciarle.* (Calvino 1992, 1109, my emphasis)

Antonino's relationship to reality has become so indirect and mediated that the pictures of the world are progressively substituted by pictures of pictures. The investigation of ordinary items surrounding the character gives way to the investigation of a photographic reality, which pushes Antonino even farther from direct contact with the world. Eros, epistemology, technology, and prosthetic enhancements are closely linked in this short story and they are all united under the sign of the fetishistic compulsion which afflicts the protagonist. The nature of their connection can potentially offer new insights into other short stories too, such as ‘L’avventura di un miope’ and ‘L’avventura di un lettore’, where the sense of sight plays an equally important epistemological and erotic role.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The application of Massimo Fusillo's definition of memorial object and his theorisation of the mythopoetic power of fetishism has provided new critical interpretations of the texts by Morante, Ortese, and Calvino. It has also highlighted the limits of Fusillo's theories and their incapability of accounting for the full complexity of the texts. In Morante's ‘I miei vestiti’, for example, the memorial function of the fetish is concretely materialised in the fabric, which also becomes the ground in which creativity can be let loose and expressed. Likewise, the mythopoetic role of the fetish, which Fusillo theorises based on very concrete, material objects, in Ortese's ‘Un paio d’occhiali’ is triggered by an absent item, which leaves a strong material and memorial impression on the protagonist. In Calvino's case, the memorial and mythopoetic role of the fetishised item takes place in less straightforward terms than in Morante and Ortese. In ‘L’avventura di una bagnante’ the fetishised swimsuit acquires an identity-defining role, as it becomes a means for Isotta to problematise and attempt to define her female identity. Vice versa, in ‘L’avventura di un fotografo’, the camera becomes a mythopoetic fetish, but rather than fostering the formulation of narratives, it prompts the formulation of theoretical

and aesthetic hypotheses. In the case of Calvino's short stories, Fusillo's theories fall short of providing an accurate interpretation of the erotic and bodily role played by the fetishes.

In all the examples in this chapter, objects have an important social function. The characters are often excluded from the wider social body and try to use objects as tools to be re-introduced into it, as is the case in Calvino, or claim their sense of identity and distinction from it, as Morante demonstrates. In all cases, the attempt to change their social position through objects is unsuccessful and, like Ortese's Eugenia, they end up being stuck in an impasse that condemns them to social exclusion and often existential loneliness. The link between objects and their social connotations will be the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Class Objects:

Carlo Emilio Gadda and Alberto Moravia

#### 1. Objects as Indicators of Social Class

The Marxist idea of commodity fetishism<sup>1</sup> has proved its productivity and versatility across different disciplinary contexts, having an impact on disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and literary theory. A fruitful discussion of this idea and an exhaustive overview of its subsequent critical and theoretical application can be found in Hartmut Böhme's chapter 'Commodity Fetishism' in *Fetishism and Culture* (2014, 223-295). In introducing this chapter, Böhme argues that the concept of commodity and of commodity fetishism introduced by Marx is contingent not only upon economic factors, but also psychological and emotional ones. The psychoanalytical understanding of fetishism and the re-elaborations offered by Fusillo and shown in Chapter One dealt with the sexual and the creative power underlying this idea. Böhme introduces the process of acquisition of the commodity and the emotional response that it triggers in the buyer. He writes:

While the act of purchase is a matter regulated by the code paying/not paying, the *dynamics of purchase is driven by the aura of the commodity*, which processes in the binaries of desire/non-desire, participation/non-participation, happiness/unhappiness, beauty/non-beauty, meaning/non-meaning, one almost wants to say: being/non-being. *None of these binaries originate from the economic system.* Desire, happiness, participation, beauty, meaning, being:

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<sup>1</sup> Dealing with commodity fetishism means employing a notion first theorised in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, published in 1867. Here, Marx conceives of commodity fetishism as the process that invests man-made objects with values and qualities that man mistakenly attributes to external entities, thus failing to recognise them as coming from him in the first place. From when it is produced by the labourer to when it is sold, the object is appointed a value, or price, which appears to be arbitrary. The relation that links that specific price to the utility of the good turns out to be a mysterious process. The arbitrary attribution of value to the commodity is compared by Marx to the investment of religious qualities onto inanimate idols, typical of (but by no means limited to) primitive religions. A parallel is thus established between the economic system and religious apparatus. As cults can be based on the acknowledgment and adoration of objects believed to have religious properties, so the value of commodities is recognised socially and accepted as the object's inherent value, rather than socially appointed qualities. For this reason, 'so soon as [an object] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent' (Marxist Internet Archive 2005), because, even though produced by the labourer, they no longer recognise it as their product, but rather as something alien and endowed with independent properties. It is for this reason that the production of commodities is, according to Marx, inseparable from fetishism: 'Fetishism [...] attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. This Fetishism of commodities has its origin [...] in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them' (Marxist Internet Archive 2005). This in turn triggers the alienation of the labourer. The attribution of arbitrary and monetary value to the commodity from the economic system means that the labourer's work is monetised and reified. They are deprived and alienated, estranged from the product of their own, human activity. For a more detailed overview on this, see Hartmut Böhme, 'Commodity Fetishism' (2014, 223-295).

these are also the qualities that the commodity, insofar as it is a fetish, incorporates as suggestions, even though they are beyond the limits of the commodity. This is what defines the strange double status of the commodity as fetish, in that it can unite thing and symbol, immanence and transcendence *uno loco*. (Böhme 2014, 225, my emphasis)

Marx conceived of the commodity as an entity that conflates material and transcendental qualities. Böhme takes a step further. He says that the metaphysical qualities projected upon the commodity do not derive solely from its arbitrarily assigned monetary value, but also from the way in which it moves within the social circuit of pleasure, desire, and emotions. If the emotional responses associated with the process of fetishisation introduced in Chapter One were mostly the result of the activity of an individual, Böhme contends that the acquisition of a commodity has a social value. Purchasing and owning these goods and circulating them within determinate social groups and families has the potential of determining social structures, status, and hierarchies. The possession of these commodities can define the affluence of certain groups and, consequently, their position within the wider collective.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between belonging to a specific social class and possessing specific goods lies at the heart of Pierre Bourdieu's work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ([1979] 1996). Bourdieu investigated the way in which the circulation of cultural and material products contributes to the creation of a social taste, which is fundamental in the creation of a sense of belonging to a specific social class. As Tony Bennett claims in his Introduction to *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, according to Bourdieu *habitus* is a 'set of unifying principles which underlies [...] tastes and give[s] them a particular social logic which derives from, while also organizing and articulating, the position which a particular group occupies in social space' (Bennett 2010: xix). One of the ways in which taste spreads within specific social classes and unifies them is through the circulation of specific objects. Bourdieu's belief that 'social relations are objectified in familiar objects' (Bourdieu [1979] 1996, 70) is the theoretical premise underlying the investigation in the next few pages. Owning or collecting objects like pieces of furniture or luxurious artefacts are social cues and play a central role in the interaction between members of different social strata.

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<sup>2</sup> Böhme offers the indicative example of hereditary items that circulate within one rather close social group and/or family, and uses it to introduce the notion of fetishism of the first order or of the second order. Whereas fetishism of the second order is identified with the Marxist theorisation, fetishism of the first order is the process by which some goods are inalienable and never enter the economic circuit. This type of fetishism 'makes certain things into impossible, completely unique things, which must be withheld so that "we" can have a persona on the stage of the traffic in goods at all' (Böhme 2014, 236). Often, these objects are identified as family heirlooms which hardly ever get traded unless events such as wars and catastrophes take place, 'in which people or collectives are completely exposed, so that they not only forfeit their inalienable things, but *with them also their identity and their ability to act*' (236, my emphasis). Böhme's theorisation then highlights once again the identity-holding and social role played by this type of objects.

Bourdieu's study is referred to the French bourgeoisie between the post-war years and the 1970s, which is a significantly different social and cultural context from that of 1930s and 1940s Italy. Nevertheless, *Distinction* represents a useful tool to apply to short stories by Gadda, and Moravia considered here. Moravia's texts are engaged in the representation of the Roman bourgeoisie, while Gadda focuses on the Milanese working-class and bourgeoisie. The texts of both authors resonate with one another in depicting a decaying and increasingly hypocritical social class.<sup>3</sup> Rather than presenting commodities, or mass-produced goods, these texts pay more attention to family jewels and precious or tasteless pieces of furniture. This chapter will therefore present not simply the fetishistic fascination triggered by the commodity, but also the connection existing between the circulation and the possession of specific objects and the characters' belonging, or wishing to belong, to determinate social classes. The possession or the desire to possess specific objects is linked both to a variety of emotional and psychological needs and to the function that objects acquire as social signifiers.

In different ways, the texts written by Carlo Emilio Gadda and Alberto Moravia depict characters that often move in or within the periphery of their contemporary Milanese or Roman bourgeoisie, which was undergoing a period of radical change. In both cases, the way in which the characters relate to the objectual world is indicative of a problematic and unstable rapport with their belonging to a determinate social class. The portraits of the Milanese working-class and middle-class and their visceral attachment to goods appear through the heavy sarcasm and irony which permeates Gadda's 'Notte di luna' and 'Quando il Girolamo ha smesso...' collected in *L'Adalgisa. Disegni milanesi* ([1944] 1990).<sup>4</sup> While Gadda's *disegni* are not ideologically informed, as will be shown below,<sup>5</sup> Moravia displays a more didactic, albeit controversial, engagement with the critique of a decaying bourgeoisie. In the short stories 'Fine di una relazione' ([1933] 2000) and 'L'avaro' ([1937] 2000) the characters either show a certain indifference to their economic means or have a blind and irrational attachment to the idea of possessing money or commodities.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed overview on the history of Italian social composition, see for example Morris, (1995), Banti (1996), Musso (2002), Scarpellini (2008), Maida (2009), Filippi (2014).

<sup>4</sup> In the notes to the text, Guido Lucchini observes that even though it was published in 1943, the majority of the texts collected in *L'Adalgisa. Disegni milanesi* were written in the 1930s. For more information, see *Note ai testi* in *Romanzi e racconti I* (1990, 839-850).

<sup>5</sup> Although Gadda's work has often been read as being informed by Fascist ideology, this thesis will side with the studies that see any discourse on materialism and the bourgeoisie as referred more to a philosophical position than a set of political beliefs. More on Gadda's philosophical background can be found in Antonello, "'Opinò Cartesio". Monismo cognitivo e materia pensante in Gadda' (2003) and partly 'Gli "eccentrici" anni '30' (2013, 105-138).

## 2. Clothes and Furniture in Gadda's *L'Adalgisa*

This section is dedicated to the analysis of Gadda's two short stories 'Notte di luna' and 'Quando il Girolamo ha smesso...' ([1944] 1990). As they are placed in a 'claustrofobico [borghese e intimo] spazio dell'odiosamanta famiglia' (Rinaldi 2008), things occupy a central and multifaceted role in the author's universe, and they have often been studied in relation to their epistemological, psycho-analytical, narratological, or memorial function. The detailed observation of objectual reality, and the 'virtuosismo elencatorio' (Rinaldi 2008) of Gadda's writings, are often connected with a general, broader understanding of the phenomenal, social, and historical contexts in which they are located. The analysis of objects through a Bourdieusian theoretical framework reveals Gadda's critical position towards the Milanese bourgeoisie.

Riccardo Stracuzzi notes that the texts composing *L'Adalgisa* 'hanno una forte vocazione di ritratto sociale: proletariato, media e alta borghesia vi sono confrontate, non senza che lo sguardo giudicante delle une sull'altro, e dell'altro sulle une sia abilmente incrociato dal narratore' (Stracuzzi 2020, 77). Though *L'Adalgisa* is not ideologically informed, the narrator's criticism of 'la cattiva coscienza della classe, industriale e politecnica' (84) is still clear. Gadda's ambiguous and controversial relationship with the bourgeoisie can be reconnected to a series of historical, political, and personal events, including the author's initial alignment with the Fascist regime:

[Gadda] vede in Mussolini e nel fascismo l'unica alternativa al caos [...]. La sua posizione è facilmente definibile: borghese squattrinato e ex-ufficiale amareggiato, conservatore (ma non reazionario), tradizionalista (ma non beghino), monarchico, nazionalista, emigrato infelice e nostalgico [...]. *Gadda esprime nelle sue inclinazioni politiche la posizione quasi naturale della propria sotto-classe sociale (una borghesia marginalizzata e impaurita), del proprio ceto culturale (una élite istruita ma frustrata)*; esprime anche le proprie angosce personali, bisogno d'ordine e controllo, preoccupazioni economiche. (Stellardi 2003, my emphasis)

The connection between Gadda and the Fascist regime will not be explored here. However, the relation between the writer and the regime suggests that his initial support for Fascism can be seen as a response to the perceived, inexorable decay of his own 'sotto-classe sociale'. Gadda observed and criticised 'le magagne di casa sua, ossia della sua patria milanese e brianzola' (Dotti 2012) and used his own experience from within this social stratum as the background material for most of the *Disegni milanesi*.

Precisely because of his privileged vantage point from within, a wide array of passages from *Adalgisa* contain harsh and satirical portraits of bourgeois hollowness and love of superficiality. Raffaele Donnarumma talked about this in his work (2006). He observed that Gadda's satirical attack on the bourgeoisie is particularly strong precisely because of his belonging to it:

La satira può apparirci, per il suo accanirsi nello smascheramento della menzogna e per il suo rifiuto di una letteratura educativa o consolatoria, un atto di rigore morale [...]. Se proprio si vuole parlare di pulsioni e di erotismo, occorre farlo nel senso che questi termini hanno per il sadico o, più correttamente, per il sadomasochista. *Egli aggredisce con tanto più trasporto un oggetto, quanto più se ne sente implicato: e ci sono pochi dubbi che per Gadda Milano e la sua borghesia siano la più vischiosa delle materie.* (Donnarumma 2006, 87, my emphasis)

The narrator's irony and satirical tone thus become self-irony and self-attack, which Donnarumma interpreted as 'il luogo del profondo', because it shows that 'il suo sadismo nasconde un masochismo latente, giacchè l'aggressione alla vittima è l'uccisione di quella parte di sé che ne è stata complice; il riso del giudizio è regressione pulsionale; la morale, furia risentita' (Donnarumma 2006, 94). Irony and satire become the means for the investigation of the world and for uncovering the superficial and fake behaviours which characterise this social class. The harsh grin cast upon the idiosyncratic conduct of the bourgeoisie permeates the text and the disillusion spreads to other actors in Milanese society, including the lower classes.

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*L'Adalgisa. Disegni milanesi* ([1944] 1990) is a collection of narratives where characters and plotlines recur regularly across different texts. In 'Notte di luna', the narrator lyrically captures the liveliness and the prosperity of nature during nighttime and, by gradually moving his point of view away from the natural landscape, creates a significant, though dissonant, parallel with the multitude of people ending their shift at the factory. The luscious and plush foliage of the natural landscape does not find a correspondingly luscious and florid humanity. The lyrical undertone of the very first lines is replicated, with ironical tones, in the description reserved for the clothes worn by human characters. They are captured as they cross the natural landscape just introduced and the narrator observes:

Taluno indossa una maglia: è azzurra, o rossa, o grigia o rigata: con buchi. Se il colletto della maglia comporta bottoni, *uno quasi sempre è mancante. Le bretelle, rare, per lo più si rivelano un po' vecchie, e sudate: o raggrinzite, scrofolose; e sono affette da complicazioni riparatorie di spaghi e legacci, che hanno coi bottoni superstiti rapporti piuttosto complessi.* Ma qualche altro, simile a benestante, *o forse il favorito di Fortuna*, ha bretelle di gomma assai larghe, nuove, tese come spago di fionda: le quali sogliono aderire in ogni moto, in ogni istante, al caldo e vigoroso impegnarsi del torace sulle fatiche dell'opera. (Gadda 1990, 295, my emphasis)

Rather than being introduced through their human bodies, the mass of workers is presented through the objects they display on those bodies. The human crowd is also a mass of decaying objects, which are carefully kept from being disposed of. This can be framed in the author's conception of an interconnected, phenomenal reality, whereby men and their 'things', be they garments or the tools they work with, are intertwined and linked by an osmotic relationship.

The description of objects and clothes offers the narrator the opportunity to shed light onto the labourers' social status, as can clearly be seen in the way they are protective of their possessions due to their limited economic resources, which from hereon in shall be referred to as a 'pauperistic' attitude.<sup>6</sup> By describing the braces as 'vecchie e sudate: o raggrinzite e scrofolose', and as 'affette da complicazioni riparatorie di spaghi e legacci, che hanno con bottoni superstiti rapporti piuttosto complessi', the subtle irony of the narrating voice underlines their flimsiness and introduces the money-saving tendency to hang on to them for as long as possible, through skilful repairs. Things are not simply consumed. They are re-used and repurposed even if broken or already dysfunctional. In this text consumption is understood as the wearing out of a resource, significantly indicated in Italian with the word 'consumare'.

This relationship with objects recalls the thriftiness found in the earlier text titled 'Carabattole a Porta Lodovica', dated 1940. In this essayistic piece, Gadda introduced the inexhaustible cycle of matter in Milanese flea markets, where worn-out and apparently useless stuff is circulated and repurposed. In 'Carabattole' Gadda writes that 'liberarsi da un vecchio arnese malato' is 'uno sforzo psicologico che è peggio di una malattia' (Gadda [1940] 2013, 47). This is because:

[p]iù che una cagione del sentimento, si direbbe quell'altro motivo, costituzionale della persona umana, anzi il fondamento stesso dell'anima (scusate la sincerità): quell'istinto del ser-

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of 'pauperism' is linked to Gadda's philosophical thought. See Lucchini (1994).

bare, 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 dei turaccioli*. (Gadda 2013, 47, my emphasis)

As Falkoff observed '[a]lthough 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' (Falkoff 2014, 86).<sup>7</sup> No matter their condition, decaying objects are repurposed, and find a new monetary value. Thus, pauperism indicates both the re-use and the repurposing of a resource when depleted, as well as an attitude of material exploitation, whereby a concerted effort is made to create use-value out of every possible, and even unpredictable, use which an object can have. 'Notte di luna' does not present a situation of commercial exchange, but the intention of showing the interminable and continuous circulation of matter is still clear. Underlining the deterioration of the braces worn by the factory workers, the narrator provides a vantage point for the observation of the working-class. This creates a rather stark counterpoint to the glimpses of bourgeois Milanese society, as is evident in the objects and the social actors presented in 'Quando il Girolamo ha smesso...'.

'Quando il Girolamo ha smesso...' is a constellation of different yet interconnected parallel narratives. Starting from the image of the wooden floor-polishing company, *Confidenza*, and their work in Milanese bourgeois households, the narrative shifts to the depiction of rich Milanese ladies and their jewels, to the decline and bankruptcy of *Confidenza* and it ends with the confusion left at the house of the Cavenaghi as a consequence of the lack of maintenance staff.

Scholarship on Gadda has underlined the psychoanalytical implications presented in this short story, especially with regards to the description of the sensuous and tactile relationship of the old bourgeois women to their jewels:

Rabbrividivano ancora, nel ricordo-sogno, carezzandosi gli stagionati padiglioni, quasi a certificarsi e' fussero tuttora ben ammanigliati alla zucca: e all'esilio delirare della zucca medesima. Palpavano commosse: i diti scivolavano ai lobi: due delicati lardelli, su ognun de' quali

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<sup>7</sup> The presence of hoards and accumulation of matter will be particularly relevant in Chapter Four, where the short story 'L'Adalgisa' contained in the same collection will be analysed with a particular attention to the dust and the discarded matter presented therein.

persisteva a riflettere impagabile e gemmante poliedro. L'estrusione kimberlitica aveva maturato la nocciola: valicati i millenni, la nocciola era pervenuta a mano dello smerigliatore di Amsterdam: che l'aveva sfaccettata, molata, polita: lavorando per loro 'esclusivamente per loro'. (Gadda 1990, 306)

As Roscioni notes, 'ogni pietra ha dunque una sua documentabile storia microcosmica testimonianza dell'organizzazione del mondo' (Roscioni 1995, 12-13). It is not simply a refined gem, but an object that has travelled in both space and time. The difference between these objects and the braces used by the factory labourers is already visible. The hard and decorative gems are not only placed at the end of a laborious process of production, but they are also far removed from the wear-and-tear to which the labourers' garments are subject. The jewels can be identified as inalienable goods, which circulate within the family to confirm its social and economic affluence. Using Michael Thompson's (1979) terms, the earrings can be defined as 'durables', because their lifespans can potentially be infinite. Possessing them is a mark of belonging to affluent social classes.

This understanding of precious objects is replicated in the description of the armchairs. The narrator states:

Cigolanti poltrone carriolavano stridendo a barricar gli anditi e i quarantottati passaggi, o si davano a rincorrere le quattro altre carrucole della inopinata 'ottomana della Teresa', che però questa qui viaggiava su certe sue rotaie speciali inventate e fabbricate apposta per lei, *nel 1847, un anno prima del Quarantotto*: rotaie a snodo, di legno lucido de' più duri, da poterne reggere l'incredibile quintalato. *O si affiancavano, le poltronacce, in linea di colonne, in anticamera, come ansimanti battaglioni per tutto il Campo di Marte. Battaglioni di zie.* (Gadda 1990, 301-302, my emphasis)

After being anthropomorphised, the armchairs are ironically compared to a 'battalion of aunts', which mocks their old age, their number, and their familiar qualities. As is the case in many of the other objects appearing in *L'Adalgisa*, the armchairs function as *traits d'union* between small, domestic history and the macro, war-ridden History. The armchairs are dated 1847, 'un anno prima del Quarantotto', thereby referencing the historical episode of the 'Cinque giornate di Milano', which marked an important part of the Italian re-unification process; they thus hint at the glorious past of the Milanese bourgeoisie. Donnarumma observed that:

[i]l rimpianto della Milano umbertina [...] ha certo un significato politico in quanto celebrazione, da parte di un conservatore, *di un ordine e di un decoro borghese che il fascismo non saprà restaurare davvero* [...]. Ma è anche il rimpianto di un'infanzia di cui Gadda sa eccezionalmente ritrarre il senso di avventurosa scoperta, senza nascondere gli aspetti scomodi e scandalosi [...]. *Se proprio deve cercare una stagione mitica del passato milanese, allora Gadda celebra il ruolo che Milano ha avuto nel Risorgimento.* (Donnarumma 2006, 144-145, my emphasis)

This chronological reference shows the antiquity of the furniture and the Cavenaghi's possession of that past, while simultaneously hinting at an historical period of prestige of their social class.<sup>8</sup> As Robert Rushing observes in relation to *Quer pasticciaccio*, 'tutti gli oggetti sono una memoria del mondo, testimoni della storia - storia primordiale [...] o storia possibile [...]; storia antica [...] o storia recente' (Rushing 1997, 418). This consideration shines a light onto the armchairs. They are a stratification of different meanings and they contribute to creating a connection with other times and spaces. They materially connect the private dimension of a Milanese bourgeois household to the bigger history of the city and of Italy as a whole.

This type of furniture can be identified as part of an inheritance with both social and historical characteristics. According to Bourdieu:

*Every material inheritance is, strictly speaking, also a cultural inheritance.* Family heirlooms not only bear material witness to the age and continuity of the lineage and so consecrate its social identity, which is inseparable from permanence over time; they also contribute in a practical way to its spiritual reproduction, that is, to *transmitting the values, virtues and competences which are the basis of legitimate membership in bourgeois dynasties. What is acquired in daily contact with ancient objects, by regular visits to antique-dealers and galleries [...] is of course a certain 'taste', which is nothing other than a relation of immediate familiarity with the things of taste. But it is also the sense of belonging to a more polished, more polite, better policed world [...]* and finally, it is an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, *forge the unconscious unity of a class.* (Bourdieu 1996, 69, my emphasis)

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<sup>8</sup> This can once again be referred to the revival of a prestigious and longed-for past re-evoked by Gadda. It can also be reconnected to his adherence to the Fascist regime, in that Fascism appeared to him as a promise to return to the conditions that the bourgeoisie enjoyed in the nineteenth century.

Bourdieu's words help with the interpretation of these pieces of furniture as connoting the 'unity of a class'. These objects express the prestige of the Cavenaghi and manifest their social position, which in this case is the Milanese bourgeoisie. At the same time, these descriptions by Gadda are imbued with irony and sarcasm. The fact that these 'poltronacce' and 'ottomana della Teresa' are compared to 'zie' connotes them as empty forms, petulant objectual reminders of an old-fashioned, waning prestige, which is typical of the 'velleitaria' and 'ipocrita' (Cavallini 2003) bourgeoisie.

A tool for the interpretation of the role that the parquets acquire in this short story is the definition of quasi-object provided by Michel Serres. Employing the metaphor of a football game, Serres argues that by moving among the footballers, the ball 'makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. [...] Who is the subject, who is an "I", or who am I? the moving [ball] weaves the "we", the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I"' (Serres 2007, 225).<sup>9</sup> The epistemological implications of this approach will be explored in Chapter Three. For now, however, it is interesting to note that the human community can be interpreted as formed by the circulation of a quasi-object. In Gadda's example, however, these quasi-objects are the parquets and they are not moving in the collective. Rather, men and women move around them. The characters' social position is not determined by the movement of the object, but by their convergence around it and the different position they acquire in relation to it. This is particularly evident in the opening of the short story. The narrator states:

A lucidare i parquets, in casa Cavenaghi, era sempre venuta la 'Confidenza', come in tante altre case, del resto. Be'...le migliori di Milano.... Ossia, venuta.... Inviava ne' debiti giorni i suoi agenti specializzati: i quali, benchè al primo saluto li si sarebber detti dei vecchi brumisti [...] bentosto invece si rivelavano animati da una bonarietà operosa e conclusiva: in un trametìo senza scampo di funzionari impareggiabili di Babilonia. (Gadda 1990, 301)

The first few lines of the story are taken up by the description of the activity of the floor-polishing company *Confidenza*, which in English can be translated as both confidence, assurance and intimacy, familiarity. The company is introduced through its labourers as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> In the original, Serres uses the metaphor of the moving 'furet' instead of 'ball', with reference to a French game which the translator explains with this note: 'the *furet* is the animal, the ferret, as well as the marker in a game somewhat like hunt-the-slipper or button, button, who's got the button' (2007, 225).

Muniti ad armacollo d'una fascia di cuoio stralucida, che gli reggeva sulla culatta e sul fianco la cassetta-armadio piena di ingredienti e di intingoli (con cera e feltri, paglia di ferro e pennelli), la cassetta era campita in un bel giallo color sabaglione, dove leggevasi curiosamente una bellissima per quanto un po' cogliona qualità dell'animo umano, la 'Confidenza', via Andegari n. 42 o via Pattari 43, piano tale, telefono tanto. Arrivavano discreti, nelle ore discrete: carichi del loro arsenale a bandoliera. Avevano insomma tutto il necessario, salvo lo spazzolone, e compreso però un paio di pantaloni ad hoc: con ginocchi rinforzati, e con via il 70% dei bottoni davanti. [...]

In quel punto, in quel trapasso di luci, annusando soddisfatte l'odorino della cera fresca evidenziato dal dolce tepore della casa, [le signore di casa] amavano discendere dalla degnazione alla conversazione, dalla conversazione alla *confidenza* [...].

Verso sera, a opera finita, a còtica deglutita, i Baruffaldi-Braghenti, non ricusavano di porgere orecchio, gratis, e con un cespuglio di peli rotondi fuor dall'orecchio stesso, alla rincasante matrona. *Una perfetta identità di punti di vista (etico-sociali) si stabiliva allora tra il cervello della condiscendenza illuminante, e quello finalmente illuminato del lucidatore dei parquets.* (Gadda 1990, 303-304, my emphasis)

The sarcasm attacks the workers of *Confidenza* as well as their employers, showing how, in *L'Adalgisa*, according to Stracuzzi, 'proletariato, media e alta borghesia vi sono confrontate, non senza che lo sguardo giudicante delle une sull'altro, e dell'altro sulle une sia abilmente incrociato' through 'un narratore [...] passabile di impersonare qualunque posizione dei suoi personaggi' (Stracuzzi 2020, 77). Milanese society as a whole is a victim of the narrator's abrasive sarcasm. Milan is 'messa in questione nel suo limite logico di cosa da rappresentare: e la cattiva coscienza della classe, industriale e politecnica, che vi occupa il ruolo predominante è duramente rivolta [...] per i continui spostamenti dello sguardo del narratore' (Stracuzzi 2020, 85).

In this short story, the different social classes of the characters are revealed by their relationship with the wooden floors. Like the narrative perspective of 'Notte di luna', where we find a description of a human mass defined by their clothes, the characters in 'Quando il Girolamo' are depicted as two distinct social formations lined up around the parquets in two undifferentiated crowds. The men who lay the floors are identified as 'questi Eligi, Anselmi, Umberti, o Girolami'. Their first names are turned into plurals, as if they have lost their human individuality and belong to an undifferentiated human mass. Likewise, the wealthy clients of the *Confidenza* are generically indicated as 'le donne' or 'le matrone'. The parquet becomes the point of convergence which draws together different subjects, through the re-enactment of the very quality that gives the company its name. It is both through

the intimacy ('confidenza') created between the parquet-polishers and the house owners, as well as the confidence ('confidenza') shown by the labourers when working around well-off households that the human subjects of this short story place themselves in different though correlated positions. While relating to each other through the floors and projecting their social role onto them, both the wealthy clients and the employers of the *Confidenza* materially step on the floors and, metaphorically, on one another. At the same time, they themselves are stepped on by the irreverent narrative voice. In the footnote added by the author, the word 'parquets' is expanded upon as follows: '1 "Parquets": francese per pavimenti di legno, impalchettature a tarsia (1880), ma per lo poi a spina di pesce: (1890-1940). Più costosi e raccomandabili (termicamente) di altri pavimenti. *Culto (religioso) dei parquets a Milano: 1890-1915*' (Gadda 1990, 330, my emphasis). Once again through irony, by defining the 'cult of parquets' as a religious phenomenon, the narrator indirectly identifies both the well-off owners of houses with parquet floors and the *Confidenza* labourers as the worshippers of the floors. Both are equally devoted to them, but they relate to the parquets in diametrically opposed ways. While the employees of *Confidenza* oversee the material preservation of what would be, in the narrator's metaphor, the religious idol, the administration of the cult is reserved to the parquets' owners, who decide how often the ritual maintenance of the venerated objects takes place.

As it is applied to a business, the human quality 'confidenza' is monetised and reified. Willow Verkerk argues that the rationalisation of things determines the objectification of humans and human qualities (Verkerk 2017, 151) and, Gadda seems to suggest, human relationships as well. The notion of commodity fetishism as expressed by Marx is expanded upon, because it involves not only the labourers who produce the goods, but also the wealthier consumers. The process of fetishization undermines and atrophies social relations, and the fetish, in this case the parquets, holds the power of revealing the social status of these characters and their subjection to the 'culto dei parquets' by appointing to them specific social roles. The wooden floor is '[il] punt[o] da cui partono (o, piuttosto, in cui convergono) raggi infiniti, e non hanno, non possono avere contorni' (Roscioni 1995, 15).

### 3. Furniture and Jewels in Moravia's Short Stories

Alberto Moravia's work represents a case of problematic engagement with issues like class distinction, and especially with questions linked to the definitions of the bourgeoisie. From his early fictional works such as *Gli indifferenti* (1929), to essays like 'Discorso sulla borghesia italiana' ([1947] 2014), Moravia showed an interest in questioning and investigating the nature and the composition of this

social stratum, in order to problematise and criticise its position in contemporary Italian society.<sup>10</sup> Given his open involvement with the examination of the nature of this social class, scholarship has often considered the reverberations of the author's political and social engagement in his works. Studies that take this approach include Alberto Limentani's (1962), Roberto Tessari's (1975) and, more recently, Massimo Onofri's (2007) and Luciano Parisi's (2008). These works represent only a small part of the wide body of secondary literature on the author's problematic ideological position.<sup>11</sup>

A radical difference sets Moravia apart from Gadda in his descriptions of the bourgeoisie. The Milanese writer attacked the moral hypocrisy of this social stratum through his scathing and unforgiving irony. Moravia's criticism is directed towards the superficiality and moral emptiness of a decaying social class. Though condemning the reproachful hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, the subtle Gaddian irony is replaced, in Moravia, by a more open criticism in tones that might be called didactic, even moralistic.

Numerous scholars have recognised the author's ideological position through observation of the considerable number of characters in his works who belong to this social class.<sup>12</sup> They are often depicted as indifferent and apathetic individuals who are incapable of relating to one another and to the environment to which they belong in sincere and meaningful ways. Scholarship has often understood, seen, or perceived these characters as resembling senseless things rather than humans.<sup>13</sup> In Bruno

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Moravia's 'Discorso sulla borghesia italiana' ([1947] 2014) is a good example of how the depiction of this social class is tightly intertwined with the description of house interiors. Here the author uses a pertinent simile: '[O]ggi la borghesia italiana si presenta come una casa con pochissime stanze arredate e queste in disordine; le altre vuote. Le stanze vuote sono chiuse a chiave e la borghesia sovente non sa neppure che esistono. Talvolta invece si accorge della loro esistenza e del loro vuoto e allora in fretta e furia corre ai ripari e provvede ad ammobiliarle. Accade però che a questo fine si rivolga a rigattieri che le forniscono per buone pessime suppellettili. La borghesia italiana, disavvezza dall'amministrazione casalinga e incapace ormai di distinguere il buono dal cattivo, le accetta ugualmente e ne va fiera. Fino al giorno che qualcuno le fa osservare che si è riempita la casa di cianfrusaglie e allora invece di incolpare se stessa se la prende con i rigattieri, getta ogni cosa dalla finestra e così le stanze tornano vuote' (Moravia 2014, 166).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed overview on these studies, see Onofri (2007), Parisi (2008), and Dotti (2012). More philologically oriented, but still relevant for the textual analysis of the bourgeois element in Moravia is de Van (1973). There is also a wide variety of less scientific articles on the topic, such as Conte (2014), Scafaro (2015), and Crea (2019). In recent years, an increasing number of critical works has revealed controversies and contradictions in the author's ideological position. This is the case for studies such as Ben-Ghiat, (1995), Chang (2003), and Parisi (2008). Moravia's unclear relationship with this social class has also often been framed and explained through his relationship to the Fascist regime. Alongside the above-mentioned article by Ben-Ghiat see: Talbot (2006) and Rundle (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Basile has crucially noted that the depiction of the bourgeoisie is that of '[u]na "classe" avvilita dalla recessione economica, dal fascismo, dai valori effimeri dell'esistere assunti per mascherare un desolante vuoto interiore. Romanzo-saggio, come si disse, *Gli indifferenti* hanno visto crescere nel tempo la loro notevole dimensione ideologica, a scapito di più sofferte e segrete componenti interiori [...]' si ha persino l'impressione che la "rivolta" che anima i protagonisti di questa tragedia domestica, di questa "favola degli amori intercomunicanti" [...] sia non solo l'evasione sterile di "vinti" da una società fallita, ma *un dramma dove sono a confronto le "persone" e le "cose", il "carcere" e la "fuga"*' (Basile 1982, 122, my emphasis). The critical literature on *Gli indifferenti* (1929), or *La noia* (1960) has particularly focused on this aspect. However, it is important to note that the motifs of money, wealth, sex, alienation, and fake relationships are indeed present throughout the entirety of the author's production.

<sup>13</sup> The process of progressive reification and *numbing* of the person is often connected to the existentialist element found in Moravia's writings. See for example, Alberto Moravia, 'Ricordo de *Gli indifferenti*' ([1964] 2019, 61-67), where he explicitly draws a parallel between humans and inert objects, Basile (1982, 121-172), and Chang (2003). These are but a few examples of the wide body of literature on the topic.

Basile's words, many of the author's works bear the signs of '[una] strategia Moraviana che dalle cose si riverbera sulle persone' (Basile 1982, 124) and establish a correlation between objects and humans.

This section examines the ways in which household items, jewels, and furniture can be indicative of the characters' social extraction and of their sense of belonging to their respective social class. In Gadda's case it was possible to identify and isolate socially connoting pieces of furniture. The analysis of Moravia's stories reveals a different phenomenon. Rather than depicting specific and clearly identifiable pieces of furniture, the narrative gaze lingers over suffocating piles of pieces of furniture, which can either populate the protagonists' living spaces with their intrusive falsity, or be accumulated and neglected in locked-up rooms and storage spaces.<sup>14</sup> In the examples chosen, the characters are dissatisfied with the commodities they possess, because they want more than they can afford, because they are more keen to save their money than to use and flaunt their possessions, or because they realise that having access to a variety of luxurious goods does not save them from their existential malaise. The dialogue between the affluence of the protagonists and the items that represent it is misaligned. The textual analysis below will consider the short stories 'Fine di una relazione' ([1933] 2000) and 'L'avaro' ([1937] 2000) as illustrating different types of relationship established between the wealthy characters of these narratives and their material environments.

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The first character to be analysed is Tullio, from the short story 'L'avaro' ([1937] 2000). Despite having the pecuniary opportunities to sustain a wealthy lifestyle, Tullio, a lawyer, is obsessed with the idea of saving money, so much so that his love life is also regulated by this principle. After working for Valentino and Elena De Gasperis, Tullio becomes their friend and a regular guest at their house. He grows particularly close to Elena and as he realises he has romantic feelings for her, he understands that Valentino, who wants to borrow money from his friends, is using her as collateral. Because of Tullio's visceral attachment to his savings, he decides to give up the romantic path and avoid any potential request for a loan from the De Gasperis. After refusing Elena's own proposal to run away with her, Tullio eventually enjoys his solitude and wallows in the thought of saving his money.

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<sup>14</sup> The persistent depiction of furniture and interior décor in his novels can also be seen as a reiteration of the author's interest in figurative arts and design. The study of Moravia's art writings has been undertaken by scholars such as Grandelis. She curated the collection *Non so perché non ho fatto il pittore: scritti d'arte (1934-1990)* (2017) and has published numerous articles on the topic, see Grandelis (2013).

This short story portrays two different relationships between the characters and the material goods to which they have access. Tullio shows what Gadda defined as ‘quell’istinto del serbare, del ritenere, del non mollare un bottone’ (Gadda [1940] 2013, 47). His visceral attachment to money is so strong that, despite having the economic resources to live up to the standards of the bourgeoisie, he decides to prioritise the accumulation of wealth over the conspicuous display of his economic means. Elena and Valentino De Gasperis have suffered an economic decline which they do not want to acknowledge and are trying to avoid the social humiliation that follows the loss of their wealth and affluence.

After looking at Tullio’s obsession with saving,<sup>15</sup> the narrative gaze moves on to the interior and exterior appearance of his flat. The text reads:

Egli abitava in un palazzo della parte antica della città, al quale i proprietari certamente non avevano messo mano da almeno un secolo. Si entrava per un portone guardato da due colonne annerite, e, poiché non c’era ascensore, si saliva ai piani superiori sotto certe alte volte fredde e piene d’ombra, per scalini così bassi che pareva di ascendere sopra un piano inclinato. Nei pianerottoli vasti come anticamere si aprivano porte di una nerezza di bitume, la vernice rossastra di un tempo essendosi con gli anni velata di una lustra patina grassa e scura [...]. La ragione di questo squallore era che il quartiere e con esso il palazzo erano decaduti; *la gente ricca era emigrata nelle parti moderne della città; e lì, così nei palazzi come nelle casette, erano rimaste le famiglie più povere.* (Moravia 2000, 1097, my emphasis)

The description reveals not only the location of the protagonist’s house in an impoverished part of town but also the neglect of a building that could be ostentatious and magnificent. The ‘portone guardato da due colonne’ which are ‘annerite’, as well as the ‘alte volte fredde e piene d’ombra’ and ‘patina grassa e scura’ suggest that the past grandeur of this building is now left to the mercy of the elements and the passage of time. Not only is this building decrepit, but it is also dirty, neglected, and unhealthy.

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<sup>15</sup> The protagonist’s interest in saving his money is intertwined with the narrator’s observations on his upbringing and education. While it is true that Tullio is frugal with material things, he does not appear to be so when it comes to cinema, theatre, and literature: ‘Egli leggeva diligentemente tutti i libri nuovi degli scrittori più in vista, seguiva con assiduità i giornali e le riviste, non perdeva un solo spettacolo del cinema e del teatro. [...] questa sua passione per le cose dello spirito esisteva e pareva davvero in lui soprafare ogni altra. La sera, poi, molto spesso, riuniva in casa sua certi amici, avvocati come lui, e con loro discuteva fino a tardi delle questioni politiche e culturali più attuali,’ (Moravia 2000, 1092-1093). In her study on Italian consumption from the Belle Epoque to the twenty-first century, Scarpellini notes that while primary education in this period is guaranteed, ‘il proseguimento [degli] studi è ancora fortemente influenzato dal livello sociale della famiglia: solo se [si] appartiene alle élite [si] può sperare di frequentare il liceo classico e poi l’università altrimenti [si] dovrà frequentare una scuola di livello inferiore’ (Scarpellini 2008, 101). Tullio’s upbringing is socially connoted. The consumption of cultural products is an indicator of his belonging to a well-off social class.

Useful observations on the interpretation of this passage come from what Francesco Orlando in *Oggetti desueti* ([1993] 2015) calls the ‘logoro-realistico’. He writes:

Il logoro-realistico comincia idealmente dal declassamento della classe dominante anteriore. A due condizioni: che il dissesto di castelli e palazzi nobiliari sia rappresentato non più a distanza storica, ma nell’attualità; che non abbia nessuna esemplarità da venerando-regressivo. (Orlando 2015, 305)

Also:

La perdita di funzionalità non è in senso estensivo, ma restrittivo: non si limita a intaccare il lusso o il prestigio o il decoro, ma compromette l’uso, la salubrità e l’abitabilità [...]. Incompatibile con lo statuto d’una classe dominante, un tale senso restrittivo si riscontra solo in casi limite nelle rappresentazioni di condizione borghese. È riservato alle due estremità sociali dove la *borghesia o profitta del declassamento altrui, o paventa il proprio come una ricaduta: all’impoverimento dell’aristocrazia, oltre che alla povertà del proletariato*. (306-307, my emphasis)

The appearance of this squalid and filthy environment corresponds to a condition of social precariousness and instability in the ‘condizione borghese’. Tullio does not flaunt his social status. He does not seem to be concerned with the preservation of the social prestige guaranteed by his economic means. While it is certainly true that this text offers the depiction of an unstable bourgeoisie, in Tullio’s case such instability is neither due to the aspiration to climb socially nor to the fear of a social decline, but rather to the morbid relationship established with his wealth.<sup>16</sup>

Tullio’s fixation with the preservation of his finances becomes even more evident when the narrator’s gaze moves onto the interior of the house and its neglected objects and spaces. Whereas the outside of the building raised the expectation of opulent rooms, the interior of Tullio’s house denies such impressions of grandeur:

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<sup>16</sup> This locates Tullio alongside the later characters of Moravia’s work, who mistakenly see the ownership of material and financial capital as a way to have a more truthful and unmediated relationship with the world. For example, in relation to *La noia*, Turchetta observes: ‘Incapace di sentire ed afferrare la realtà delle cose (è proprio questa la malattia della “noia”) e degli altri, Dino appare correlativamente afflitto da una sorta di ipertrofia della dimensione ermeneutica: cerca costantemente di capire proprio perché non capisce, o meglio, perché vuole capire in maniera sbagliata, secondo modalità di appropriazione, invece che di serena accettazione’ (Turchetta 2009, 73). The ownership of goods and money is invested with the epistemological and emotional purpose of shortening the distance between the subject and its surroundings.

Ma se il visitatore varcava quelle soglie ed entrava negli appartamenti, invece delle belle sale dipinte e dei pavimenti marmorei che l'aspetto nobile del palazzo lasciava supporre, trovava anticamere, corridoi, e stanze grandi e alte sì, ma piene di povere suppellettili, di stracci, di mobili vecchi e sgangherati. Il tutto immerso in un'aria buia e polverosa che non bastavano a rischiarare le finestre profondamente incassate nei muri grossi. Egli abitava in un palazzo della parte antica della città, al quale certamente i proprietari non avevano messo mano da almeno un secolo [...]. L'appartamento di Tullio [...] come dappertutto nel palazzo, ingombravano le stanze le solite cassapanche, i soliti armadi, le solite suppellettili di legno scuro, sgangherate e scomode, *roba familiare, di quella che si trascina per le aste e per le eredità, senza stile né tempo*. (Moravia 2000, 1097, my emphasis)

The 'anticamere, corridoi e stanze grandi' are indeed full of testimonies from a more glorious past, where there was a correspondence between the economic resources of the family and the ostentation of what they could acquire through that wealth. The 'solite cassepanche, soliti armadi, solite suppellettili di legno scuro' show a recurrence of these pieces of furniture within the circles of bourgeois families, and their circulation across different generations. This echoes, yet differs, from Gadda's writings, where pauperism described the intention of extending the use of worn-out objects which were constantly fixed and repaired, so that they could stay for as long as possible within the economic and financial cycle. In 'L'avaro' these items are not preserved or repaired with the intention to save money. They are accumulated as part of an outdated past. The 'solite cassapanche, i soliti armadi, le solite suppellettili di legno scuro, sgangherate e scomode' are not used to flaunt the family prestige. They are simply cumbersome items, hoarded and forgotten in the 'stanze grandi'.

According to Bourdieu ([1979] 1996), material inheritances such as pieces of furniture or antique items are also cultural inheritances and aid in the shaping of one's 'taste'. In turn, the possession of a certain taste contributes to the moulding of one's social identity and sense of 'membership in bourgeois dynasties' (Bourdieu 1996, 69). The fact that in 'L'avaro' the decorative items are generically named 'roba familiare' and then labelled as 'cianfrusaglie' implies that Tullio did not take part in the acquisition of this cultural and material inheritance. Things from the past are not considered material and cultural heritage, as Bourdieu would have it, but are defined as items from a 'magazzino di robivecchi' characterised primarily as counterfeit. Following Bourdieu's notion of social distinction as a process fostered by the physical environment, the values this room exudes are superficiality,

obsolescence, and falsity.<sup>17</sup> Tullio was raised in an environment inhabited by dust and filth. These objects do not contribute to strengthening his class-consciousness and they do not bear social values in which Tullio recognises himself. Orlando's idea that the category of the 'logoro-realistico' appears only in instances in which membership to the bourgeoisie is less stable, is not necessarily an accurate one. Rather than maintaining an object within a closed social circle, Tullio's determination to purely own the object is representative of a reconfigured relationship to the material world, whereby the correlation between the subject's material possessions and the definition of their social status is no longer straightforward or direct.

The figure of Elena de Gasperis is diametrically opposed to that of Tullio. Elena is still very concerned about keeping up social appearances but is obliged to live in a condition of economic penury. The De Gasperis' apparent wealth is in fact just a façade to hide the economic destitution in which they live. The first signs of the De Gasperis' decay can be detected in the descriptions of the 'salone' where the couple and their guests usually spend their evenings:

Non c'era che una vasta sala la quale riceveva la luce scarsa e piovosa da un finestrone dai vetri opachi. Di giorno questo enorme stanzone restava immerso in una ombra leggera e fredda che posava su tutte le cose come un grigio velo di polvere; di notte, accese le poche lampade, una oscurità nera restava negli angoli e tra le alte travature oblique del soffitto. I De Gasperis avevano uniformemente tappezzato questa loro dimora con una stoffa grigia e pesante che da metà delle pareti giungeva fino a terra; ma non inchiodata e tesa bensì libera e drappeggiata in grosse pieghe piene d'ombra che parevano cortinaggi di teatro e facevano supporre il vuoto là dove, invece, c'erano i muri. *Completavano l'arredamento pochi mobili belli e antichi i quali facevano pensare che un tempo le condizioni dei due coniugi fossero state migliori.* Perché, veramente, parevano dibattersi nelle strettezze. (Moravia 2000, 1105, my emphasis)

The description of this one 'stanzone' portrays a deeply squalid environment which the couple unsuccessfully attempts to hide through heavy, theatrical 'cortinaggi'. A parallel is already established with the furniture in Tullio's apartment. The layer of dust that conveyed the man's indifference to the furniture and to the social role to which it is associated, is replaced in the De Gasperis' house by the 'ombra leggera e fredda che posava su tutte le cose come un grigio velo di polvere', which only superficially replicates the uncleanness of the protagonist's abode. The 'suppellettili sgangherate e

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<sup>17</sup> In this short story, the theme of the contrast between appearances and reality is particularly relevant. According to Basile (1982) and Parisi (2008), the theme of the duplicity of appearances supposedly hints at Moravia's controversial ideological position in relation to the bourgeoisie.

scomode' of Tullio's place give way to 'pochi mobili belli e antichi i quali *facevano pensare che un tempo le condizioni dei due coniugi fossero state migliori*'. The De Gasperi's care of their house expresses their interest in the evocation of a lost and prestigious past. This attitude is diametrically opposed to the accumulation of unappreciated and cluttered furniture owned by the stingy protagonist.

Rainone's study (2013) of the interiors that appear in *Gli indifferenti* is an important interpretative resource to grasp the relationship established between these objects and the social status of the De Gasperis. Rainone describes the resemblance between the bourgeois interior and a theatrical environment, and shows how the characters appear and disappear in the scene like 'maschere' in many of the author's writings. Though in this short story the resemblance to a theatrical stage is not as prominent as in *Gli indifferenti*, it is still possible to recognise some of these theatrical features in the description of the 'salone'. As the narrator writes, the interior of the De Gasperi's studio is covered by a heavy, grey fabric that hangs from the ceiling and makes the walls look like 'cortinaggi di teatro'.

Rainone's observation that in *Gli indifferenti* 'è dal "sottosuolo" [...] che promana *sub specie theatri* il sistema simbolico di funi e argani per la recita sopraporte l'assito della sala da pranzo' (Rainone 2013, 77) can help with the interpretation of 'L'avaro' too. The parallel between the theatrical space and the interior space of the De Gasperi's house further corroborates the understanding of social identity as dependent upon performance. As Filippi states, 'la casa della borghesia è un luogo che rimane a lungo sospeso tra l'intimità di uno spazio privato e la teatralità di uno spazio di rappresentanza' (Filippi 2014, 30). In turn, this changes the objects which decorate this pseudo-theatrical space into props instrumental to the performance.

Further evidence on the identification of Elena with the values of the bourgeoisie can be found in the passage in which she serves alcohol to her guests:

Questo momento, era chiaro, aveva per lei un *valore quasi rituale*; quelle bottiglie, quei bicchieri, quelle schegge di ghiaccio, *brillavano ai suoi occhi come le fiammelle dei ceri sopra gli altari*; *quei suoni leggeri dei cristalli e dei liquidi le ispiravano la stessa sospensione quasi mistica che nel devoto provocano il tintinnio del calice e delle ampolle e il fruscio dei paramenti sacri*. Ma avvicinarsi a quel tavolo, mescolare i liquori, offrirli, discorrere affabilmente con quei tre giuocatori [...] doveva essere per lei una vera umiliazione, peggio, una *profanazione*. (Moravia 2000, 1109, my emphasis).

Despite their economic difficulties, the De Gasperi are clearly still keen on offering the pleasures of alcoholic beverages to their guests, thus holding on to pleasures that back in their family's heyday might have been more affordable. This passage casts the house as a sacred space, where a series of

ritualised gestures are adopted to keep up the ritual In Thorstein Veblen's words ([1899] 2007), Elena is not only the 'sole exponent of the household's pecuniary decency' (Veblen 2007, 85), but also the provider of a social differentiation based on dietary preferences:

The ceremonial differentiation of the dietary is best seen in the use of intoxicating beverages and narcotics. If these articles of consumption are costly, they are felt to be noble and honorific. Therefore, the base classes, primarily the women, practise an enforced continence with respect to these stimulants, except in countries where they are obtainable at a very low cost. (Veblen 2007, 70).

Thus, not only is she the enabler of social distinctions through the ceremony of alcoholic consumption, but also by her own renunciation of that substance. This in turn allows us to reflect upon the ceremonial aspect of these practices as well as her deep knowledge of such manners. The fact that she repeats gestures of cordiality following a skilful ritual and using a variety of objects speaks for her interiorisation of these gestures. Following Bourdieu, this is further evidence of her sense of belonging to a social class of which she wishes to be part and to which she can only fictionally go back to through the recuperation of rituals such as these. Elena can only flaunt what she has internalised and appropriated by way of being raised in this class:

Knowing that manner is a symbolic manifestation whose meaning and value depend as much on the perceivers as on the producer, one can see how it is that the manner of using symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of "class" and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction. (Bourdieu 1996, 59)

In a similar way to the social value acquired by the possession of antique objects whose old age bespeaks of their prestige and whose possession is a provider of social prominence, showing 'legitimate manners' can serve as a social signifier and becomes expressive of the social extraction of the character.<sup>18</sup>

Pieces of furniture that act as theatrical props are not the only elements to perform this function in the short story. A relationship of exchange between the human subject and the luxurious good is established with Elena De Gasperis. When she opens up to Tullio about her husband, Elena claims that:

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<sup>18</sup> See Bourdieu (1996, 59-64)

‘Tutto mi ha portato via per pagare i suoi debiti... tutto... la mia collana, i miei anelli... e avevo tanta roba, cose di famiglia, cose che mi aveva regalato quando eravamo fidanzati e ci amavamo ancora, tutto... tutto’. Ripeteva quel ‘tutto’ continuando a toccarsi il collo con le mani dalle dita aperte e guardando davanti a sé con gli occhi sbarrati. (Moravia 2000, 1116)

Rings, necklaces, and jewels can be identified as what Böhme calls ‘inalienable goods’ (Böhme 2014, 233). He defines these as heirlooms, family jewels, or inherited ornaments which are placed outside economic circulation. These goods tend not to be sold or traded, as any other commodity, because of their affective and identity-holding importance.<sup>19</sup> The only occasion in which such goods enter the circuit of economic exchange, Böhme continues, is after a natural catastrophe or a war. In this short story, the catastrophic event involving the De Gasperis has a more private and familial dimension, but equally serious consequences. The selling of Elena’s jewels is the result of Valentino’s addiction to gambling, which has compromised their own access to that very wealth.

Tullio’s realisation of Valentino’s intention to pawn Elena herself is soon followed by the description of the woman’s fascination with the promise of luxury offered by her suitors Locascio, Parodi, and Varini. The possibility of re-acquiring these inalienable goods adds to her attraction towards her suitors. As she confesses to Tullio:

‘Parodi,’ spiegò a questo punto, ‘vorrebbe che io andassi a stare a sue spese in un appartamento civettuolo che dice di aver già fatto montare e tiene pronto per me...: *avrei due donne di servizio, l’automobile, l’autista in livrea, un pechinese, vestiti, gioielli... tutto quello che mi manca ora... insomma diventerei il tipo perfetto della mantenuta dell’uomo d’affari...*’. (Moravia 2000, 1120, my emphasis)

And later on:

‘Mi dia la mano,’ ella sussurrò dall’oscurità che le avvolgeva la bocca; turbato Tullio la porse e sentì che gliela guidava sul pelo folto e setoso della pelliccia. ‘È bella questa pelliccia,’ [...] ‘io l’ho accettata e basta... ora so che non avrei dovuto farlo... ma allora... e poi,’ e la voce parve calmarsi e distendersi in un accento invaghito e patetico, ‘e poi è così bella una pelliccia,

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<sup>19</sup> Böhme notes for example that ‘[w]hat is certain is that immobilised, inalienable things cannot disappoint. They are. They remain. They show themselves. They show us – we, who either directly (as their owners) or indirectly (as museum or temple visitors e.g.) count them as our as “assets” – that we belong to existence. We are not made of ourselves. Perhaps this is our deepest anthropological humiliation: that we can only be sure of our existence through the medium of things’ (Böhme 2014, 237).

e ne avevo tanto desiderio...’ Ci fu un momento di silenzio. Quindi risuonò lo scatto secco del fermaglio della borsa, e, dopo un breve tramestio, *lenta e insinuante come la testa di un serpente*, in un riflesso che illuminava le ginocchia di Tullio, avanzò la mano della donna. All’indice brillava un anello con un diamante. ‘Me lo darà Locascio se andrò via con lui,’ sussurrò la voce ansante, ‘intanto gli ho chiesto di tenerlo una settimana... è così bello...’ La mano si girava ora da un lato ora dall’altro, vanitosamente, come per far meglio ammirare la *grossa pietra fulgente*; ‘non è vero che è bello?’. (1125, my emphasis)

Furs, diamonds, jewels, and cars become staples of the luxury Elena craves to recover. The enjoyment of these objects is connected to the possibility they offer her to get back her lost social and economic prestige. For a moment, she forgets that the acquisition of these goods would take place only through trading her self. This establishes an intricate system of resonances with the phenomenon of commodity fetishism and the alienation of the labourer introduced by Marx.<sup>20</sup> These luxurious objects are long-lasting reminders of the economic affluence of those who own them and the promise of more material wealth to come. Elena’s desire to re-appropriate her lost prestige through the ownership of those goods can be seen as a consequence of the fact that they:

[s]tand [...] in for (usually) the image of a world that fulfils all our needs, a world that is always ‘full’, ‘rich’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘beautiful’ (and we are a part of it). This is what defines the aura of the commodity fetish: the commodity fetish beckons with the promise of participation in a land of milk and honey (all versions of it). The commodity is therefore the code for a utopia. (Böhme 2014, 265)

Elena’s suitors project an economic value onto her body by encouraging her to see their gifts as materialising ‘desire, happiness, participation, beauty, meaning, being beyond the limits of the commodity’ (Böhme 2014, 224). Elena believes that the way to regain her social prestige is to accept the material offers from her suitors and acknowledge her own financial and economic value as a commodity. Her own visceral attraction to these commodities and precious items mirrors her own status and value as a commodity that can be exchanged to pay off her husband’s debts. Her body undergoes a process of objectification and she is transformed into a surface on which to display precious goods.<sup>21</sup> Her hand, for example, becomes detached from her body and loses its organic quality. The precious

<sup>20</sup> See Böhme (2014, 248-259).

<sup>21</sup> In novels such as *La noia* (1960) the objectification of the female body is particularly evident. For a more detailed overview on this see Wood (1989) and Turchetta (2018).

ring she wears turns it into a snake with ‘una grossa pietra fulgente’ on its head. By accepting those goods and re-entering that social class *through* them and *with* them, she reifies herself. Elena is located at the opposite end of the spectrum to Tullio’s resistance to the fascination of goods. She realises that the only way to return to that world of commodities is by becoming a commodity herself.

A different type of relationship between a man and his possessions is established in ‘Fine di una relazione’ ([1933] 2000). Here, the protagonist Lorenzo is no longer able to tolerate the emptiness of his middle-class life and is determined to put an end to his existential anguish by separating from his lover. This short story offers an example of an alienated relationship with the world of objects. The protagonist is no longer able to appreciate the luxury he can have access to and attempts to remind himself of the emotional comfort which derives from the possession of expensive goods. Unlike ‘L’avarò’, in this short story there is a correspondence between the social extraction of the character and the exhibition of his resources. Lorenzo, however, cannot stand the fakery hidden behind the precious commodities and pieces of furniture he owns, because they act as an insufferable reminder of the emptiness of his social class.

The first part of the text describes Lorenzo’s wealth and the sense of *noia* and inability to stand the superficiality of his lifestyle. The narrator writes:

Non era forse ricco? Non faceva di queste sue ricchezze l’uso più giudizioso e raffinato? *Casa, automobile, viaggi, vestiti, divertimenti, giuoco, villeggiature, società e amante, gli avveniva qualche volta di enumerarsi tutte le cose che possedeva con una specie di noia vana e orgogliosa* per concludere alla fine che l’origine del suo malessere dovesse essere cercata in qualche disturbo fisico. [...] Così, senza motivo, la vita era diventata per Lorenzo, un arido e opaco tormento. (Moravia 2000, 462, my emphasis)

The variety of these products and services denotes the social and economic affluence of the protagonist and his attitude towards them is different from that found in ‘L’avarò’. Lorenzo searches for the same comfort and sense of reassurance that Elena De Gasperis found in the goods offered by her suitors. However, his search for material comfort is not only unsuccessful, it also aggravates his *malaise*. The goods to which Lorenzo has access are fake and this falsity is reflected back onto the social class to which they are connected. The luxury that they appear to possess is an illusion. The comfort they promise is but a fleeting impression of respite from his inner discomfort.

More clearly than ‘L’avarò’, ‘Fine di una relazione’ can be seen as a gallery of fake items which reflect the protagonist’s disillusioned outlook on the world. This is clear from the first description of his house:<sup>22</sup>

*Sul marmo giallo del tavolino in falso stile Luigi quindici che era nel vestibolo vide, posato accanto al tozzo ombrellino e alla borsa, un curioso pacchetto irto di punte aguzze. [...] Lorenzo riavvolse il balocco nella carta, appese l'impermeabile e il cappello e passò nella camera da letto. [...] Subito dal primo sguardo capì che la donna, per ingannare l'attesa, aveva preparato se stessa e la stanza in modo che egli, arrivando nella notte fredda e piovosa, avesse subito l'impressione di una intimità affettuosa e consolante. Non c'era che la lampada del capezzale che fosse accesa ed ella l'aveva avvolta nella sua camicia di seta rosa affinché la luce fosse calda e discreta.* (Moravia 2000, 463-4, my emphasis)

By following Lorenzo’s movements in his house, the reader is offered an overview of the different spaces that make up the interiors.<sup>23</sup> The succession of ‘vestibolo’ and bedroom and the presence of little tables strategically positioned to accommodate umbrellas, hats, and toys generate an image of intentional sophistication and confirm Lorenzo’s financial availability.<sup>24</sup>

The furniture which appears in this passage is both the cause of the exacerbation of Lorenzo’s state and the material manifestation of the fakery he can no longer stand. If, according to Baudrillard ‘the primary function of furniture and objects [...] is to personify human relationships’ (Baudrillard 1996,

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<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Lorenzo’s house is located in an under-populated part of the city: ‘L’appartamento di Lorenzo stava al pianterreno di una palazzina nuova situata in fondo a una straducola ancora incompleta che, partendo dal viale suburbano, qualche casa più in là si perdeva nella campagna. Fuorchè la sua, tutte le case in quella viuzza erano disabitate sia addirittura in via di costruzione’ (Moravia 2000, 463). Whilst Tullio’s house is located in a part of town progressively abandoned by well-off people, Lorenzo’s is situated in a soon-to-be residential area. It would appear from this description that the rest of the dwellings around Lorenzo’s house have not been completed yet, giving the impression that his flat is an exclusive one. Though referring to the post-war period, Bonomo’s article (2011) offers an insight into how different residential typologies corresponded to specific social strata of the time: ‘As early as the 1930s, while this latter building type palazzine] [...] was most commonly associated with the petite bourgeoisie, the palazzina and villino were associated with the middle and upper classes. As a consequence, from the mid-1920s onwards, Rome was witness to the construction of many more palazzine than villini [...] it is no wonder, then, that during this period the typology of the palazzina was strictly associated with the bourgeoisie’ (Bonomo 2011, 293). This further reinforces the identification of Lorenzo as a representative of the bourgeoisie.

<sup>23</sup> De Fusco notes that ‘[le] esigenze di semplificazione e di assonante unità, di funzionalismo organico, non si traducono solo in aspetti stilistici ma in un modo del tutto nuovo di concepire gli ambienti interni, ognuno dei quali, secondo il moderno comfort borghese, assume una precisa identità: la sala d’ingresso, il salotto, la camera da pranzo [...] ne deriva una nuova tipologia di mobili’ (De Fusco 2004, 252-3, my emphasis). Once again, the presence of spaces with ‘una precisa identità’ is indicative of the social extraction of the protagonist. There is an exact correspondence between the protagonist’s social extraction and the sequence of spaces in his house.

<sup>24</sup> De Fusco identifies multifunctionality as a trait specific to Art Nouveau: ‘l’orientamento verso la polifunzionalità del mobile [...] portano gli architetti dell’Art Nouveau ad adottare la tipologia degli arredi ad elementi combinati’ (2004, 253). Interestingly, another ‘Art Nouveau’ house can be found in the short story ‘La caduta’ (1940) and, as Rainone has underlined, it appears to refer back to the author’s own childhood house (Rainone 2013, 155).

16), it is evident that the protagonist's gaze on the objects decorating his house is revealing of a deeper, social emptiness. As soon as he enters his flat, Lorenzo looks at the 'marmo giallo del tavolino in falso stile Luigi quindici' (Moravia 2000, 464, my emphasis). He makes his way to his room and notices that his lover covered the lamp 'affinchè la luce fosse calda e discreta' (464). Finally, in the middle of the conversation with her, 'si fermò d'improvviso davanti uno stipo dorato e falso come tutti gli altri mobili della stanza' (464). The falsity and multi-functionality of the cabinets are exemplary of the tendency to create a hiding recess, an artificial space which is used to conceal things. The woman's movements and attitudes, too, express a sense of affectation. Her rearrangement of the room and her covering of the lamp to soften the light are triggered by the intention of re-creating a universe of genuine emotions which does nothing but exacerbate the state of Lorenzo's poor mood. The realisation of the falsity of these objects is proof of the emptiness of appearances and of relationships, and expresses the fleeting nature of comforts.<sup>25</sup> Less subtly than *L'Adalgisa*'s ironic treatment of the absurd behaviours and attitudes of the Milanese bourgeoisie, 'Fine di una relazione' establishes a clear parallel between the fakery of the furniture and the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. The objects surrounding Lorenzo are either temporary distractions to be consumed as a temporary solution to his malady, or a mirror that reflects back the hypocrisy surrounding him.<sup>26</sup>

Emblematically, the finale of the short story seems to hint at the sense of emptiness overwhelming the protagonist and contrasts starkly with the pompous and falsely luxurious interior of the house. Once his lover leaves, Lorenzo opens the window and looks at the desolation of the environment outside:

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<sup>25</sup> This is also true for the type of clothing found in this short story. The 'impermeabile e cappello' convey an idea of impenetrability and protection from the outside, as they prevent external elements from affecting what is underneath them.

<sup>26</sup> Interesting evidence of Lorenzo's new-found hatred for superficiality can be emblematically detected in his relationship to the mirror. As the narrator states: 'Due ore trascorrevano così in cure inutili; due ore durante le quali più e più volte Lorenzo prendeva uno specchio e indugiava a scrutare il proprio viso come se avesse sperato di sorprendervi uno sguardo, di rintracciare una ruga che avrebbe potuto fargli intuire i motivi del suo mutamento. [...] Ma, nonostante la vuotaggine e l'amarezza di queste cure dedicate alla sua persona fisica, quelle due ore, forse perché l'impiego che ne faceva era preciso e limitato e non richiedeva alcuna riflessione, erano le sole della giornata durante le quali gli riuscisse di dimenticare se stesso e il proprio miserabile stato' (Moravia 2000, 462). In this regard, Baudrillard underlines that '[a]nother change is the disappearance of looking-glasses and mirrors [...]. The bourgeois interior [...] and what remains of that interior in present-day serially produced furniture, has mirrors in profusion, hung on the walls and incorporated into wardrobes, sideboards, cabinets or panelling. As a source of light, the mirror enjoys a special place in the room. This is the basis of the ideological role it has played, everywhere in the domestic world of the well-to-do, as redundancy, superfluity, reflection: the mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual opportunity to exercise his privilege – to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions [...]. The mirror still exists, but its most appropriate place is in the bathroom, unframed. *There, dedicated to the fastidious care of the appearance that social intercourse demands, it is liberated from the graces and the glories of domestic subjectivity.* By the same token other objects are in turn liberated from mirrors; hence, they are no longer tempted to exist in a closed circuit with their own images' (Baudrillard 1996, 21-23, my emphasis). By observing himself in the mirror and recognising the vanity of what he sees, Lorenzo despises his reflection even more and this further corroborates the hypothesis that these short stories are engaged in the debate between reality and appearances. A more detailed work on the nature and the recurrence of mirrors in Moravia is Basile (1982).

Finalmente si levò, andò alla finestra e l'aprì [...]. Stava fermo, i suoi occhi vedevano il nero e confuso terreno da costruzioni che era sotto la casa, *coi mucchi di immondizie*, le erbacce e certe forse caute e lente che dovevano essere di gatti affamati, i suoi orecchi udivano i rumori del viale non lontano, trombe di automobili, stridori di tramvai ma il suo pensiero restava inerte. [...] 'Come me, anzi meglio di me,' pensava osservando sui *mucchi bianchicci di immondizie* le ombre mobili e guardinghe dei gatti, 'quei gatti sentono quei rumori, vedono quelle cose'. (Moravia 2000, 470, my emphasis)

By moving his gaze onto piles of rubbish, the protagonist seems to be reminded of the true, corrupt nature that hides behind the fake luxury by which he is surrounded. The atmosphere of desolation is at the same time a real, squalid environment and a landscape of the mind which reflects, more accurately and truthfully than the furniture of his house, the discomfort that afflicts his existence.

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the way in which the ownership and display of objects can be connected to a character's belonging to a specific social class. In Gadda's case, the narrator's scathing irony attacks the pauperism of the working-class as much as the superficiality of the bourgeoisie. The Cavenaghi's parquet floors illustrate how an object can become a point of convergence for members of different social classes and a tool which reveals the social dynamics between them. In the short stories by Moravia, characters have different understandings of the social relevance of objects. The objects that a character like Tullio possesses do not grant him access to the bourgeoisie, given his unawareness of the social role they play and his unwillingness to use them with that purpose. In other instances, characters who had previously belonged to the bourgeoisie, like Elena, show a morbid attachment to objects and rituals that had marked their life within that class. The characters' social aspirations, or lack thereof, are not matched by a corresponding capability of appreciating objects or by adequate economic means to purchase them. In the case of Lorenzo, his belonging to the bourgeoisie is matched by material wealth. However, this social and material coherence coincides with the protagonist's realisation of the superficial value of these socially connoted objects. These examples show the unbalanced relationship of the characters with the world of the objects which they then fetishise.

## CHAPTER THREE

### New Materialist Objects: Tommaso Landolfi and Dino Buzzati

#### 1. Nonhuman and Objective Epistemologies

In recent years, an increasing number of theoretical, philosophical, and critical approaches have manifested an interest in abandoning an onto-epistemological system based on dichotomies, in order to embrace a more fluid and interconnected vision of the world. This ever-increasing, multifaceted, theoretical body expresses the interest in adopting a new vision of phenomenal reality that attempts to overcome the dualism underlying Western thought. These theoretical subdisciplines and trends share the common belief that a world-view based on binary oppositions such as object-subject, nature-culture, and natural body- social-body is fundamentally insufficient to describe the variety of the world, whereby phenomena hardly fall clearly within either one of these categories.

An attempt to offer a guide through this variety of theoretical approaches can be found in Richard Grusin's *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015). The volume collects a series of contributions which have emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century and which have unanimously attempted to 'de-centr[e] the human in favour of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality and technology' (Grusin 2015, vii). As Grusin explains, the nonhuman describes the 'simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical "turns" – for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological or evolutionary' (x) which bear witness to the uncontrollable proliferation of new ways to understand and decode the world.<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour's and Michel Serres' theoretical positions are not only testimonies to this broadening theoretical attitude, but also indicative examples of the productivity of this approach in the field of the social sciences.

In tune with an epistemological system that problematises the categories of subject and object, Michel Serres' *The Parasite* ([1980] 2007) introduces the notion of the quasi-object. As discussed briefly in Chapter Two, Serres states that the quasi-object 'is not an object, but it is one nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Grusin lists a series of nonhuman approaches: '(1) Actor-network theory, particularly Bruno Latour's career-long project to articulate technical mediation, nonhuman agency, and the politics of things (2) Affect theory [...] (3) Animal studies [...] (4) The assemblage theory [...] (5) New brain sciences [...] (6) The new materialism in feminism, philosophy, and Marxism (7) New media theory [...] (8) Varieties of speculative realism including object-oriented philosophy, neovitalism, and panpsychism' (Grusin 2015, viii).

since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be subject' (Serres 2007, 225). Through the example of the game of football, Serres argues that the ball, as an object, defines the role of the player as a subject of the game, because the player is subjected, 'sub-mitted [...] put beneath' (227) the ball. He or she would not be a player without the ball defining their role as such. At the same time, however, the ball also becomes a subject of the game when it is played by the player. Serres shows that notions of objectivity and subjectivity are in a state of flux, and as such should be reframed in terms of *intersubjectivity*. This idea evokes a more fluid and interchangeable relationship between entities that can shift and change according to the perspective from which they are seen.

The dismantling of traditional notions of subjectivity and the shifting of attention onto the relational aspect linking different beings is also at the centre of Bruno Latour's theoretical contributions to the fields of anthropology, and political and social sciences. His insights originate from considerations of divisions between natural and social sciences, and the repercussions that these disciplinary divisions have in modern day practices and worldviews. The apparent irreconcilability between these two disciplines can easily be circumvented, Latour maintains, by abandoning the deeply rooted traditional dialectic system and embracing the idea of hybridity and collectives. Rather than conceiving of the world as divided into human-nonhuman or nature-culture, in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) the scholar proposes a theory that 'does not deal with nature or knowledge, with things-in-themselves, *but with the way all these things are tied to our collectives and to subjects*' (Latour 1993, 4, my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the relations between things and beings abolishes ontological hierarchies and proposes a system in which 'the association of humans and nonhumans' (4) creates collectives.<sup>3</sup>

Whether it is called hybrid, action-network-theory, assemblage, or collective, both Serres and Latour recognise the necessity of adopting an onto-epistemological system which is more focused on the way to approach and better comprehend the assemblage or collective thus formed, rather than in

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<sup>2</sup> Latour identifies binary oppositions such as science versus politics, and nature versus culture as unrealistic and based on the identification with the principles of the Enlightenment. This cultural and historical period aimed at 'purify[ing] by carefully separating [what] belonged to things themselves [ontology] and the part that could be attributed to the functioning of economy, the unconscious, language or symbols' (Latour 1993, 35), in an attempt at cleansing and pigeonholing pre-modern categories. The desire to clearly process the world in clear-cut categories does not correspond to modern reality, which is based instead on enmeshment and contamination. In Böhme's words, 'we believe that we are modern, but we have never been', because 'the very thing that modernity accuses pre-modern cultures of, namely mixing up conceptual oppositions, in fact, applies perfectly to modernity itself' (Böhme 2014, 50). The traces of superstition and pre-modern elements that feature also in modernity are found in these texts as well.

<sup>3</sup> Latour's theories progressively came to include concepts such as the actor-network theory (ANT) that the philosopher developed together with Law and Callon. In order to abolish the distinction between subjects and objects, Latour talks about *actants* (2004), defined as 'a term from semiotics covering both humans and nonhumans' (Latour 2004, 237), which are part of networks. For a more detailed overview on this, see Cressman (2009).

their ontological investigation. These schools of thought move the focus of philosophical investigation from ontology to epistemology, and more specifically, to an epistemology that revolves around the rejection of the human subject as the unique focus of philosophical attention, and the appreciation of the nonhuman elements instead.

### 1.1 Jane Bennett's New Materialism

Serres' and Latour's contributions are amongst the earliest examples, in the twentieth century, of a rekindled scholarly interest in the study of material assemblages or collectives,<sup>4</sup> and they were fundamental for the development of later, nonhuman thought, such as the new materialist current. In their volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), Samantha Coole and Diana Frost write that the philosophy of new materialism conceives of matter as an ever-changing and manifold entity which:

[possesses] its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization and directedness, and thus [it is] *no longer [...] simply passive or inert, [it] disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality and freedom to more autonomous decisions* and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature. (Coole and Frost 2010, 10, my emphasis)

According to Coole and Frost understanding matter in transformative terms allows us to 'think anew about the fundamental structure of matter [as having] far-reaching normative and existential implications' (Coole and Frost 2010, 5), while simultaneously bringing forward the political and ethical concerns triggered by scientific and technological advances and their impact on matter, 'and in particular on living matter' (5). Rethinking the notion of matter in terms that do not conceive of it as necessarily subordinated or opposed to the human can bring forward new and unexpected consequences that can have political, ethical, and social implications.

A major exponent of new materialism is Jane Bennett, who has contributed to the development of this current with two works, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001) and *Vibrant Matter* (2010). In her first study (2001), Bennett highlights the necessity to revive and cultivate a quotidian sense of wonder, which can 'propel ethical generosity' (Bennett 2001, 3). The capacity to fall under the spell of the everyday enables us not only to 'resist the history of disenchantment of modernity' (3) but it

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview on the genealogy of this thought see Böhme, 'Now That's Some Thing: An Introduction to the World of Things' (2014, 21-120).

also offers the possibility to discover ‘sophisticated modes of communication among nonhumans, the strange agency of physical systems at far-from-equilibrium states, the animation of objects by video technologies’ (3). This apparently childlike state of wonder helps to suspend our sense of modern scepticism and refines our capacity to grasp and tune in with the liveliness and the vibrancy of the everyday. Ultimately, the capacity to cultivate and surrender to enchantment becomes key to perceive the ‘connection of different things’ (6), beings and matter alike.

The attention to matter and its vitality was subsequently turned into the subject of Bennett’s later book, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), where she offers a powerful eco-political argument for the vitality of supposedly dead matter.<sup>5</sup> By re-elaborating Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of assemblage and integrating it with the notion of network proposed by Latour, she initially defines such congregations of ‘being’ as the ‘locus of agency [...] a human-nonhuman working group’ (Bennett 2010, xvii). At the heart of these ‘working groups’ lies a kernel of heterogeneity, derived from the fact that ‘[they are] *ad hoc* groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. [They] are living throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of things that *confound them from within*’ (24, my emphasis). Furthermore, ‘[a]ssemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group’ (24).

Bennett’s reflections on eco-political issues resonate with Serres’ theoretical approach in that both consider the interrelation of different elements in collectives and investigate the social implications that such interrelations have. At the same time, by arguing for a horizontal and democratic study of the participants of the assemblage, Bennett borrows Latour’s egalitarian idea of *actant*, which she presents as that which is ‘neither an object nor a subject but an “intervener”’ (Bennett 2010, 9). In its nature, the actant’s ‘efficacy or agency always depends on the *collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces*’ (21, my emphasis). It follows that by being part of the assemblage, each *actant* needs to communicate and interconnect with all the other participants of the assemblage, by responding to its organic and inorganic surroundings and affecting them in turn. The abolishment of dichotomies and the rejection of a hierarchical ontological system corroborates the idea of an amorphous, non-categorised *entanglement* of matter and beings.

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<sup>5</sup> The development of her Latourian philosophy leads Bennett to apply this theoretical framework to a series of case studies, ranging from real events, such as the blackout of 2003 in North America, to fictional ones, as is the case for her analysis of Franz Kafka’s short story ‘The Cares of a Family Man’. The analysis of this short story offers a good example of the productivity of this framework in literary analysis and can be used across a variety of literary genres.

## 1.2 An Alternative Investigation of the Real: A Note on Genre

The potential of the theoretical premises introduced thus far can also shed new light onto the literary genre of the fantastic. The critical literature on the authors considered in the following pages, Tommaso Landolfi and Dino Buzzati, has often mobilised the category of ‘letteratura fantastica’ to explain the significance and the ways in which the worlds they depict in their texts deviate from ‘ours’.<sup>6</sup> The deployment of this literary genre, however, corresponds to the mobilisation of the psychoanalytical notions lying at the heart of the conventional definitions of the fantastic. Concepts such as the uncanny, the subjective, the unconscious, or fantasy are often used in discussing works belonging to this genre and are informed by a psychoanalytical matrix. A wide body of studies has investigated the overlap between this literary genre and psychoanalysis, and has pointed out that the literary texts Freud used to introduce some psychoanalytical notions show features that contribute to their attribution to the category of the fantastic.<sup>7</sup> In Andrew Butler’s words, ‘[p]sychoanalysing genre fantasy risks tautology: since Freud draws upon myths such as that of Oedipus and stories such as Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1815) to formulate his theories’ (Butler 2012, 91).

The analysis of the texts of Landolfi and Buzzati through the theoretical parameters highlighted above will add to the body of critical work on these texts and show how the fantastic genre can be re-assessed in the light of objective epistemologies. Rather than conceiving of the fantastic worlds in these texts simply as uncanny or as manifestations of unconscious forces, they will be looked at as proposing a reality that does not conform to ‘human’ onto-epistemological principles. These different and parallel universes are animated by vibrating forms of materiality and can be investigated with alternative epistemological means, which are capable of capturing and making sense of the unusual rules underlying them. The theories of Latour, Serres, and Bennett will contribute not only to the investigation of these unconventional, fantastic worlds through a rigorously non-anthropocentric approach, but can also comment, indirectly, upon the dynamics at work in *our* human world.

In tune with the inherently fluid and non-categorical intentions of this textual analysis and with the epistemological redefinition proposed for this literary genre, the notion of ‘genre’ itself should be re-assessed in the light of Remo Ceserani’s idea of ‘modo fantastico’. This is defined as ‘un insieme di procedimenti retorico-formali, atteggiamenti conoscitivi e aggregazioni tematiche, articolazioni dell’immaginario storicamente concrete e utilizzabili da vari codici linguistici, generi artistici o let-

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<sup>6</sup> Landolfi’s writings have been studied as expressions of the fantastic in texts such as Carlino (1998), Cecchini (2001), Farinelli (2009), Castaldi (2010), Micali (2014), and to name a few. Insofar as Buzzati is concerned, see Bonifazi (1982), Arslan (1993), Lazzarin (2002), Polcini (2014), and Zangrandi (2014).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Buse and Stott (1999), Borghart and Madelein (2003), Nan Lewen (2004), and Butler (2012).

terari' (Ceserani 1996, 8, my emphasis). Ceserani's notion of the 'mode' negotiates between the different aspects featured in these texts without expecting to account for their complexity and to allocate them into unmovable categories. The notion of mode echoes with, and shares, the productivity of the theoretical framework employed throughout the chapter. The idea of a 'mode' is more open to stylistic contamination than that of 'literary genre', because it acknowledges the fluidity and the hybridity of literary texts and the impossibility of pigeonholing them in one single category. Such openness and hybridity resonate with the notions that lie at the heart of the new materialist school of thought.

The textual analysis below will first consider Tommaso Landolfi's short stories as depicting alternative worlds where the 'things' humans usually experience as impalpable are instead extremely concrete and vibrant. Subsequently, it will consider Dino Buzzati's short stories and the osmotic relationship between mechanical and technological objects and the humans inhabiting nightmarish and disturbing universes. In the work of both authors the presence of scientific and technological artefacts like telephones and automobiles, or the recurrence of disquisitions on the physical and chemical nature of things like musical notes or colours become expedients to underline the limitations of our epistemological understanding of the world and to offer provoking alternatives. Though these examples are very different from one another, both authors present an 'attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body' (Bennett 2010, xiv) and an interest in investigating this new, kaleidoscopic, unsettling reality in all its vibrancy and liveliness.

## 2. Tommaso Landolfi's Enchanting Materiality

Tommaso Landolfi's production has often been labelled as belonging to the literary genre of the fantastic. Scholars identify the fantastic as a feature that originates from, and mainly resides in, Landolfi's use of language.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the employment of so-called 'parole-vitici', namely 'entità verbali "senza un immaginabile rapporto colla realtà fenomenica"' (Landolfi in Bellotto 2003, 214), Landolfi creates a literary universe characterised by '[uno] scarso (o inesistente) senso di realtà, percepita come qualcosa di falso, di non autentico, qualcosa su cui non si può fare affidamento e da cui tuttavia si dipende, ma che prima o poi ci tradirà' (Cecchini 2001, 50). In addition, 'il fantastico viene recuperato da Landolfi come mezzo per mettere in crisi il concetto di realtà e decostruire il ruolo e la funzione di letteratura in epoca moderna' (Cecchini 2001, 53). The increasing distrust towards 'il concetto di realtà' results in the progressive detachment from it and in the attempt to create literary products in which 'il fantastico si realizza come costruzione squisitamente *testuale* e si verifica perciò

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<sup>8</sup> Other than the scholars named in note 7, see also Lazzarin (2007) and Zublena (2013)

in *area linguistica*' (Castaldi 2010, 360, my emphasis). Because of the eminently linguistic nature of Landolfi's fantastic, the newly fabricated narrative dimension does not refer back to a realistic, concrete referent, because '*l'unico referente rimane quello della lingua del narrato [...] Landolfi suggerisce il paradosso per cui il linguaggio (e di conseguenza la letteratura) significa solo quando indica altro da se stesso [...] e contemporaneamente solo se stesso*' (Castaldi 2010, 364, my emphasis). The lack of engagement with external reality, and the self-reflective nature of the text would suggest that Landolfi's writings are removed from any empiricist interest and, in turn, from theories relying on a heightened attention to the phenomenal and material world, such as the new materialist ones.

In *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, however, Jane Bennett proposes a worldview that strongly resonates with Landolfi's, in spite of the profound difference that only apparently underlies their visions. Bennett proposes an alternative 'story of contemporary life that accentuates its moments of enchantment and explores the possibility that the affective force of these moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity' (Bennett 2001, 3). By resisting the deep-rooted narrative of 'modern disenchantment' and by critically engaging with philosophical, political, and ethical theories, Bennett goes through the different alternative ways in which to experience such a state of mind and lingers both on the psychological and the corporeal effects provoked by this sensation: 'You notice new colours, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a collection of singularities. Enchantment includes, then, a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transposed' (5).

Although these theorizations do not unanimously apply to the examples offered below, the next pages will illustrate how the self-referential element in Landolfi's text creates an alternative universe sustained by unusual ontological and epistemological principles. Such dimensions are often populated by enchanting entities and beings described by nonhuman or insane characters that alone can process the eerie and disorienting world described by the narrator. Rather than being concerned with the material and phenomenal difference between a realistic depiction of the world and a fantastic one, this analysis will be focusing on the characters' material, ontological, and epistemological relation to their surroundings.

This analysis will consider a selection of four short stories: 'Settimana di sole' and 'La donna nella pozzanghera' from *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* ([1937] 1975), 'Ragazze di provincia' from the collection *Il mar delle blatte e altre storie* ([1939] 1975), and 'Da "La melotecnica esposta al popolo"' from *La spada* ([1942] 1975). Rather than being ordered chronologically, these texts will be grouped according to the ways in which they problematise and represent physical materiality. While 'Ragazze di provincia' focuses on the vibrancy of objects such as clothes, theatrical props, and trinkets, the

other three short stories question and dissect the physical nature of what we experience as immaterial elements, such as sunrays, musical notes, and human feelings. Though it can be argued that sunrays, notes, and feelings can hardly be described as objects, it is also important to notice that the way they are portrayed in these texts suggests a worldview that considers them to be material and concrete entities.

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‘Ragazze di provincia’ ([1939] 1975) focuses on the adventure of a bachelor, Carlino, who, while roaming around the house he has inherited, finds some old theatre costumes he used to play with as a child. This triggers the memory of an older female cousin with whom Carlino decides to re-establish a relation. Eventually, the woman settles in the protagonist’s house and Carlino ends up finding himself expelled from his own abode.

During the first encounter between the protagonist and the stage garments, the narrator describes them as follows:

Erano abiti senza fodera, *alla foggia del cinquecento e d’altri secoli passati*, che nelle grosse impunture rivelavano, *appena a voltarli, una confezione affrettata e tramandavano un curioso odore di velluto, di raso, di filo lucente da ricamo e forse di naftalina*. Quegli abiti avevano una particolarità: si agganciavano tutti da dietro, con ciappe a maschio e femmina, sicché non si potevano indossare senza aiuto [...] o come sarà ora la cugina che sempre lo aiutava, all’ultimo momento, ad agganciarsi la giubba viola? (Landolfi 1975, 68, my emphasis)

Despite the obsolescence of their shape and their careless manufacture, these dresses have a memorial function. They still fascinate the protagonist, to the extent that their features leave particularly strong sensory effects. For example, the ‘velluto’, ‘raso’, and ‘filo da ricamo’ hardly release any peculiar smell, but they conjure up in the protagonist a ‘mood of wonder [and of] participat[ion] in a momentarily immobilizing encounter’ (Bennett 2001, 5). The ‘encounter’ with the garments emphasises their material qualities, and their gleaming charm has concrete effects on the protagonist.

Whereas the recovery of the clothes is insufficient to mend effectively the relationship between the protagonist and his cousin, those very garments offer completely different opportunities to the animal communities living in them. The narrator explains:

tutti se li dimenticarono sempre là. Un primo topo li scoprì e fece la via; i topi vi menavano i loro piccoli. Poi fu alla volta d’un nugolo di tarli. *E così, a poco a poco, sbrindellati, sbocconcellati, essi persero ogni consistenza. Già erano ormai intessuti solo di polvere; eppure,*

*giacenti di sbieco sulla panca, conservavano ancora quella compostezza rivelatrice d'una forma scomparsa, che hanno le marsine nelle pare, quando si riesumano i resti mortali d'un uomo. A toccarli, si capisce, si sarebbero definitivamente scomposti e sarebbero venuti via in un pugno.* (Landolfi 1975, 70, my emphasis)

The clothes' loss of shape ('compostezza rivelatrice d'una forma scomparsa') and of consistency ('persero ogni consistenza'), determines their uselessness for human purposes. While showing the clothes' progressive decay, however, the narrator also tries to remove them from an exclusively anthropocentric set of values, by showing their transformation into a fertile ground for the proliferation of nonhuman forms of life. The animal lives that have taken over are not concerned with the tattered appearance of the clothes, as would be the case for humans, but rather with their material qualities.

This process of gradual de-functionalisation and decay determines the clothes' central role in this short story. The animal life that thrives in them and causes their deterioration paradoxically determines the existence of these garments. In other words, the *life* of the clothes expresses itself through the life of the mice and moths that live in them and *consume* them. At the same time, the lives of these animals are grounded upon the material qualities of the fabrics. By giving up part of their functionality and materiality, the clothes do not 'act autonomously in front of an objective background, but [they] share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy' (Latour 2014, 5). In short, garments and animals create an *assemblage*.

The other strand of Landolfi's writing focuses on the material and even *atomic* elements that compose natural and often immaterial things. Landolfi's interest in scientific issues is visible in his re-elaboration of themes and motifs related to physical and chemical concepts.<sup>9</sup> This preoccupation becomes particularly evident in the pages of 'Settimana di sole' ([1937] 1975).

'Settimana di sole' is a diary-like short story, where the first person, psychotic narrator retells the events taking place during his stay at his relatives' abandoned house. His obsessions are directed towards the figure of one of his ancestors, Il Dissipatore, who is responsible for the squandering of the family wealth and whom the narrator sees, together with other symbolic ghost figures.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The importance of science and in particular of physics and mathematics has not been subject to a thorough analysis in the secondary literature and has hardly ever been on the radar of scholarly attention. In Landolfi's work the presence of these pseudo-scientific excerpts is not only prominent, but also often uttered by mentally unstable characters. This stresses the ironic quality of the scientific register. For the relevance of the parodic element in Landolfi's writing see Cortellessa (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Cecchini notes that the entire collection can be seen as 'una specie di diario schizofrenico' (Cecchini 2001, 63), and later on 'i simboli psicanalitici e le ossessioni che punteggiano i suoi racconti, più che a corrispondere a pulsioni dell'inconscio, sembrano essere ammiccamento consapevole' (66). Once again, the conscious use of psychoanalytical motifs can be seen as parody, like the use of scientific linguistic registers mentioned above.

Throughout the short story, there are several instances in which the protagonist's madness is expressed both by the paranoid and obsessive thought that the decadent house he inhabits conceals a treasure, and by his relations and dialogues with pieces of furniture and natural elements. As he wonders who Il Dissipatore is and where he might have hidden the wealth, the protagonist confesses:

[Ho] chiesto consiglio al guardiano e ride timidamente, *ho domandato particolari allo stipo sulle scale*, che ne deve rammentare parecchie, e dice che non sa nulla: di certo s'è rimbambito ormai. Appena sceso in sala, *le seggiole mi sono corse incontro festose a leccarmi le mani; le ho accarezzate, poverine*, come potevano sapere dei miei grattacapi? (Landolfi 1975, 122, my emphasis)

The protagonist perceives a vibrant world around him. Like faithful dogs, the chairs acquire animal-like behaviours, and the anthropomorphic staircase 'stipo' is addressed like a loyal confidant. It is interesting to notice that asking for 'particolari allo stipo' suggests the protagonist's acknowledgment of the longevity of the furniture.<sup>11</sup> By inhabiting the house for much longer than the man himself has, the staircase 'stipo' seems a more reliable witness of the events of the past. As was the case for the sixteenth-century clothes in 'Ragazze di provincia' and the different uses made of them by human and nonhuman entities, the narrator's reflection implicitly relativises the human understanding of the passage of time.

As the story proceeds, the liveliness and anthropomorphism of things start to involve natural elements as well, as they appear to be sustained by a life of their own. The rays of sun and the silence, for example, are a source of profound hatred from the protagonist, although he never reveals why.

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<sup>11</sup> The anthropomorphosis of pieces of furniture and the presence of psychoanalytical motifs contribute to placing Landolfi's work close to examples found in Alberto Savinio *Casa 'la Vita'* (1943) and *Tutta la vita* ([1945] 2011). In the collection *Tutta la vita*, the short story 'Poltromamma', for example, stages the adventures of the young child protagonist as he witnesses the transformation of his mother into the armchair he will carry around all his life until his death. This object also becomes the addressee of the protagonist's oedipal love and devotion. In spite of the clear psychoanalytical elements in play in these short stories, their presence only accounts for part of the complex interplay of surrealism and metaphysics present in the author's production. The notion of vital materialism can offer important insights into the material qualities and vibrancy of the objects found in Savinio's collection. In the preface to *Tutta la vita*, for example, Savinio writes: 'Fra questi racconti [...] *alcuni portano in scena poltrone, divani, armadi e altri mobili, in specie di personaggi sensibili, parlanti e operanti*. [...] Noi stiamo traversando la crisi di allargamento dell'universo. Guerre, rivoluzioni, angoscia dell'uomo, tutto che è crisi nel mondo da più anni a questa parte, tutto è conseguenza di questo allargamento [...]. Anche il cristianesimo segue la sorte di questo universo più vasto. *Non sarà cristiano in avvenire chi non porterà anche agli animali, alle piante, ai metalli, quell'amore cristiano che finora egli portava soltanto all'uomo*' ([1945] 2011, 5-6, my emphasis). The attention to the material qualities of the most familiar and humble objects is framed within the context of a spiritual capacity to tune in with the world around and is explained as a metaphysical manifestation of religious love. In other words, Jane Bennett's idea of vibrant and vital materialism can be seen as already present but framed by Savinio in religious terms. Both visions rely upon the same attention to the diversity of 'questo universo [...] vasto'. For a more detailed overview on this aspect and on the coexistence of metaphysics, surrealism, psychoanalysis, and materialism in Savinio, see Lioji (2018) where Fusillo (2012) serves as a framework to hold these elements together.

They also become the addressees of his (to us, unjustified) violence. This is shown in several passages throughout the short story. For example:

Di notte [c'è] un silenzio *che fruscia e gira rapidamente lungo gli angoli, come un topo grigio*; giurerei che anche lui ha paura, *se un giorno l'acchiappo l'avrà da fare con me*. [...] [P]asseggiavo per la cucina con tutte le porte chiuse e un'aria indifferente, *allo scopo di prendere, se mai, il silenzio alla sprovvista: la cucina è la sua tana preferita*. (Landolfi 1975, 125, my emphasis)

The same paranoid attitude is adopted towards what the narrator perceives as the disgraceful presence of the sun's rays:

[R]ientrando in camera [...] ho sorpreso un raggetto smilzo che s'era insinuato fra gli scuri e cercava qualcosa a terra. *Sono riuscito ad acchiapparlo, sebbene tentasse fuggire [sic] sulla parete, gli ho dato una buona scrollata, l'ho picchiato a dovere, l'ho battuto a diverse riprese contro il pavimento, dov'è rimasto a sbattersi per un certo tempo come una serpe*, e poi l'ho gettato dalla finestra. (131, my emphasis)

The protagonist's bursts of violence are reserved only for natural elements, while man-made ones are treated as friendly presences and faithful confidants. All that comes from the outside world and attempts to penetrate the safe walls of the protagonist's abode is seen as a potential threat, towards which the narrating voice shows an extremely defensive attitude. Rather than 'propel[ling] ethical generosity' (Bennett 2001, 3), as Bennett would have it, the appreciation of matter's vitality triggers in the protagonist quite destructive behaviours. Vice versa, when the natural world is processed through man and once it loses its natural rawness, as is the case for the 'stipo in legno' and the chairs, which we can presume are wooden too, it appears to be no longer threatening, but more integrated with the protagonist. This mentally unstable narrator is far from acknowledging his belonging to a wider *assemblage*, especially when it includes natural elements. His appreciation of the vibrancy of matter is heavily dependent on the visibility of the imposition of the human hand on it.

By attributing the rays and the silence with the material status of concrete elements, the narrator contributes to the depiction of an alternative reality, which does not match our day-to-day experience. Interpreting the narrator's madness in 'Settimana di sole', Cecchini points out:

È un protagonista che, come abbiamo visto, sembra tagliato su misura per sedute psicanalitiche; inetto e logorroico, affetto da nevrosi, manie ossessive, fobie per animali vari [...] fissazioni feticistiche (varie parti del corpo femminile, in particolare il seno), tendenze voyeuristiche e crudeltà sadistiche. *È anche un personaggio che tende alla cancellazione e annullamento delle differenze e che quindi ben si inserisce in quello che Rosemary Jackson ha caratterizzato come uno degli elementi centrali della trama fantastica: l'undifferentiation.* (Cecchini 2001, 67, my emphasis)

Leaving aside the psychoanalytical implications detected by Cecchini, the features that the scholar identifies in Landolfi's protagonist are representative of a more general attitude found in this short story. The cancellation of differences presented in the text can be interpreted as an attempt to propose a more ontologically inclusive universe, where typically human ontological hierarchies are debunked. This reconfigured reality is by no means easy to process and understand, as can be seen from the narrative voice's unjustified bouts of violence. The new world represented in 'Settimana di sole' can only be investigated through untraditional cognitive means that encourage the adoption of an epistemological system tailored to capture a more vibrant reality.

Similar events take place in the short stories dated 1942, 'Da "La melotecnica esposta al popolo"' and 'La donna nella pozzanghera', part of 'La piccola apocalisse' and included in *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* ([1942] 1975). Despite their inherent differences, these half philosophical, half treatise-like texts appear to be in tune with an idea of materiality extended to things that, supposedly, humans do not experience as palpable, as was the case in 'Settimana di sole'.<sup>12</sup>

'Da "La melotecnica esposta al popolo"' (henceforth 'Melotecnica') expands on the quality and the appearance of musical notes, which, in this universe, are endowed with a specific weight and pleasant colours and smells. The narrator-lecturer who presents this scientific report explains that, '[c]iò che [...] non tutti sanno è che le note emesse da gola umana hanno un proprio peso e una propria consistenza, più o meno apprezzabili secondo la valentia e la potenza dei cantanti' (1975, 87). Furthermore:

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<sup>12</sup> Landolfi's choice to craft a hybrid text such as this bears witness to a very personal and unique re-elaboration of fantastic narrative modalities. Cecchini talks about 'ibridi tra racconto e saggio, tra finzione e documento (che presentano in anticipo molte delle caratteristiche dello sperimentalismo della Neoavanguardia e del Gruppo 63): "metadiari" che descrivono l'impossibilità di scrivere un diario' (Cecchini 2001, 50) and later on 'il fantastico viene recuperato da Landolfi come mezzo per mettere in crisi il concetto di realtà e per decostruire il ruolo e la funzione della letteratura in epoca moderna' (53). The re-elaboration of fantastic literature modalities is ironically combined here, as well as in the following short story, with the re-elaboration of scientific language and style.

le note alte (o acute) mostrano un'insistente tendenza all'azzurro tenero, ma possono tuttavia apparire persino vagamente vermiglie o verdognole in determinati casi; le centrobasse offrono allo sguardo una gamma sempre più cupa a misura che si procede verso il registro profondo e si aggirano in generale sui colori detti dai pittori goladipiccione e verdebruciato o verdefogliamorta. (Landolfi 1975, 91)

Even more peculiar is the chemical composition of the notes. The narrator underlines the '[e]lementi chimici che compongono le note. Aggiungeremo qui che questi elementi appaiono combinati, in proporzioni variabili, su una base che si può dire costante, formata da alcuni metalli nobili (oro argento platino) e da alcuni gas lievi (idrogeno elio) in diversi stati' (Landolfi 1975, 95). These descriptions read like a textbook explanation, which provides a thorough and comprehensive account of the nature and the appearance of these elements.<sup>13</sup> The soundscape, the landscape, and the smellscape portrayed return a vibrant, multicolour image, which recalls the vibrancy perceived by the protagonist of 'Settimana di sole' but is devoid of the paranoid rage found therein.

An interesting insight into this short story arises from the theories offered by Bennett (2001). When discussing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of cosmos, Bennett reports that, according to them, 'sounds [...] provide sensory access into the cosmological (i.e., energetic and rumbling) dimension of things' (Bennett 2001, 166), which can take place through the repetition of a refrain. Bennett believes that Deleuze and Guattari describe a process which is responsible for the connection of the human with the nonhuman and this would prove that 'through sounds, through the various refrains we invest, repeat and catch from nonhumans, we receive news of the cosmic energies to which we humans are always in close molecular proximity' (168). The refrain becomes a means by which humans can cultivate a sense of sharing and belonging to a wider *cosmos*, which in turn fosters a sense of wonder, enchantment, and attention to the phenomenal world.

In 'Melotecnica', the process outlined by the narrator is almost diametrically opposed to Bennett's notion. While the scholar advocates the need to actively search for a sense of attunement with the surrounding world, the narrator in Landolfi's short story is trying to make that cosmos more understandable and palatable to the reader. By endowing musical notes with perceptible features, such as colours, tastes, and smells, the narrator is portraying an immaterial universe tailored to human epistemological capacities. Paradoxically, the effort to bring that universe close to ours prevents us from understanding it. Even though we as readers (or the 'popolo' of the title) are offered the tools to fully

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<sup>13</sup> Though referring to 'Da "L'astronomia esposta al popolo"', Cecchini's observations are particularly fitting in this context too: '[questo racconto] tiene della fumisteria, ovvero di una rappresentazione che gira a vuoto intorno a sé stessa e inclina all'astrattismo, destabilizzando i referenti para e fantascientifici, nonché filosofici ed orientandosi ad esiti di entropia' (Cecchini 2001, 55).

grasp the nature of the notes, they remain unfathomable entities which we still cannot relate to our reality, despite being described with words and experiences that come from it. These observations resonate with Bellotto's idea that:

[i]l valore mitopoietico della letteratura non consiste tanto nel trasferire il lettore in incredibili atmosfere da sogno [...] quanto nel liberare il punto di vista soggettivo dalle strettoie del positivismo e del realismo, e nel rivelare, perforando la tralucevole compattezza e monoliticità dello spettacolo mondano, la supposta e ambigua convivenza di livelli diversi. È un nuovo paradigma di realtà che Landolfi ci invita a considerare, un paradigma misto e ancipite *dove l'inverosimile è equiparato al verosimile, l'immateriale convive nel materiale, il plausibile e l'implausibile si fondono equivocamente*. (Bellotto 2003, 190, my emphasis)

Bearing these considerations in mind, the employment of scientific language and expressions reveals itself in all its parodistic force. The scientific intention of systematising reality's phenomena into clearly describable and understandable elements is defied here. The rationality and precision offered by the scientific language is insufficient to describe the variety of the world. Its employment does nothing but underline the ridiculousness and the limitations of an epistemological system such as ours which, in spite of its totalising intentions, cannot skilfully describe simple elements such as the musical-note protagonists of the text. This resonates with what Simona Micali observes in relation to speculative fiction, where 'the possible world in which the story is set always *functions as a cognitive exercise*, which enhances our critical understanding of the real by highlighting or interpreting or else by criticising some aspects *we don't perceive clearly*' (Micali 2019, 9, my emphasis). Landolfi's irony has an epistemological nature. It attacks the insufficiency of scientific words to 'far presa sulla realtà' (Marabini 1969) and describe it in all its variety.

Such a sense of epistemological exclusion is further staged in 'La donna nella pozzanghera' ([1937] 1975) through the puzzlement and disorientation experienced by the narrator, D. Here, the surreal atmosphere is animated by his adventures with a woman he meets during a night out with A, B, and C. Following his attraction to her, D decides to leave the café where he is with his friends and embark on a series of flaneur-like adventures 'in uno spazio urbano dove ogni accadimento è interpretato in guisa contraria agli usi comuni e chiosato da segni incoerenti alla norma' (Carlino 1998, 54). The short story closes on the woman disappearing inside a muddy puddle.

Rather than understanding the external world like D does, who perceives in ways relatable to ours, the woman comprehends it through colours. The *femme fatale* describes through colours the feelings

between the humans that she and D encounter in their wanderings, which she then tries to translate into words. Before setting off on their nocturnal stroll, the woman warns D with these words:

A vero dire, *tutto quanto so è che al mondo esistono luci e colori*. Ciò che gli uomini chiamano avarizia e gioia, dolore e terrore, sono per me luci azzurre o verdi, rosee o gialle. [...] e di colori ce n'è tanti, quante sono le stelle in cielo. E in alcune luci, prepotenti, c'è un solo colore, ma in altre, anche umili e tenui, ce ne sono mille, infiniti in uno. Così, scernendo in queste luci dal colore imprecisato i vari colori, ci si può fare un'idea della cosa o dell'uomo che le emana. *Dio mio, come farti capire?* (Landolfi 1975, 104, my emphasis)

The untranslatability of her understanding of the world is particularly evident when she misinterprets the content of specific social situations. An example of this tendency can be seen when she notices two men coming out of a building:

Una fila di grandi porte listate di luce azzurra ci si parò davanti. – Amore fraterno – disse ancora la donna. Oltrepassammo le porte azzurre, ma uno scoppio di voci adirate, seguito da urla rabbiose ci fece volgere: da una delle porte vedemmo uscire, correndo e inciampando, un uomo, e il sangue gli gocciolava dal viso. Un secondo personaggio lo inseguiva a breve distanza brandendo un piccolo oggetto opaco: molta gente si fece incontro a quest'ultimo, gli strappò il piccolo oggetto e voleva trattenere lui stesso, ma egli si divincolò furioso con indomabili scatti e continuò il suo inseguimento. (Landolfi 1975, 108)

The sight of the 'luce azzurra' is completely misunderstood and the label of 'fraternal love' is appointed to a scene in which the characters appear to have just seriously injured one another. Despite being unable to communicate successfully using human words ('come farti capire?'), the woman is connected to the world but has completely different epistemological coordinates to process it. By portraying a situation that is described in completely opposite and inaccurate ways by someone who is endowed with an alternative and visionary intellectual system, the narrator ironically suggests the limitations inherent in verbal language and in its capacity to convey only a specific and very human perception of the world.<sup>14</sup>

In turn, this resonates with the more established scholarship on Landolfi, which views the mismatch between the woman's analysis of the world and the actual situation she describes as indicative of the fact that '[e]ssa parla la lingua dell'indifferenziato, la lingua mitica precedente il peccato

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<sup>14</sup> Such limitations can be seen in the ironic use of the letters A, B, C, and D to indicate the names of the characters.

originale, quando ancora non esistevano differenze tra nomi e cose' (Cecchini 2001, 63). In Landolfi, according to Cecchini:

[c'è] uno scarso (o inesistente) senso di realtà, percepita come qualcosa di falso, di non autentico, qualcosa su cui non si può fare affidamento e da cui tuttavia si dipende, ma che prima o poi ci tradirà [...] solo nell'infanzia, l'età dove non esiste ancora diaframma tra sé e altro, tra soggetto e mondo, è possibile l'identificazione parole-cose. Finita l'infanzia [...] la parola diviene parola perduta. (Cecchini 2001, 50)

Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's notion of cosmos, Bennett underlines that this is a 'dimension of being within all conceptual and experiential strata; it is that energetic aspect of things, thoughts, matter, which has not (yet) *crystallized into a place of knowing or belonging*' (Bennett 2001, 166, my emphasis). By conceiving of the things of the world through colours, it appears that the woman perceives a world *in a state of becoming* and lives in a dimension of "“fuzzy aggregates” or “forces, densities, intensities” that “are not thinkable in themselves” (166), but rather as a continuum, which in this case is a continuum of colours. What Bennett argues through Deleuze and Guattari echoes with the idea that the woman belongs to a dimension where things and words are not yet fixed and distinguished. As the language she uses epitomises the 'identificazione parole-cose' (Cecchini 2001, 50), so her way of experiencing the world appears to be a dimension where 'things, thoughts and matter [have not] (yet) crystallized' (Bennett 2001, 166).<sup>15</sup>

The resonances between these philosophical schools of thought and the scholarship on Landolfi, then, are rather striking. Sharing the view that the woman's use of language resonates with the author's view on the relationship between literature and the world, and bearing in mind Bennett's standpoint, it is possible to conclude that her disappearance in the mud at the end of the short story holds an important ontological value. It can be seen as her evocative return to the undefined, unclear, amorphous universe of semiotic and ontological muddle where she belongs.

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<sup>15</sup> Interesting resonances with Bennett's re-elaborations can be found in Barad (2007). Here the scholar deals especially with matter's becoming by arguing that 'phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the result of measurements; rather phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting “agencies”' (Barad 2007, 139). By defining 'intra-activity' as a process analogous to Bennett's perception of matter's vibrancy, Barad continues her argument pointing out that "“Matter” does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, “matter” refers to phenomena in the ongoing materialization' (151). In other words, by elaborating on both physical and philosophical notions, Barad's theory echoes with Bennett's through the use of more physical and philosophical evidence.

### 3. Automobiles and Telephones: Dino Buzzati's Technological Objects

In her article (1997), Maria Polesana argues that Buzzati's representation of animated man-made objects conveys 'una diversa e più profonda realtà' (Polesana 1997, 93). In choosing to depict quotidian objects and to focus on 'quella zona d'ombra che la realtà proietta dietro di sé' (93, my emphasis), Buzzati expresses the idea that 'i mobili, i muri, le stanze hanno una loro "sensibilità"' (93) and that even the most common items can become mysterious and eerie presences. Polesana's point of view on the representation of automobiles and their increasingly important role in modern man's life is grounded in the idea that:

[I]a nostra società è malata di feticismo, è colpevole di attribuire ad alcuni oggetti, tra cui l'auto, un'importanza che va oltre la loro utilità pratica o il piacere che deriva dalla loro contemplazione estetica: *è come se l'uomo moderno avesse inconsciamente recuperato ancestrali superstizioni, credute sepolte da secoli, investendo semplici cose, frutto del suo lavoro e della sua creatività, di misteriosi poteri.* (Polesana 1997, 108, my emphasis)

Together with Lydia Pavan (1994), Stefano Lazzarin (2008b), and Silvia Zangrandi (2011), Polesana is amongst the very few scholars who have detected and analysed the combination of modernity and 'ancestrali superstizioni' in the technological objects of Buzzati's fiction and has analysed the sense of enchantment and unsettlement springing from them. This echoes Latour's idea of modernity as inherently *factish*, that is based on a mixture of supposedly pre-modern superstition and modern rationalism. Sharing Polesana's understanding of Buzzati's ambiguity towards modern and technological 'things', this analysis investigates further the complexity of the author's depiction of what Stefano Lazzarin calls, using Romano Luperini's definition, 'allegorie del moderno' (Lazzarin 2008b, 49).<sup>16</sup> The feelings of familiarity and intimacy established with these items often implies an emotional and

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<sup>16</sup> Lazzarin argues: 'ci sono [...] fantasmi che incarnano nel loro corpo-spirito [...] il moderno. Quest'ultima categoria di spettri tende ad assumere caratteristiche spiccatamente allegoriche: questi fantasmi, immagini della modernità, sono [...] vere e proprie allegorie del moderno. [Volgeremo] un occhio di riguardo per le scoperte tecnologiche che, a partire dalla seconda metà dell'Ottocento hanno radicalmente cambiato l'esistenza dell'uomo, in Occidente' (Lazzarin 2008b, 50). Lazzarin's argument is clearly comparable to Latour's idea of a premodern sensitivity underlying modernity. Although Lazzarin does not explain the contradictions inherent in the notion of the 'fantasma del moderno', the technological objects he identifies as 'fantasmi' are clearly a mixture of modern rationalism, technologism, and premodern superstition. The condensation of such apparently contradictory ideas not only proves the benefit of employing a non-binary theoretical framework for the analysis of the objects appearing in the corpus, but it also supports the idea that such items can be points of entry to observe the development of alternative epistemological systems. The study of 'allegorie del moderno' or 'fantasmi moderni', precisely for their condensation of superstition and rationalism, can be the starting point for the re-definition of the epistemological system underlying these works.

a material merging with them. At the same time, this sentimentally and physically osmotic relationship is at the core of the unsettlement and eeriness originating from them. Through the employment of Serres's notion of quasi-object, Bennett's ideas on isomorphism, and René Girard's theories on plague, the following analysis will consider the telephones and the automobiles in 'Telefonata' dated 1950 and now collected in *In quel preciso momento* ([1950] 1963) and, from the collection *Sessanta racconti* ([1958] 1994), 'Lo sciopero dei telefoni', 'Il problema dei posteggi' both published in 1955, and 'La peste motoria', dated 1956.

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Collected in *In quel preciso momento* ([1950] 1963), 'Telefonata' is less a short story than a peculiar, fragmentary reflection upon an everyday object that enables remote communication.<sup>17</sup> The text opens with a very brief exchange of words between two lovers in the middle of the night, but this is used only as a device to introduce the narrator's speculations on the object-telephone:

Ma a un tratto, lei, di là di cento case grigie, piene di grigio, stava seduta su di una *abominevole poltrona rococò* e con la mano destra teneva sollevato, appoggiandolo all'orecchio, *un coso nero e oblungo del peso di circa 400 grammi, che in sommità si allargava un poco, torcendosi e formando una specie di piatta scodella. Seguiva un manico, tenuto appunto dalla mano. Quindi un altro rigonfiamento, tondo, con una piccola grata che veniva a trovarsi dinanzi alla bocca di lei. Sotto a questo rigonfiamento si dipartiva un lungo filo nero e flessibile.* Anche lui si accorse di tenere con la destra un coso uguale, dentro a cui parlava. Che strano. (Buzzati 1963, 286, my emphasis)

The description of such a 'perturbante [gesto che] siamo abituati a compiere molte volte al giorno' (Lazzarin 2008b, 17) undertakes an epistemological as well as an aesthetic function; both are carried out simultaneously and kept together by the perceived strangeness of the object. The sinuous and yet insect-like design ('coso nero oblungo [...] un altro rigonfiamento [...] si dipartiva un filo nero') is combined with the description of the technical specifications of the device ('del peso di circa 400

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<sup>17</sup> The motif of the telephone appears in a wide variety of short texts by Buzzati dated later than the period considered here: '[T]esti come "*Guardi che...*" (1967), *Chiamate il numero 5131313* (1963) *Al telefono* (titolo redazionale per *Silenzi*, 1970), *La telefonata* (non databile con precisione), in cui compaiono spettri al telefono, numeri telefonici che non esistono, sibille telefoniche, e strane, angosciose aberrazioni temporali che proiettano telefonate nel futuro, o forse decessi di care amiche nel passato' (Lazzarin 2008b, 17). The trope of the telephones appears in the author's paintings as well; see the table 'Telefoni stanchi' on page 33 of *Poema a fumetti* (1969). Buzzati's ambiguous relationship with telephones can also be linked to biographical reasons. See for example the author's own statements in the interview with Panafieu, *Dino Buzzati: un autoritratto. Dialoghi con Yves Panafieu* (Panafieu 1973, 70-71).

grammi'). By revealing the object little by little and delaying the reader's identification of the device, the narrator stresses the peculiar conformation of this item and provides a picture of it as if it were seen for the first time.

If the Freudian notion of the 'uncanny' aids in decoding the mixture of familiarity and strangeness evoked by the object, it is also evident that the telephone can be read through what Latour calls a *hybrid* (1993). When talking about the mixture of modern and premodern elements which lie at the heart of our contemporary social, political, and scientific praxes, Latour defines hybrids as proliferating entities born out of a 'mixture between entirely new types of beings' (Latour 1993, 10). According to him, these beings are hardly knowable through an epistemological system that conceives of them as 'things in-themselves' (4), and invites the formulation of a knowledge system that appreciates their hybridity and their relationship with the surrounding beings and environments. Being both a product of scientific and technological progress, as well as an insect-like and almost-living object, the telephone is portrayed as an ontologically varied and *vital* thing. The attempt to rationally penetrate the mystery hidden behind this banal object lies at the root of an epistemological attempt to make sense of the peculiar and unknown kind of life throbbing in it.

This complex amalgam of contrasting sensations is particularly evident in the dynamics involving the human and the technological elements in the short story 'Lo sciopero dei telefoni' ([1955] 1994).<sup>18</sup> Here the narrator describes the confusing though captivating series of events that follows the 'strike of the telephones'.<sup>19</sup> Although this mishap compromises the success of telephonic communication, it brings about a bond between a group of strangers, who end up sharing laughs and pleasant conversations despite having never met one another before. The short story ends with the appearance of a charming (albeit slightly unsettling) male voice, whose appeal manages to convince most of the participants in this collective phone call to hang up, with the exclusion of the narrator.

Unlike the material attention in 'Telefonata', 'Lo sciopero dei telefoni' focuses on the actual absence of the object and on the concreteness of its dysfunction. As the short story starts, the narrator underlines that the technological failure affecting the telephones becomes the background for:

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<sup>18</sup> See the surprising overlap with Primo Levi 'A fin di bene', in *Vizio di Forma* (1971), where telephone lines seem to take on a life of their own.

<sup>19</sup> The word 'sciopero' is usually used to indicate an action performed by humans. In modern Italian, expressions such as the 'lo sciopero degli aerei' or 'lo sciopero dei treni' are commonly used to indicate strikes performed by bus drivers or airplane pilots. It is unclear whether 'Lo sciopero dei telefoni' is a colloquialism comparable to 'lo sciopero degli aerei', or whether the author intended to invest telephones with the 'agency' of striking. In any case, the unclear use of this expression problematises the nature of human and mechanical agency.

un piccolo comizio al buio, dove la gente entrava e usciva in modo inopinato e non si sapeva chi vi intervenisse e gli altri non potevano sapere chi fossimo noi, e tutti parlavano quindi senza le solite ipocrisie e ritegni, e ben presto si determinò una straordinaria allegria e collettiva leggerezza d'animo, come è pensabile avvenisse negli stupendi e pazzi carnevali dei tempi andati di cui un'eco ci tramandano le favole. (Buzzati 1994, 401)

The dysfunctional phones recuperate an almost mythological and lost community which recalls the 'straordinaria allegria e collettiva leggerezza d'animo [...] dei tempi andati'. The telephonic communication that is usually restricted to two participants is thus opened up to a much wider sociality held together by what Michel Serres would identify as the quasi-object.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Serres argues that through the demolition of objective and subjective binarism, the quasi-object can be compared to a '*furet*<sup>20</sup> [who] runs in the collective', in a way that 'when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is "it". Who is the subject, who is an "I", or who am I? The moving *furet* weaves the "we", the collective; if it stops, it marks the "I"' (Serres 2007, 225). In other words, this 'quasi-object [...] is a marker of the subject [and] an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity' (227). The circulation of the quasi-object contributes to the 'abandon[ment] of the I' and therefore to the establishment of a collective engaged in 'una curiosa festa di gente col microfono all'orecchio, sparsa in case lontanissime dei più opposti quartieri, chi in piedi in anticamera, chi seduto, chi sdraiato sul letto, *legati l'uno all'altro da esilissimi chilometri di filo* [...] una quindicina di persone che non si erano viste mai [...] si sentivano fratelli' (Buzzati 1994, 407, my emphasis). In this short story, it is not the circulation of the object that determines the creation of the collective. The phone is a dysfunctional and immobile quasi-object, since it is presumably installed on the wall or linked to a power source. However, by giving up part of their technological performance, the telephones contribute to the creation of an immaterial, yet very bonded human community.

The eeriness and the mystery hidden behind the *défaillances* of these devices is not fully evident until the appearance of the male voice. The narrator tells 'si udì a questo punto una voce d'uomo, nuova, bellissima, giovanilmente aperta e autoritaria, che stupiva per la eccezionale carica di vita' (Buzzati 1994, 405). The mystery surrounding its appearance is conveyed by the narrator, who becomes the spokesman of the telephone users' doubts:

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<sup>20</sup> The note to the translation reads: 'The *furet* is the animal, the ferret, as well as a marker in a game somewhat like hunt-the-slipper or button, button, who's got the button? – Trans.' (Serres 2007, 225).

Un timore oscuro, la sensazione di una presenza misteriosa era entrata nei fili del telefono. Chi era? Un mago? Un essere soprannaturale che manovrava i centralini al posto degli scio-peranti? Un diavolo? Una specie di folletto? Ma la voce non era demoniaca, anzi, ne sprigionava un fascino incantevole. (Buzzati 1994, 408)

Scholars have interpreted the appearance of the voice in several different ways. While Zangrandi argues that ‘la voce suadente porta pace e serenità a chi l’ascolta’ (Zangrandi 2011, 69), Lazzarin notes that the weirdness provoked by the eerie, nonhuman entity underlines that even telephones can be ‘bizzarri, inquietanti, perfino perturbanti’ (Lazzarin 2008b, 15), and therefore become a source of discomfort. The variety of interpretations shows that the feelings aroused by the voice bear the traces of an inexplicable sense of threat and danger, as well as enchantment and wonder.

If it can be maintained that the telephone lines act as an immobile and static quasi-object, whose ‘connecting’ quality is its constitutive, ontological feature, then it is possible to interpret the appearance of the voice as the materialisation of such intersubjective links. The telephone lines acquire a life of their own and such agency materialises through the disturbing voice on the phone. Like a ‘furet’ the mysterious ‘essere soprannaturale’ moves amongst the telephone users and tries to demolish even further the individual, private barriers separating every subject from the rest. The narrator shows that the voice intimately knows each phone user:

Lui: “Bene. Lei, signorina, mi stia bene a sentire, lei signorina ha una lenticchia, una piccola lenticchia... ehm, ehm... non posso dirle dove...”. La Clara, vivamente: “Lei non può saperlo!”. Lui: “È vero o non è vero?”. “Lei non può saperlo!” “È vero o non è vero?” “Giuro che nessuno l’ha vista mai, giuro, tranne la mamma!” “Vede che ho detto giusto?” (Buzzati 1994, 405)

Linked in an interconnected network, the subjects of this assemblage, such as Clara, share part of their sense of subjectivity with the rest of the community through the phone. By sharing this secret detail with the rest of the network components, this acoustically materialised quasi-object undermines Clara’s self-contained subjectivity and strengthens her intersubjective connection with the rest of the assemblage.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In both short stories, the telephones are not only eerie, unsettling presences, but also important historical and cultural markers. According to Puglia ‘il carattere feticistico della merce ha potuto liberarsi dalla sua zavorra fisica, costituendo una dimensione autonoma e potente che sfugge alla distinzione tra presenza e assenza’ (Puglia 2018, 8, my emphasis). Admitting the possibility for the objects to be liberated from their material dimension turns them into ‘non [...] solo (quasi-) cose [ma anche] oggetti [non] localizzabili, [non] separati dal soggetto; [...] essi sono al contempo stati d’animo

More clearly than the telephones, the cars that appear in Buzzati's shorter fiction are depicted in all their vitality, vibrancy, and *femininity*.<sup>22</sup> Rather than returning an image of sterile, cold 'things', these mechanical objects seem to live, feel, and get sick as humans do.<sup>23</sup> While telephones fostered the creation of a human collective, the human relationship with cars is characterised by an underlying element of violence. Thanks to the application of René Girard's observations, the textual analysis will show how the human relationship with their automobiles does nothing but exacerbate social inequalities and human hierarchies. This is particularly evident in the two short stories 'Il problema dei posteggi' and 'La peste motoria'.

'Il problema dei posteggi' ([1955] 1994) focuses on the logistical problems originating from the ever-growing diffusion of automobiles. This tale is told by a first-person narrator who lives in a chaotic and nightmarish reality where humans are engaged in an everyday battle against one another for the possession of a parking space. His attachment to the car causes him uneasiness when he realises the risks involved in parking it out of sight, and this makes him constantly worried about the dizzily chaotic and dangerous external world. By the end of the tale, the pressure to park the car and the anxiety stemming from the lack of space push the protagonist to abandon it in the desert.

As is the case in 'La peste motoria', 'Il problema dei posteggi' personifies the automobile, through vocabulary usually employed for the description of human physiology. For example, when undertaking a difficult parking manoeuvre, the narrator recognises how:

[a] onor del vero, la macchina *mi offre tutta la collaborazione immaginabile, si fa ancora più piccola, si assottiglia, si contorce, tiene il fiato, si sposta sulla punta delle gomme*. Dopo sette tentativi, tutto sudato per lo sforzo dei nervi, riesco finalmente a insinuare la mia trappola nel brevissimo intervallo. (Buzzati 1994, 443, my emphasis)

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e ambienti nei quali si è immersi, una specie di dislocazione spazio temporale che sospende la Storia a vantaggio dell'esperienza privata – da cui pure in seguito la Storia può tornare a scaturire, ma trasformata' (9, my emphasis). This definition accurately illustrates the way that the object-telephones are depicted, especially in 'Lo sciopero dei telefoni'. These devices are non-localisable, because they are physically absent; they are indistinguishable from their users, as human subjects can only phonetically materialise through the telephones and, ultimately, they can be seen as channels that allow the sharing of private experiences with a wider community. Their peculiar material immateriality becomes the starting point for the creation of a collective.

<sup>22</sup> Technological objects such as cars and motorbikes are often represented as female subjects. This becomes particularly evident in Buzzati's later short novel *Il grande ritratto* (1960), where the representation of a robot is intertwined with the depiction of a woman.

<sup>23</sup> Buzzati's interest in automobiles finds space in his pictorial activity too, such as in the silk-screen printing *Vecchia auto* (1968) published in only 105 copies in Italian and 105 copies in English with the title *Veteran Car* (1968). It later became part of the collection of short stories *Le notti difficili* (1971). I wish to thank Marco Perale, president of the Associazione Internazionale Dino Buzzati, for drawing my attention onto this piece of bibliographic information. Other examples of the author's depiction of cars are the very short texts entitled 'Storielle d'auto', published in *Il Corriere della sera*, on 16 July 1969.

Later on, after a stroke of luck, ‘dalla finestra dell’ufficio posso anzi vederla e controllarla, la mia macchinetta utilitaria. Sembra perfin graziosa adesso, *ha un’espressione sorridente*, evidentemente gode di avere anche lei il suo posto al mondo’ (Buzzati 1994, 445, my emphasis).<sup>24</sup> The car is described as if it were a ‘physical’ person with the capacity for emotions and feelings. For example, when considering the need to find a parking spot for the night, the narrating voice wonders: ‘Stasera verrà il buio e anche le automobili saranno stanche come noi, sentiranno il bisogno di una casa’ (446), thus further showing the level of identification between the human and the machine. The emotional connection between human and nonhuman becomes even more apparent in the lines that close the short story, where the owner’s decision to abandon the car is expressed through somewhat lyrical language:

Spenso il motore, scendo, chiudo lo sportello. ‘Addio’ le dico ‘sei stata una brava macchinetta, è vero, *in fondo ti volevo bene*. Perdonami se ti abbandono qui, ma se ti lasciassi in una via abitata, presto o tardi verrebbero a cercarmi con pile di contravvenzioni. *E tu sei vecchia, e brutta*, scusa la sincerità, ormai nessuno ti vorrebbe.’ Lei non risponde. Io a piedi mi incammino e penso: ‘*Che farà questa notte? Verranno le iene? La divoreranno?*’ (Buzzati 1994, 447, my emphasis)

The narrator’s involvement is manifested through the speech addressed to the automobile in the second person, as well as by confessing his fear that *she* will be eaten by ferocious hyenas, which further underlines *her* nature as a biological and fleshy entity.

Although it is true that the anthropomorphic process taking place in these passages suggests an attitude that ‘preserves humanity as a primary actor’ (Bogost 2012, 8), Jane Bennett’s notion of isomorphism (2010) seems more productive for the scope of this analysis. According to Bennett, anthropomorphosis can be seen as a process that ‘can catalyse a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides [...] *anthropo-*

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<sup>24</sup> The depiction of the automobile as comfortable, familiar, everyday presence echoes with instances of texts proposed by Massimo Bontempelli. In 522: *Racconto di una giornata* (1932), for example, ‘la macchina è descritta come un utensile comodo, piacevole, della vita di tutti i giorni, tanto da essere paragonata a una “caffettiera”’ (Antonello 2012, 134). Both the examples offered by Bontempelli and Buzzati can be interpreted as ironic and yet affectionate depictions of automobiles. Both writers openly take distance from the bombastic tones adopted by the earlier futurist tradition and opt instead for the problematisation of the emotive and very physical relationship established with this technological support.

*morphism can reveal isomorphism*' (Bennett 2010, 99, my emphasis). Rather than condemning anthropomorphism, Bennett stresses its potentially positive implications by showing how, through identification or isomorphism, it can improve the 'channels of communication between members' (104) of the assemblage. This, however, does not correspond to a flattening out of the components' differences, but rather to a focus on their similarities.

Describing cars as having human traits fits with the idea that the human and the mechanical participate equally in the assemblage by sharing their materiality and by establishing a relationship based on communality. The process of anthropomorphism can thus be re-interpreted as isomorphism and invite a deeper integration of the members composing the assemblage. This suggests the need to abandon a critical approach based on epistemological binarisms when dealing with literary representations of anthropomorphic machines, and it invites reflections on the social implications of the human-machine network and on social dynamics.<sup>25</sup>

In 'Il problema dei posteggi', people's social status or their belonging to the community is manifested neither by the possession of a car nor by the 'circulation of objects', but rather by the ease with which they can circumvent the problem of the car parks. As the narrator observes:

[q]ui la sosta è permessa solo per mezz'ora, là soltanto nei giorni dispari (e oggi è il 2 novembre), là soltanto ai soci del Motormatic Club, là ancora il parcheggio è limitato alle macchine provviste della licenza "Z" (enti pubblici e parastatali). E se io tento di fare l'indiano, fulmineamente sbuca un uomo con un berretto di tipo militare che mi espelle dal suo dominio. Sono i guardiani dei posteggi: uomini membruti, alti, con baffi, stranamente incorruttibili, le mance non fanno su di essi alcuna presa. (Buzzati 1994, 444-5)

And later on:

Ma le autorimesse sono piene. *I proprietari, fino a qualche anno fa persone umili e gentili, che noi potevamo considerare nostri simili, sono diventati personaggi potentissimi che non si riesce a avvicinare.* È tanto se si può parlare coi loro ragionieri, o segretari, o altri tirapiedi,

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<sup>25</sup> These considerations can also be made for 'La moto' in *In quel preciso momento* ([1950] 1963). Here the motorbike is heavily sexualised and the owning of this property is at the root of the narrator's social prestige 'Ero il loro eroe leggendario, il campione, il vincitore, il dio, tutto per merito di quelle trecentoquindicimila sporche lire' (Buzzati 1963, 227) and social ridicule 'poi uno cominciava a sorridere assaporando la mia sconfitta. E poi tutti "E dagli un po' d'aria. Molla l'anticipo!" sbeffeggiavano, da professori. "Su qualche colpetto al *gigleur!*" Scarlatto ero, come un limbo di bandiera. Adesso tutti ridevano, irrispettosi della mia *Blizzard*, 900 centimetri cubi, sudicio infame catenaccio' (Buzzati 1963, 228).

ma anche questi non sono più i giovanotti servizievoli di un tempo. Non sorridono più, ascoltano con sussiego le nostre lamentose suppliche. ‘Ma lo sa’ rispondono ‘che abbiamo già una ventina di prenotazioni?’ [...] *Sono tutti nomi grossi, di miliardari e potentati, chirurghi celebri, latifondisti, grandi cantanti, citati per intimidirmi.* Inoltre, anche se non me lo dicono, le macchinette vecchie e delabrées come la mia non sono ospiti graditi: il prestigio della ‘casa’ ne risente. (446, my emphasis)

If the ontological status of cars has clearly been redefined, anthropomorphised, and eventually elevated, the assemblage they create with the human appears to be still structured in hierarchies. The absence of public parking spaces open to all appears to hint at a system where the humans are still in charge of managing ontological categories. This shines a light onto the political scenario depicted here. The association formed by men and their cars is still structured around human hierarchies and seems ill-integrated with other human-car groupings. In other words, while the physical and emotional bond between men and cars in this short story is a given, it is also clear that such assemblages are units isolated from their surroundings and excluded from a bigger, more comprehensive assemblage. Some of these units still have privileges over the others.<sup>26</sup>

As the title suggests, ‘La peste motoria’ ([1956] 1994) revolves around the representation of a lethal disease affecting all means of transport, no matter their size or power.<sup>27</sup> The first-person narrator, who works as a driver of a luxurious and expensive Rolls-Royce, initially believes that his car will not be affected by the disease, but is eventually forced to face reality and deal with its painful death and cremation.

In a more brutal manner than ‘Il problema dei posteggi’, the description of the motor plague uses language that is usually employed for the description of the symptomatology of a human disease:

[E]ra arrivata la peste delle macchine [...] Dicevano che l’infezione si rivelasse con una cavernosa risonanza del motore, come un *intoppo di catarro*. Poi i giunti si gonfiavano in *gibbosità mostruose*, le superfici si ricoprivano di *incrostazioni gialle e fetide*, infine il blocco

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<sup>26</sup> This can serve as a springboard for further considerations of the political implications stemming from these notions. As Bennett notes, in fact ‘if human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) “public” coalescing around a problem’ (Bennett 2010, 108). According to this view, Buzzati would hint at a democracy in which both humans and nonhumans participate equally. The hierarchical social system such as that organising human societies, however, undermines this democratic possibility and does not allow for an equal participation of different elements.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the motif of the illness spreading to cars can be found in Primo Levi, “‘Cladonia rapida’”, in *Vizio di forma* (1971). For the overlap between the two, see Zangrandi (1996).

del motore si disfaceva in un intrido sconvolto di assi, bielle ed ingranaggi infranti. (Buzzati 1994, 518, my emphasis)

The isomorphism of ‘Il problema dei posteggi’ is amplified here and it makes the overlap between human and nonhuman entities more visible, even in its most revolting aspects. While it is true that the isomorphism brings the experience of cars closer to ‘our’ human experiences, it is also true that this overlap does not account for the richness of the human-nonhuman relationship found in this short story.

By staging a disease that affects nonhuman entities in ‘human’ ways, Buzzati establishes a sense of identification with the automobiles, while simultaneously creating a sense of estrangement from the human community depicted. The reader partly identifies both with the cars and with the humans who own them, but does not fully recognise him or herself in either. This places the reader in an intermediate and yet advantaged critical position from which to observe what is taking place in the human society and in its mechanic counterpart. The human characters are not primarily involved in the epidemic. They live it ‘by proxy’ and use it as an opportunity to perpetuate human hierarchies and inequalities. As soon as the disease starts spreading, for example, the narrator underlines the appearance of human jackal figures, who take advantage of the disseminating death to rob the metallic carcasses:

*[F]urti e saccheggi di vetture incustodite; denunce anonime di auto che in realtà erano sane ma ad ogni buon conto, nel dubbio, venivano prelevate e date al fuoco; abusi dei monatti incaricati del controllo e dei sequestri; incoscienza delittuosa di chi, pur sapendo la propria macchina impestata, circolava tuttavia, seminando il contagio; auto sospette bruciate ancora vive (se ne udivano, a distanza, le urla atroci).* (Buzzati 1994, 519, my emphasis)

The spreading of the disease does nothing but reveal the visceral and osmotic connection between cars and men, to the extent that their death exacerbates social antagonisms and violence.<sup>28</sup>

An insightful hermeneutic tool for the analysis of these social dynamics is René Girard’s ‘Plague in Literature and Myth’ (1974), where the scholar investigates the recurrence of the theme of the plague in Western literature and its social repercussions. As Girard observes ‘the distinctiveness of

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<sup>28</sup> Zangrandi notes that ‘oltre alle evidenti analogie con la peste descritta da Manzoni nei *Promessi Sposi* [sic] (anche qui ci sono monatti e lazzaretto [...]) è presente l’inanimato che si anima’ (Zangrandi 2011, 68, my emphasis). For a more detailed analysis on the overlap between Manzoni and Buzzati and the parodic use of stylistic devices, see Colombo (1992).

the plague is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness, the plague overcomes all obstacles, disregards all frontiers. All life, finally, is turned into death which is supreme undifferentiation' (Girard 1974, 834). Acting as a social equaliser, the plague 'dissolve[s] [...] difference' (839) by hitting different social groups alike, no matter their social or economic affluence. Crucially, the theme of the plague is closely intertwined with the recurrence of the trope of violence. According to Girard, the spread of the disease helps uncover 'a certain pervasive violence in our relationships' (846) which usually finds an outlet at the emergence of an unruly and chaotic situation. The violence is thus addressed towards a 'spontaneous scapegoat' (843), supposedly responsible for the spread of the disease, which becomes the focus of the repressed violent energy.<sup>29</sup>

In Buzzati's text, the increasing violence is visible in the bonfires destroying the infected vehicles, or the jackal figures robbing the 'carcasses' of the cars, and in the increasingly stricter policing measures:

Passarono però tre settimane prima che un altro sintomo affiorasse. Era un ambiguo comunicato del Comune: a evitare "abusi e irregolarità", *speciali squadre erano state istituite, a cura della polizia stradale e della vigilanza urbana – era scritto – per controllare, anche a domicilio e nelle rimesse, l'efficienza degli automezzi pubblici e privati e, nel caso, ordinare il "ricovero conservativo", anche immediato*. Era impossibile indovinare, sotto così vaghi termini, il vero scopo; e la gente non ci fece caso. (Buzzati 1994: 518, my emphasis)

As the illness spreads and the attempts to control it fail, the human community groups in intimidating, fascist-like 'squads' and reveals its most violent behaviour in a series of reciprocal betrayals. The narrator himself becomes a victim of this misconduct when he is betrayed by his friend and mechanic Celada.

Thus, 'La peste motoria' sheds an unusual light onto the profound antagonisms afflicting human communities. Although the different social classes are united in the common misfortune of seeing their beloved cars affected by the lethal disease, men still fight against one another by cruelly taking advantage of the deep and sentimental connection they establish with their automobiles. The socially equalising effect triggered by the plague seems to do nothing but generate more violent responses.

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<sup>29</sup> In turn this serves as an output to release the pent-up violence underlying society. As Girard states: 'Ritual tries to reproduce a process that has proved effective against one kind of "plague", the most terrible kind, the epidemic of reciprocal violence that never becomes explicit as such. It is my opinion that the scape-goat process, through religious myths, notably the myths of the plague, plays a major role in disguising and minimizing the danger its own potential for internal violence constitutes for a primitive community. This minimization must be viewed in turn as an integral part of the protection that myth and ritual provide against this same violence' (Girard 1974, 845). This can trigger further considerations on the type of society depicted by Buzzati.

The dissolution of difference between different social subjects is represented as a situation to avoid, rather than pursue. In other words, this short story suggests that the subversion of social hierarchies and the levelling of social differences through the plague is too dangerous a state to reach. The levelling of human social organisation and ontological hierarchies is thus prevented in order to maintain differences and inequalities.

The process highlighted here is diametrically opposed to what was introduced in ‘Lo sciopero dei telefoni’. There the quasi-object was a static, *wired* one; its capability of connecting different people was ontologically determined. The appearance of the voice threatens and eventually undermines the subjective barriers that separate the individuals who participate in this collective phone call, regardless of their age, gender, and social status. Instead, in ‘La peste motoria’ the spreading of the motor plague takes place through the movement of the means of communication which, rather than creating a collective through its passing, as Serres has it, partitions human society even further. The units composed of cars and men are still organised according to human categories and, crucially, this is maintained through the violence and injustice spreading through the nightmarish universe represented in this short story.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The texts analysed in this chapter engage in creating a non-traditional and non-human way to process and make sense of reality. By portraying it through unusual points of view, these examples of fiction ‘call attention to the [...] limitations [of human understanding] and stage the impossibility of transcending them in ways that are highly productive for literary interpretation and may sensitize the reader to puzzles of consciousness’ (Caracciolo 2014, 488). By offering an unconventional view on the world and questioning the ‘conceptual (and cultural) models of perceptions’ (Caracciolo 2014, 493), the uniqueness of human epistemological modes is shaken and problematised. Through their alternative representations of the real, these texts ultimately have not only an epistemological, but also an ethical function that corresponds to an increasing attention towards nonhuman entities.

Both Landolfi and Buzzati are clearly interested in the depiction of objects which are not simply unsettling or unrecognisable textual presences. These objects are also revealing of a more inclusive and all-encompassing attitude towards an intersubjective, hybrid reality, whose understanding does not rely on a sole cognitive system. Thanks to the interrogation of and dialogue with the theories proposed by Bruno Latour, Michel Serres, and Jane Bennett, it has been possible to conceive of the ‘things’ appearing in these texts as pivotal intersections which have ultimately revealed how ‘abolendo le varie distinzioni moderne tra natura e cultura, materia e pensiero, tecnica e arte, ordine

e caos, [non si fa altro] che rivelare la matrice epistemologica emergente della nostra contemporaneità: cioè il rivelarsi della nostra costituzione ibrida pre-moderna o a-moderna' (Antonello 2005, 16).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Decaying Things:

Carlo Emilio Gadda and Italo Calvino

#### 1. Rubbish, in Theory

Disorders, like hoarding. Practices, like wasting and recycling. Decaying materials, like debris, dust, and trash.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly all these are used as theoretical frameworks in a variety of disciplines, from anthropology and literature to sociology and film studies. In the social sciences, the anthropological study of refuse and decayed matter has shed light onto the structures and values at the base of societal and cultural systems. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2001) and Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* ([1979] 2017) have long been considered the cornerstone in the exploration of the theoretical and epistemological potential of rubbish and dirt, thanks to their anthropological, historical, and sociological observations on refuse both in Western and non-Western contexts.<sup>2</sup>

A similar interest in discarded forms of materiality appears in Maurizia Boscagli's study *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014). In the introduction to the volume, she states that the intention of the book is to 'highlight how culture has focused not on matter in general, but on stuff more specifically defined as those things which we own, but which have shed their glamour as shiny commodities, yet which we are unwilling to dispose of and relegate to the trash heap' (Boscagli 2014, 2). Boscagli's theoretical premises share the idea of the interrelatedness and ontological intertwining of matter proposed by the new materialist school of thought. By combining the tradition of historical materialism with new materialism, Boscagli investigates how the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity has changed, and what this has meant for our traditional understanding of materiality. She recognises that:

each of these critical positions anticipates current discussions of materiality in that they paradoxically salvage the relationship between subject and object while giving more pre-eminence

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<sup>1</sup> See the series *Object Lessons* published by Bloomsbury, mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis. On rubbish see: Hawkins (2001), Kennedy (2007), Viney (2014), and Morrison (2015) to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, the word 'rubbish' is used to indicate the Italian 'spazzatura'. The use of words like 'trash', 'garbage' and 'waste' throughout this chapter is limited only to those occasions where the use of the word 'rubbish' causes inelegant repetition. Words like 'trash', 'garbage', and 'waste' are not exact synonyms in English (and have different usage in American English) and they bring about different theoretical implications. In this regard, see the introduction to Kennedy (2007, xi-xx).

to the object. The problem now is not to turn the relationship between subject and object on its head or to recuperate the object and give it new primacy, but rather to reconfigure this relationship in terms of *relationality* and *entanglement*. (Boscagli 2014, 20, my emphasis)

Boscagli's study is indicative of a recently rekindled theoretical interest in material culture and in the investigation of a reshaped relationship between human subjects and the material world. *Stuff Theory* examines the *relationality* and *entanglement* of object and subject through the observation of 'liminal' (Boscagli 2014, 14) matter. 'Stuff' is indeed located at the threshold between being valuable matter and useless rubbish and its study accounts for the epistemological potential that lies in this apparently negligible form of materiality.<sup>3</sup>

Boscagli's intention was to explore twentieth-century material culture through observation of liminal matter. This chapter looks at decay and disintegration of stuff into dust and rubbish in three short stories by Carlo Emilio Gadda and Italo Calvino. As the analysis will show, like stuff, dust and garbage help reconfiguration of subject-object relationship through the formulation of epistemological and ontological considerations. The theoretical approach to the study of rubbish is similar to the theoretical approach to the study of matter, as seen in Chapter Three. Objects, after all, are made of matter. Their disintegration is inseparable from their material status. The subject of this chapter, therefore, is their disintegration, not their fetishisation. The interpretative hypothesis underlying this analysis is that discarded or decayed matter can be used as a vantage point to observe the epistemological structures underlying these texts.<sup>4</sup> Both authors see literature as a 'filosofia naturale', a 'letteratura che abbia al suo interno una fondamentale dimensione conoscitiva' (Antonello 2005, 6), in which they reconfigure the relationship and entanglement of subject and object. The process of understanding the world proposed in these texts determines the establishment of a much more fluid exchange

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<sup>3</sup> The productivity of the observation of 'liminal matter' is explored in the volume *Indeterminacy: Waste, Value, and the Imagination* (2001), edited by Alexander and Sanchez. Here they propose the category of 'indeterminacy' as a 'term that challenges this binary [between waste and value]' (Alexander and Sanchez 2018, 1). Starting from Mary Douglas' categories of form and formlessness, the scholars write: 'we suggest that waste and value are both aspects of Douglas' "form", whereas formlessness or indeterminacy is a third modality occupying space between waste and value' (2). This interstitial and liminal space becomes the gateway for the observation of different types of social and cultural phenomena across a series of cultural contexts, of which the book offers a variety of examples.

<sup>4</sup> The secondary literature on epistemology in Calvino and Gadda is particularly substantial. On Gadda, for example, see Rushing (1997), Dombroski (1999), Antonello (2003, 2005) Porro (2004), and Mileschi, (2007). On Calvino see: Hume (1992a, 1992b), Harrison (1996), Antonello (2005), and Porro (2009). The epistemological function attributed to literature underlies many of Calvino's works, but it has been investigated in relation to later texts (particularly those from the 1960s onwards), where the attempt to dissect and make sense of the real is rather evident. This feature has been only superficially detected in these short stories. Ricci's volume (1990) remains one of the major critical tools for the investigation of these earlier short stories. In the opening of the volume, Ricci states that they 'express [...] the limits of human rationalism [which] are most apparent in this [*Racconti* (1958)] collection' (Ricci 1990, 1). He thereby recognises an early and yet not fully developed epistemological interest visible in these texts.

between human subjects and the objectual realities which surround them. The process of epistemological investigation is represented as hinging upon the protagonists' close relationship to, and merging with, these environments. Dust and rubbish are not simply accessories to the characters' ambience, but a material manifestation of their interaction with and understanding of the world.

The different type of epistemological relationship established with discarded materials found in these texts can partly be explained by the generational gap separating the two authors. Gadda's short story 'L'Adalgisa' was written in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> It depicts a pauperistic relationship to objects.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two, Gadda develops this idea in clearer terms in the essay 'Carabattole a Porta Ludovica' ([1940] 2013), where pauperism is introduced as the tendency to constantly re-use an item and preserve it for as long as possible within the economic and monetary circuit: 'c'è un sogno di risparmio e di profitto, un tentativo di resurrezione in-extremis [...] di arrivare ad accozzare il frusto con l'utile, la parte col tutto, e la pazienza col momento buono' (Gadda 2013, 50). In Chapter Two of this thesis, 'Carabattole a Porta Ludovica' served to explain the mentality of the characters, but it also offers an insight into the cycle of matter. Even when worn-out and dysfunctional, things are seldom disposed of. Instead, they are provided with new purposes which contribute to their preservation within the material and economic system of exchange. This tendency can partly be explained as a response to the economic, cultural, and social crisis that occurred after the First World War, which meant that material possessions were scarce and therefore extremely valuable. In 'L'Adalgisa', this socio-economic and historical turmoil acquires the private dimension of Carlo Biandronni's death and his family's material and economic decline. As the social affluence of the Biandronni declines, the collectables populating their house are tentatively but unsuccessfully used to alleviate the condition of economic poverty into which the family is falling. Dust is the physical by-product of a new attitude towards their material possessions after their economic downfall. It can also be seen as the metaphorical by-product of the epistemological need to make sense of a reconfigured, inhospitable, and threatening reality.

Calvino's 'Il gatto e il poliziotto' ([1948] 2003) and 'La panchina' ([1955] 2019) were written in the post-war years, during the period of increasing economic growth that took place before the economic miracle at the end of the 1950s. Both these short stories portray a reconfigured city space where rubbish is not simply an environmental presence but an integral part of the urban experience. Despite

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<sup>5</sup> The short stories collected in the volume are mainly dated in the 1930s and early 1940s. In the notes to *L'Adalgisa*, Lucchini wrote that '[i]ntegralmente o in parte i futuri "disegni milanesi" escono in rivista in un arco di tempo piuttosto breve, dal '38 al '43' (Lucchini 1990, 842-843). For more philological and editorial information see the notes to the collection (Lucchini 1990, 842-843).

<sup>6</sup> This is explained particularly well in Gadda's 'Carabattole a Porta Ludovica' ([1940] 2013): 'quell'istinto del 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 [...] profitto' (Gadda 2013, 47).

their slight chronological differences, both ‘Il gatto e il poliziotto’ and ‘La panchina’ carry traces of the metanarrative and epistemological interests portrayed in later narratives and usually associated with novels such as *Le città invisibili* (1972) and essays like ‘La poubelle agréée’ (1977).<sup>7</sup> The link between creativity, rubbish, and epistemology which was developed by the author in these later texts and partly derived from the reading of anthropological works undertaken in the 1950s, is found in these earlier, pioneering short stories.<sup>8</sup> In comparison to later works which are more theoretically informed, these short stories, though less up-to-date, already clearly bear witness to the author’s epistemological understanding of literature.

### 1.1 Epistemology in Gadda and Calvino

Investigation of the representation of rubbish and dust in the works of Gadda and Calvino requires a preliminary discussion of their epistemologies. While there are stylistic differences between the writers, they share a common epistemological matrix and intention in their work. Robert Rushing (1997) dealt with this theme and will be used as a tool for the investigation of these texts. Rushing employs Leo Spitzer’s definition of *enumeración caótica* – the use of asyndeton as a way of bringing together different items in the same text – to consider the epistemological structures underlying the works of Gadda and Calvino, as well as the textual dynamics taking place therein. Rushing states that by seeing literature as ‘uno strumento conoscitivo’, the two writers use it to investigate ‘la infinita profondità e ricchezza del mondo fenomenico’ (Rushing 1997, 407). Although driven by similar epistemological intentions, the results they attain are considerably different and are illustrated by Rushing with images of the ‘cold crystal’ and the sea. Gadda realised that the creation of a rigid epistemological system in the attempt to capture and catalogue the variety of what is real cannot represent faithfully the variety of ‘mondo fenomenico’, and is bound to break down into pieces, literally *pulverised*. As a result, he

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<sup>7</sup> In recent years, the relevance of rubbish in the author’s work has been highlighted mainly in relation to works such as *Le città invisibili* (1972), in particular for cities like ‘Leonia’, see Scaffai (2017), and essay-like writings such as ‘La poubelle agréée’ ([1976] 1990, 89-116), now collected in *La strada di San Giovanni* (1990), see Biasin (1997). In recent years, studies such as Severi (2007), Boscagli (2014, 227-268), Valdinoci, (2017), and Scaffai, (2017) bear witness to a rekindled interest in these themes in the author’s work and recognise the concrete role that rubbish plays in Calvino’s work.

<sup>8</sup> Alunni (2015) offers relevant information on Calvino’s reading of anthropological works in preparation for the publication of *Fiabe italiane* in 1956. In 1949, in the newspaper ‘l’Unità’, he discussed Vladimir Propp’s *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale* which had been translated from Russian into Italian (*Le radici storiche dei racconti di fate*) in that year. In 1952, Calvino read the work of folklorist Giuseppe Cocchiara; in 1962, during a period of hospitalisation he read the work of Ernesto De Martino, *Civiltà e magia* (1962). More information can be found in Alunni’s article. In (2008), Raffaele Donnarumma claimed that, in the 1960s, Calvino started reading more consistently works by Claude Lévi-Strauss, like *Tristes tropiques* (1955) or *De près et de loin* (1961), which had long-lasting effects on the author’s work. Calvino also started to follow Lévi-Strauss’ seminars in 1974-1975 at the Collège de France, as Alunni shows. Later anthropological readings of Calvino’s include Michel Tournier and Arnold Van Gennep. For more information on Calvino and anthropology, see for example Lollini (1997), Barengi (2007), Donnarumma (2008), Alunni (2015), and Carli (2018).

saw reality as entangled and chaotic. His ideas on literature and epistemology reflected his philosophically informed and highly theoretical vision.<sup>9</sup> Vice versa, the relentless battle between chaos and cosmos lay at the heart of Calvino's understanding of the literary process. His attempts to dissect the phenomenal world into discreet units was at the base of his formulation of a more rigid, 'crystal-like' epistemological structure. Unlike Gadda, Calvino manifested a positivistic and Cartesian nostalgia. The unattainability of a rationally organised reality generates oscillations between the desire to impose rigid epistemological structures on reality's multifariousness, and the recurring and inevitable defeat vis-à-vis chaos.

## 2. The Epistemological Value of Dust in Gadda's 'L'Adalgisa'

Expanding on Gadda's epistemological approach to literature, Rushing argues:

Per Gadda, l'oggetto da rappresentare non è un corpo isolato, indipendente, 'prendibile' dalla coscienza umana in sé. Invece, come è ben documentato, è un nodo di rapporti con altri oggetti, oppure, con altri nodi di rapporti, in una rete infinita di relazioni e concause. La mente, nel tentativo di capire la quiddità di un determinato oggetto, trova invece che oggetto e mente si dissolvono in 'un vortice, un punto di depressione ciclonica nella coscienza del mondo.' [...] Le associazioni 'bizzarre' delle metonimie non sono che l'espressione di un'ontologia di dissoluzione - cioè, *un'ontologia in cui ciascun oggetto apparentemente indipendente si rivela invece l'entrata in un sistema infinito di sistemi*. (Rushing 1997, 418, my emphasis)

Gadda does not consider reality as composed of discrete elements but rather as a series of elements tied up in knots.<sup>10</sup> Objects have to be considered as part of 'grovigli' or 'pasticci', where '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*' (Falkoff 2014, 83, my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> This resonates with Boscagli's ideas. Any object is connected to other objects, events, and spatial and temporal dimensions, the connection being one of relationality and entanglement. Objects become a point of

<sup>9</sup> Alongside his activity as an engineer, Gadda nourished a fervent passion for philosophy to the extent that he studied it at university. His thought was informed by the readings of philosophers such as Leibniz and Spinoza. For more on the issue, see Antonello (2005, 22-78).

<sup>10</sup> See Porro: 'it is within the thread within the network, the complication of discrete elements that illustrates Gadda's representation of the 'inestricabile complessità' of events [...] the network and combinatorial mathematics thus become the antidote to knots or muddle, and Gadda's word for clump and clot seems the most appropriate synonyms to denote the illegible world rather than the unwritten one' (Porro 2004, 265).

<sup>11</sup> See Riva (2008).

convergence where reality's phenomena mesh together and are instruments to observe reality in its micro and macro dimensions.<sup>12</sup>

While the object becomes the mind's point of access to the intermingled reality, 'la mente [...] trova che l'oggetto e la mente *si dissolvono in "un vortice [...]"*' (Rushing 1997, 418, my emphasis). The process of epistemological appreciation of reality is based on dissolution and on the need to constantly elaborate on and adapt to chaotic and apparently unstructured material arrangements ('vortice'). If the phenomena of the world are difficult to separate into discreet units,<sup>13</sup> then the processes of matter's dissolution and *pulverisation* into undistinguishable particles epitomises the understanding of reality as a muddle, as is the case for Gadda's materialistic worldview.<sup>14</sup> Examination of the pervasiveness of dust and debris is a useful tool for the investigation of what Rushing calls 'ontologia della dissoluzione', whereby things are not 'things in themselves' but rather part of an ontological mesh.

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The short story 'L'Adalgisa' ([1943] 1990) is told from Adalgisa's point of view and revolves around her life, her love story with her late bourgeois husband, Carlo Biandronni, and part of Carlo's own life. The textual analysis that follows will be divided in two parts. First, it will show the attitude that Carlo had towards science and nature during his lifetime. Second, it will illustrate the precariousness of his Cartesian epistemology, which is made particularly evident after his death. Both these aspects can be examined through observation and analysis of the dust and the abandoned objects that appear in this short story.

As Adalgisa introduces her dead husband's life story, she states:

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<sup>12</sup> In relation to this stratification of meaning, Roscioni observes that '[u]n oggetto esiste solo in quanto ha una certa struttura e una certa funzione; il suo colore, il suo odore non sono accidentali, ma costitutivi del suo essere; la sua ubicazione nello spazio e nel tempo ne condizionano la forma e l'apparenza. Nominare un oggetto vuol dire quindi evocare una o più delle sue modalità, al di fuori delle quali esso non ha nessuna realtà' (Roscioni 1995, 15).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to this interest in interconnection rather than distinction, Gadda's texts have proved to be a particularly fertile ground for considerations coming from theoretical approaches such as the posthuman and the new materialist schools of thought. By hinging upon notions such as flat ontology, actor-network theory, and assemblages, these approaches can resonate particularly well when applied to Gadda's texts. This has been the case for works such as *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957) and *La cognizione del dolore* (1963), which have been the subject of studies such as Falkoff, 'Carlo Emilio Gadda's Junk and Other Vibrant Matter in Milan and Maradagàl' (2014) and Amberson and Past, 'Gadda's Pasticciaccio and the Knotted Posthuman Household' (2016). As can be inferred from the titles, these works rely upon the investigation of stuff and matter as a point of entry to illuminate the understanding of the author's conception of materialism and ontological interconnection.

<sup>14</sup> In Gadda's case, 'materialism' refers less to an ideological (i.e. Marxist) attitude than 'un coerente sistema filosofico-formale a matrice materialista' (Antonello 2012, 126), in Antonello's words. More on Gadda's philosophical and formal materialism can be found also in Antonello (2003).

*Lo studio, la scienza, erano il suo pane.* Non era certo uno che viveva per il ventre. Nelle poche ore libere, studiava sui libri. Continuava a leggere fino alla una, in letto, che io ero già bell'e addormentata. Si occupava di tante di quelle cose! *Faceva delle raccolte. Le raccolte,* oltre ai ritratti dei paesaggi della Libia, *erano il suo più grande ideale.* (Gadda 1990, 515, my emphasis)

His passion for the study of science is intertwined with his passion for collecting stamps, minerals, and insects. Adalgisa calls it 'hoarding':

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.* Del Regno d'Italia, anzi, con la venerata effigie di Sua Maestà, ne arrivò a possedere un duemila. [...] Tutte le migliaia di pezzi di busta *avevano sedimentato* in ventitré scatole di ex-biscotti, le quali, in cima a un armadio, guai a chi le toccasse. (Gadda 1990, 516, my emphasis)

Like minerals or precious stones, stamps *sediment* on one another in the boxes that have been freed up for them.<sup>15</sup> In a similar way to the jewellery found in the later *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de' via Merulana* (1957), they hint at specific temporal and geographical coordinates. As Roscioni wrote:

L'indicazione della presumibile provenienza delle pietre, geograficamente localizzata, si precisa e si approfondisce in un riferimento al processo cosmico-religioso che è alla base dei fatti chimici e fisici, finchè si scopre di quelle gemme, la vera essenza. *In quanto oggetti, in quanto materia, esse sono memoria.* [...] Ogni pietra ha dunque una sua documentabile storia micro-cosmica testimonianza dell'organizzazione del mondo. (Roscioni 1995, 12-13, my emphasis)

Stamps become a man-made, 'microcosmica testimonianza dell'organizzazione del mondo' (Roscioni 1995, 13). Referring to different times and different places, they bear witness to remote dimensions and are participants in the 'groviglio' of relations which link different places, times, people, and objects.

Carlo's interest in collecting pieces and debris of the world and subdividing them into discrete categories becomes even more evident when he begins to be interested in the natural world. Adalgisa describes his increasing passion for minerals as follows:

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<sup>15</sup> Precious stones and gems are a recurring motif in Gadda's fiction. For a wider overview of this, see Gioanola (2004).

Più che la ‘geometria dei cristalli’, però, [...] lo interessavano invece ‘i minerali in se stessi’ [...]. *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. I bimbi, crescendo, ebbero il permesso di giocare con alcuni dei più tenaci e dei meno avvenenti, ma fu loro proibito di ‘consumarli’.* [...] Ciò non ostante, fra i residui *della spolveratura e della spazzatura, nella ‘lana’ che veniva stanata da dietro i mobili, e già magari in prossimità dell’atra ruéra* – [...] si reperivano quasi ogni giorno, sotto alla scopa, delle *briciole di solfo cristallizzato, delle lamette o scagliette*, ahi ahi, di mica; talora dei minuzzoli di ortoclasio. (Gadda 1990, 516, my emphasis)

And later:

E non c’era passeggiata nei monti, a Intronno, né bagno di mare, a Varazze, che non ne discendesse o non ne uscisse greve di testimonianze geologiche o talassologiche, di conchiglie, ricci, cavallucci duri, secchi in breve come un’ala di pollo arrosto troppo arrostito: o gelatinose meduse enfiate della loro urticante idropisia. O, giù dai dirupi, silice. O pulverulenta dolomite. Il ‘periodo glaciale’, poi, lo zavorrava senza misericordia. (517)

Through irony (‘Il “periodo glaciale”, poi, lo zavorrava senza misericordia’), the narrator depicts Carlo’s fastidiousness and care as he categorises and systematises the natural world by literally boxing it up into arbitrary, man-made categories.

The man’s intention to catalogue and systematise the phenomenal world partly resonates with what Mary Douglas observed in *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2001):

Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating, and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas 2001, 3-4)

Douglas’s reflections refer to the idea that social order can be maintained through observance of the categories of purity and impurity. They determine the stability of the social structure thanks to the

creation of hierarchies and establish the modalities of interaction between the components of said society. Beyond their social and anthropological value, however, the anthropologist's observations also have epistemological and psychological values. According to Douglas, the categories of order and chaos or purity and impurity illuminate the processes of organisation of the world, because '[d]irt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but *a positive effort to organise the environment*' (Douglas 2001, 2, my emphasis) into a new and alternative structure:

In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, *making it conform to an idea*. There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: *it is a creative movement*, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience. (Douglas 2001, 2, my emphasis)

The process of discerning what is dirt from what is valuable plays a fundamental role in determining ways to make sense of the world. In Douglas's view, assigning things to the categories of 'pure' and 'impure' can have an epistemological value because it imposes very clear-cut and dichotomic categorisations onto the material and phenomenological world. The process of organisation of the world attempted by Carlo, his efforts to systematise the plurality of the 'francobolli del mondo' and the piles of minerals he collects can in fact be read as his attempt to create 'unity of experience' (Douglas 2001, 2). Carlo tries to re-order and re-categories the natural world with the help of a clear Cartesian system. He isolates collectable items in boxes which have been turned into sterile and clean display cases, an example of his 'anxiety to escape disease' (2).

Douglas' theory further explains Carlo's behaviour when he tells the story of how he trapped and collected the Necrophorus:

Un'altra volta si trattò invece del Necrophorus, anzi di tutta una confraternita di Necrofori, al margine d'un sentiero. Una puzza. Era un topo marcio. E vi lavoravano intorno come dannati: a scavare, a tirare, da seppellirlo prima che facesse giorno, da metterlo in arca. [...] 'Ne ho raccolti un cinque o sei... Con le pinze, sigüra!, per minga tocà el ratto cont i man... 'Questi necrofori una volta seppellita la sua brava carogna, ci banchettano dentro, felici...' (Era felice anche lui). 'Dènter in del venter, in di büsèkk del ratt...' Si stirò i baffi. '*Poi si accoppiano*' e questa brutta parola fu pronunciata da un Carlo straordinariamente serio; 'indi vi depongono i uovi...' Un'ägape sacrificale, un banchetto totemico. Poi l'orgia a pancia piena, nella pancia del topo morto. [...] *Così tutto è fecondo, nella infinita fecondità di natura*. (Gadda 1990, 524-5, my emphasis)

The corpse of the rat can be easily identified as dirt *par excellence*: it emanates a stench and is a clear example of what literally can cause disease. Part of the disgust provoked by the animal's dead body is due to the loss of demarcation between the within and the without. The dead rat becomes an open living space where parasites mate, proliferate, and thrive.<sup>16</sup> However, by using the 'pinza' to collect 'un cinque o sei' of them, Carlo hinders the merging between the different forms of life and tries to impose clean, clear-cut distinctions and separations onto this ontological entanglement. The act of locating the insects in a sterile, unfertile, clean environment corresponds to what Douglas defined as a positive and Cartesian 're-ordering', but it is incompatible with the living needs of these insects. In tune with Gadda's epistemological position on the world, Carlo's 're-ordering [of his] environment, making it conform to an idea' (Douglas 2001, 2) is not only an unsuccessful task, but also one doomed to materially collapse into pieces.

His approach already shows its metaphorical and epistemological fragility. The minerals and insects collected are easily worn out by touch, they produce dust and 'lana', as if they could not endure the physical scrutiny Carlo and his sons inflict upon them. Once de-contextualised and torn from their surroundings to be studied individually, these natural objects are particularly prone to deterioration, as if their isolation contributed to their decay.

The description of the places in which these fragments accumulate also offers the narrator the opportunity to move his gaze into the interior of the Biandronni family house and to linger over socially connoted practices. The narrator points out that 'si reperivano quasi ogni giorno, sotto alla scopa, delle briciole di solfo cristallizzato' (Gadda 1990, 516). This implies that the practice of cleaning the house corresponds to a daily battle against the microscopic detritus left behind by minerals and insects, and suggests the care devoted to getting rid of it.

The domestic management of dust illuminates the social status of the Biandronni, just like the pieces of furniture discussed in Chapter Two. Insights come from Gary Alan Fine and Tim Hallett's

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<sup>16</sup> Danti offers an analogous reading of *La cognizione del dolore*, by observing how animals and humans are depicted: 'costituiscono un insieme ingombrante e indifferenziato. I polli sono inseriti nell'elenco sia perché si aggirano fra gli ospiti, ma soprattutto perché, nell'impasto, l'umano si mescola con l'animale e ne ripete le dinamiche. [...] Uomini e animali dovrebbero rimanere divisi e negli spazi deputati, siccome però a causa dei loro comportamenti sconfinano e si sovrappongono, lo zoomorfismo degli umani diventa ripugnante e il soggetto perviene alla fantasia di sterminio, all'epurazione onirica a colpi di mitragliatrice, per riprendersi finalmente "una casa liberata! Disinfettata!"' (Danti 2019, 126). He also reads the presence of this entomological imagery as bearing important political and social implications: '[n]ell'ultimo "disegno" trionfa la "raffigurazione deformante e satirica della società ambrosiana" e dei suoi rituali, finalizzati all'autoconservazione e al rinsanguamento della "tribù" (p. 202), attraverso le giovani leve. Alla "tribù" è lieto di appartenere il povero Carlo, che guida gli altri del clan in uno slalom fra eufemistiche metafore ("nido", "pallottola", "polpetta"), sviluppando il parallelismo tra ceto medio milanese e stercoreari, sino all'equivalenza di sapore freudiano oro = merda. I membri dell'uditorio, dal canto loro, si beano di quella natura 'su misura', a portata di borghese, annuiscono approvando la disamina del membro colto del clan e si congratulano perché tutti sono arrivati alla stessa rassicurante conclusione' (121). This aspect will be further developed below.

article (2003). Assuming that ‘we can observe and understand large social systems through the examination of the smallest conditions of life’ (Fine and Hallett 2003, 2), they maintain that not only does there appear to be a direct correlation between the cleanliness of the house and the financial income of its inhabitants, but also that this correlation can be preserved through gender imbalances. It appears that the ‘concern with the control of dust is a luxury, not emphasized in earlier centuries (prior to the mid-nineteenth century) or in preindustrial communities’ (3), and that ‘women have had the responsibility of protecting the home from dust and dirt; they are the guardians of domesticity’ (5). The capacity to keep dust at bay by sweeping, and getting rid of ‘i residui della spolveratura e della spazzatura, [che] si reperivano quasi ogni giorno, sotto alla scopa’ (Gadda 1990, 516) reflects not only to the series of expectations socially placed upon an affluent household, but also over Adalgisa herself. Fine and Hallett continue:

Clearly, *household dust is a moral matter*, and it is one in which males and females have different roles. *The absence of dust reveals the efficiency and femininity of women*. Men, the workers, are supposed to be dusty; children, the players, are supposed to be dusty; *women are supposed to domesticate their public participation and cleanse their families*. *It is through control of these tiny specks of morality that women demonstrate the successful performance of their gender roles*. (Fine and Hallett 2003, 6, my emphasis)

The attitude shown towards the fragments of the minerals is indicative of Adalgisa’s efficiency once she abandons her status as a ‘*donna del popolo*’ to climb the social ladder when she marries Carlo. The capacity to govern dust and defeat its silent invasion of domestic spaces can be read as Adalgisa’s determination to maintain the social affluence acquired through her marriage.<sup>17</sup> The way in which dust is dealt with in these passages expresses the solidity of the social prestige acquired by the Biandronni and their resolution to keep it intact.

The last collectable items that mark the acme of Carlo’s collecting mania are beetles.<sup>18</sup> The narrator, Adalgisa, tells us:

[P]untò sugli scarabei. Tutta questa crisi, diobono, dopochè alla fiera di Sant’Ambrogio, una domenica, s’era imbattuto in un volume scompagnato del Fabre, che aveva accompagnato in

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<sup>17</sup> Adalgisa’s determination encounters ostracism from Carlo’s female family members: “‘Se non fossero state quelle cagne, che anni felici!’ sospirava “e anche nonostante tutti i disastri, e il fallimento del poer Vanni!” Le cagne, chi non lo immagini già da s, erano le parenti acquisite nella nuova parentela: cognate, suocera, donna Eleonora Vigogni, ecc’ (Gadda 1990, 545).

<sup>18</sup> Beetles are often linked in Gadda’s writings to the motif of coprophagy. For a more detailed overview on the recurrence of faeces and excrements, see Gioanola (2004).

seguito con l'opera del Pirazzoli: 'I coleotteri italiani – Nozioni elementari' e con il libro di Eger Lessona 'Il raccoglitore naturalista'. (Gadda 1990, 518)

Scientific knowledge of the insects acquired from the books bought at the fair pushes Carlo to progressively address his collecting attention to 'scarabei':

In dodici o quindici scatole di legno, pavimentate ognuna del suo sopraffondo di sughero e questo, poi, coperto *d'un foglio bianco a coordinate rettilinee*, su infiniti spilli, davanti agli occhi sgranati de' due bambini, il povero Carlo aveva meticolosamente infilzato gli Scarabei e i ditischi infiniti della natura, i Cembrioni, i Curculioi, i Cerambricidi, i Buprèssidi, gli Elatèridi [...]. I più piccini, pidocchietti minimi della terra infinitamente materna, li consegnava invece (con un punto di un suo speciale mastice o balsamo) a un piccolo cataletto di midolla di sambuco: e infilava poi nel cataletto lo spillo più esile, da un lato, per non guastare il morto. La preparazione e il ritaglio dei cartellini occupò talvolta nell'ultim'anno, il ragazzo più grande. Intere domeniche! Coi ditini nelle forbiciacce, intento al lavoro, serio serio, ogni tanto si passava la puntina rossa della lingua sul labbro di sopra. (520, my emphasis)

La grande ansia della famigliuola era che il pigidio (con questo vocabolo si dimanda il didietro dei coleotteri, cioè l'ultimo segmento addominale) – potesse svuotarsi, come talora avvenne, dopo la morte, all'atto dell'infilzamento. Rimaneva allora moscio moscio, preda d'una mortificante tendenza all'ingiù. [...] E poi, nelle scatole, ci metteva un vetro di orologio a rovescio, sul fondo, con una specie di olio giallo per preservarli dalle cà mole, dai vermi. (521)

The books on which Carlo bases his collections are indicative of his entomological and scientific interests. Jean-Henry Fabre's books *Souvenirs Entomologiques* (1879), Odoardo Pirazzoli's *Coleotteri Italiani – Nozioni Elementari* (1882), and in particular Leopold Eger and Michele Lessona's *Il raccoglitore naturalista. Guida pratica per raccogliere, preparare, conservare i corpi naturali organici e inorganici* (1877) indicate a positivistic, nineteenth-century scientific approach to insects based on their taxonomical and discrete classification. Luca Danti observed that:

[i]n Carlo prende campo la 'cultura antologica' dei borghesi, che si materializza nel Fabre mutilato, ovvero la tendenza a parcellizzare il reale, a dominare il sapere specialistico, innamorandosi della propria competenza. [...] Nella costruzione meticolosa delle teche per con-

servare gli insetti, si avverte l'irrigidimento del pensiero di Carlo, il quale sembra voler dominare la natura 'grande e infinida' all'interno di un riquadro di legno; *il ragioniere mostra all'élite altoborghese la sua collezione, senza dissimulare il proprio narcisismo*. (Danti 2019, 118, my emphasis)

The depiction of Carlo's passion for collecting insects is very much in opposition to the perception of 'il senso del complesso' (Danti 2019, 113) and of phenomenal interrelation. Insects are treasured as stamps and rocks are, but the process involved in their preservation implies an actual killing. Carlo stops and exsiccates the life out of these insects using pins and needles, attempting to make sense of life's flowing intangibility by superimposing a Cartesian 'foglio millimetrato' (Gadda 1990, 520) on it. By neglecting his 'consapevolezza [...] della propria parzialità, dell'essere immerso in una rete di elementi e chiamato a comprendere [...] il maggior numero di relazioni possibile senza la pretesa di esaurire il sistema nella sua interezza' (Danti 2019, 118), Carlo flaunts his appreciation for an unproductive and unreliable 'cultura antologica' (113). This type of culture is interested in the imposition of a 'foglio millimetrato' over the 'natūra infinida', at the expense of the complexity of reality. The study and the use of these books in identifying 'porzioni isolate del mondo' (Danti 2019, 127) is instrumental in the depiction of an atrophic and self-deluded Milanese bourgeoisie, which is not aware of its own limitations and reveals its self-absorption and narcissism.<sup>19</sup>

Carlo's superimposition of a reticular grid over 'i ditischi infiniti di natura' is not a successful method to process and 'impose an order' upon the infinity of nature. As Gioanola argues, Gadda's philosophy is 'cercare i fondamenti della conoscenza, predisporre il grande reticolato categoriale entro cui collocare tutti i contenuti delle scienze naturali e umane; per questo la filosofia gaddiana è essenzialmente una gnoseologia, una ricerca del metodo' (Gioanola 1977, 162-3). Carlo's method will turn out to be unsuccessful, precisely because it is based on delimitations.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The hatred of narcissism is indeed one of the tropes that recur in the author's works. Carla Benedetti observes this in relation to *La cognizione del dolore*, where we find a similar attitude against narcissistic individualism. Benedetti argues: 'I mali, tutti i mali sociali contro cui Gadda si scaglia, sono la conseguenza di un fissarsi del punto di vista, di un solo punto di vista, come tale sempre misero, e meschino. Così il narcisismo [...] è parzialità innamorata di se stessa; e l'avidità di possesso, in quanto consustanziazione narcissica dei beni, è un'iperbole erronea del non-essere [...]. In questo brano [*La cognizione del dolore*] sono succintamente riassunti sia l'aspetto etico che quello conoscitivo del male provocato dall'individuo che si chiude nei confini miserabili della propria parzialità: esso tende a possedere, nonostante sia destinato alla putrescenza, e a predicare cose, nonostante sia impossibilitato a predicare alcunché, data la limitatezza del suo punto di vista' (Benedetti 2000).

<sup>20</sup> The failure of an epistemological system based on these premises has already been anticipated. Insights are provided in Falkoff (2014). By being removed from their natural *networks*, insects and stones replicate Gonzalo's behaviour in *La cognizione del dolore*. Falkoff writes that, '[t]he 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' (Falkoff 2014, 90). The stubborn defence of the boundaries that separate the being from its surrounding is therefore a detrimental practice. The isolation and the defence of one's possessions are subjected to the narrator's own ridiculing

After Carlo's death and the economic downfall that follows it, Adalgisa and her sons are obliged to move out of their house and face the considerable amount of rocks and insects collected by Carlo. The text reads:

Il guaio fu 'quando le cose precipitarono'. [...] Il trasloco tragico fu una specie di *cataclisma*. La tromba marina della disdetta l'aveva aggirata e ravvolta via verso il buio, forzandola a smaltire su 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: *'Quasi quasi dovevo pagargli io il trasporto.... Ah! Madonna, che momenti!... Che momenti ho passato! Domà il Signore lo sa!...'* E fortuna ankamò che il capomastro di casa Ingegnoli era buono come il pane. *Aveva da colmare una buca, nella fabbrica nuova lì a due passi, pènnna foeura di Via Pisacane. I 'minerali in sé stessi' finirono lì. I facchini del trasloco, invece, 'che sono come le bestie' avevano perfezionato la disgrazia.* (Gadda 1990, 525, my emphasis)

The collected beetles undergo an analogous treatment:

Anzitutto nell'agguantare le prime teche venutegli fra le mani, le avevano 'scorlìte' con una tal mancanza di riguardo, da disincagliare issofatto alcuni Curculioni del meno felicemente infilzati o forse un po' troppo secchi, ormai. E anche dei Bupressidi. I costoro cadaveri avevan preso a vagabondare nel sepolcreto inseguiti dal ciotolino del mirbano, il quale, essendo un vetro d'orologio, non solo era andato in briciole lui, ma aveva anche infranto il vetro della teca. Poi, come non bastasse, e nonostante una tremenda intemerata dell'Adalgisa, *avevano deposto alcune delle quindici scatole, le più preziose naturalmente, quella dei Geotrùpidi fra l'altre, davanti a una ruota del furgone*: dove ci si leggeva sul fianco, a lettere cubitali, Fratelli... Fratelli ... che so io!: e subito dopo le avevano completamente dimenticate [...] Ne conseguì, appena mossi i cavalli, un appiattimento definitivo della più eletta società de' Geotrùpidi e de' Curculioni, oltreché delle Blatte. *La Blaps Mortisaga, alta e pretenziosa sulle zampe e dura e croccchiante sotto il calcagno, si ridusse ad essere niente più che la proiezione ortogonale della sua propria superbia.* (526, my emphasis)

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voice. These observations can be extended to 'L'Adalgisa' as well, where the operation of 'boundary ridiculing' is addressed to the epistemological approach displayed by Carlo. In other words, the collection and preservation of natural elements in boxes and the progressive production of dust seems to resonate with the 'deteriorating walls' and the 'bounds of foul being' found in *La cognizione del dolore*. This becomes even clearer through the change of situation provoked by the move.

The rocks that were carefully and scientifically differentiated from one another are now referred to with the collective name ‘sassi’; the *honourable* ‘blaps’ is now just its own orthogonal projection. The epistemological arrogance expressed in the attempt to re-arrange the natural world in anthological, man-made categories becomes the objective of the narrator’s scathing irony. His vitriolic sarcasm creates distance from the events recounted by Adalgisa and it asserts the limitations of the blind and naïve scientific approach held by the defenders of positivist thought, like Carlo. His expectation that rationalism can fully account for the variety of nature’s manifestations expresses the failure of the positivist paradigm.<sup>21</sup> Such principles are nothing but dust and sand.

The transformation of these precious collectables into banal and dusty *stuff* is the direct consequence not only of the end of Carlo’s scientific appreciation and re-organisation of this material, but also of Adalgisa’s attempt to sell them and reintroduce them into a purely money-driven system. After the man’s death, the woman tries to put the stones up for sale to relieve herself and her sons from penury. This attempt does not yield ‘alcun profitto, senza poterne ricavare un centesimo!’ (Gadda 1990, 525). The minerals have lost their scientific value and have become only common stones. Adalgisa bitterly realises that, unlike the sellers at Porta Ludovica, she cannot ‘utilizzare in un qualunque modo, e fino all’ultimo centesimo ricavabile, ciò che s’è acquisito, comperato, tirato in casa, goduto, magari per anni’ (Gadda 2013, 47). In Boscagli’s words, the minerals and the insects ‘point beyond official taxonomies of value’ (Boscagli 2014, 228).

The process of progressive loss of shape and pulverisation can also be identified as a gradual *deformation*.<sup>22</sup> In decaying, these previously precious and distinct natural objects lose their peculiar characteristics and undergo a process of homogenisation. The squashed insects turned into ‘briciole’ and the minerals pulverised into ‘sassi’ are now both transformed into microscopic and indistinguishable specks of dust. The efforts undertaken by Carlo to catalogue, separate, and, ultimately, know the immense variety of the natural world is jeopardised. Insects, minerals, or stamps: the similarity and the interconnection concealed behind superficially different phenomena resurface at last.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, those very ‘minerali in sè stessi’ so carefully preserved and catalogued end up being used as rubble in the foundations of a factory: ‘il capomastro di casa Ingegnoli era buono come il pane. Aveva da colmare una buca, nella fabbrica nuova lì a due passi, pènnna foeura di Via Pisacane.

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<sup>21</sup> Gadda’s anti-Cartesianism is shown by Antonello in relation to the author’s Darwinism: ‘L’assunzione di una prospettiva evoluzionistica nella propria genealogia filosofica comporta necessariamente un abbandono di qualsiasi cartesianesimo. [...] Evoluzionista convinto, fiducioso della “consapevole scienza”, contrario a qualsiasi idealismo e tentato a non scomodare “l’ipotesi Dio” per spiegare il suo sistema, Gadda sposa sin dagli esordi della sua attività intellettuale una posizione monistica, anti-cartesiana e anti-idealistica di non separazione tra materia e spirito’ (Antonello 2004, 51).

<sup>22</sup> Roscioni argues that every act of knowledge is also an act of deformation. See, Roscioni (1995).

<sup>23</sup> See Rushing (1997, 418).

I “minerali in sé stessi” finirono lì” (Gadda 1990, 525). This hints at the ‘infinite relazioni, passate e future, reali o possibili’ (Roscioni 1995, 12) of these objects, which turn them into ‘una memoria del mondo, testimoni della storia - storia primordiale (le viscere del mondo) o storia possibile [...]; storia antica [...] o storia recente [...] e così via’ (Rushing 1997, 418). By being both Carlo’s ‘zavorra [del “periodo glaciale”]’ (Gadda 1990, 517) as well as the very physical foundation of modern and mass-producing factories, the pulverised stones not only fall within the idea of the Gaddian object stratified with meanings, but they also invite considerations on the cycle of matter. Their use as the filler for a pit-hole is contingent upon the underlying materialism of the author’s conception, whereby matter belongs to a cycle in which it is neither created nor destroyed, but preserved.<sup>24</sup> By becoming literally the ground for new productive systems, the destroyed ‘minerali in sé stessi’ turn out to be foundational for the production of new and modern things. They contribute with their millennial history to the modern age.

These considerations have a series of ontological repercussions which can be pitted against Joseph Amato’s observations. In *Dust*, Amato highlights that ‘[h]ere on earth, dust comes from everything under the sun: minerals, seeds, pollen, insects, moulds, lichens, and even bacteria [...] and things of human fabrication, too numerous to mention, also cover the earth and fill the atmosphere with dust’ (Amato 2000, 4). Decaying into dust, these rocks are now deprived of their exceptionality in that they become equal to anything else that produces dust. This is made even more evident when the ‘trasloco’ ends and the narrator explains:

[La portinaia] s’era data a spazzare il marciapiede, furiosamente: *come se la paglia e tutti i frùstoli di quello sgombero l’avessero di troppo infettato*. Aggiunse in fine con un’alzata di spalle, quasi parlando tra sé e sé: ‘de qui bordòkk lì se ne troeuva de per tutt’. (Gadda 1990, 525, my emphasis)

The normalisation and loss of prestige of the collected insects and stones and, simultaneously, the recognition of the impossibility of accounting for their variety and number is reiterated by the porter: ‘those beetles can be found anywhere’, precisely because ‘la natūra [è] infinida’. In tune with Gadda’s notion of ‘un’ontologia di dissoluzione - cioè, un’ontologia in cui ciascun oggetto apparentemente

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<sup>24</sup> This resonates with what Falkoff observes (2014). She argues that the idea of objects as being part of a never-ending cycle represents a recurring motif in Gadda, as can be seen in ‘Carabattole a Porta Ludovica’, where Gadda acknowledges the wonder and the value of the objects sold at the ‘mercato’: ‘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 out-lived 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’ (Falkoff 2014, 95). In ‘L’Adalgisa’ objects do not return to the economic cycle (in fact, quite the opposite, as Adalgisa sees upon trying to sell the rocks), but rather to being part of a wider, modern, productive eco-system.

indipendente si rivela invece l'entrata in un sistema infinito di sistemi' (Rushing 1997, 418), the pulverisation of collected items turns out to be a fundamental moment in the 'cycle of matter', one that corresponds to the beginning of a new series of interrelations.

According to Amato, the understanding of dust as polluting and unhealthy corresponds to the beginning of the industrial revolution, when the production of industrial dusts has coincided with a more concerted effort to get rid of it (Amato 2000, 13). In a way, then, the appearance of dust in Gadda's text can be seen as a historical, social and even industrial marker. Defining it simply as a contaminating element takes away its productive potential. Instead it resonates more with Amato's observations that:

Dusts, which contemporary sensibility is disposed to consider only as pollutants, also reveal a history of beneficial service to humans. To suggest just a few of many examples, dust has furnished rich minerals and supplemented soils. It has been used to make bricks, ceramics, and glass. It has provided chalk for writing, clay bases for cosmetics, talc for drying bodies, and a range of powders for such basic manufacturing processes as purification, grinding, desiccation, adhesion, aggregation [...]. Dust can be both an essence of things and the best means of getting at the essence of other things. (Amato 2000, 8)

The decay of things into dust marks their return into a cycle where they will be part of other, countless 'building units' (such as the foundations for a forthcoming building). Thus, the accumulation of dust expresses the state of constant flow of ever-changing, non-categorisable matter. Dust is far from an infertile and sterile substance. It is the promise of new, productive beginnings.

### 3. Trashed Narratives and Wasted Knowledge in Calvino's *Racconti*

Through the examination of the 'liste caotiche', the long lists of disparate elements which appear in works like *Le cosmicomiche* (1965), Rushing studied the tension between order and chaos in Italo Calvino's work.<sup>25</sup> According to Rushing, 'quando si legge la narrazione che incornicia la lista [caotica], si trova quello che sembra le istruzioni per scrivere una enumerazione caotica [...] è precisamente la tensione fra un mondo riduttivo ma chiaro e un mondo vorticoso e ricco che caratterizza

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<sup>25</sup> To illustrate the 'liste caotiche', Rushing quotes a passage from the chapter 'I meteoriti' as an example: '[i]n un racconto, "I meteoriti," il protagonista ubiquitario Qfwfq si trova sulla giovane terra, un "piccolissimo corpo freddo" che si ingrandisce "inglobando meteoriti e polvere" (1206). Qfwfq e sua moglie, Xha, stanno sotto una sorta di pioggia continua di detriti cosmici: "pezzi sparsi d'altri sistemi planetari, torsoli di pera, rubinetti, capitelli ionici, vecchi numeri del «Herald Tribune» e del «Paese Sera»" (1206)' (Rushing 1997, 408).

*Calvino*' (Rushing 1997, 409, my emphasis). The contrast between chaos and cosmos, and the predilection for the latter, clarify Calvino's desire to adopt an exact epistemological system which resembles a 'freddo cristallo', a system which acquires metaliterary features.<sup>26</sup> The 'narrative instructions' which surround the lists and explain how to create them suggest that the process of narrative and literary creation is an attempt to impose order on chaos. The written creation is not the *result* of a definitive defeat of chaos, but the *process* of ordering the disorder. Such a process never settles at either one of these extremes. Literature springs from tension between these opposites, not their stasis.

The relevance of the tension between cosmos and chaos, a *crux* in Calvino, can be expanded upon further through the consideration offered by Maurizia Boscagli of Calvino's later essay 'La poubelle agréée' (1976):

At the end of the essay, [Calvino] reflects on his work as a writer and on the creative process by pointing out that *art is produced by the same mechanism through which both order and self are maintained: an act of separation from waste and debris*. Even the essay worth publishing is the result of a form of 'self-dispossession', the result of loss, what remains after throwing away 'a pile of crumpled sheets of paper and a pile of pages written over till the last line, both no longer mine, disposed of, expelled'. [...] The author demonstrates his impatience with the smooth surface and sutured perfection of some art objects, which, like commodities, claim to have come into existence magically by themselves. *The work of art, like the self, like social and personal order, depends on its traffic with waste and negativity. As Calvino makes clear, this exchange is never resolved*. (Boscagli 2014, 253, my emphasis)

Like the writing surrounding the 'lista caotica', the writing on rubbish acquires metanarrative traits because it reflects the dynamics underlying the creative process. The practice of getting rid of rubbish and debris corresponds to the process of organising chaos and is at the foundation of the creation of a literary product. The motif of chaos versus cosmos identified by Rushing and its later re-appearance in the trope of rubbish, noticed by Boscagli, can already be seen in 'Il gatto e il poliziotto' ([1948] 2003), collected first in *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1948) and subsequently in *Racconti*, first published in 1958 and 'La panchina' ([1955] 2019), published in 1958 in *Racconti* and then edited as part of the collection *Marcovaldo Ovvero Le stagioni in città* (1963). In both short stories, the protagonists try

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<sup>26</sup> Rushing claims that 'tutti e due [ordine e caos] sembrano attraenti all'inizio, ma ogni tentazione ci porta al disastro: o il freddo cristallo che riduce la ricchezza del mondo a uno schema arbitrario, o il mare di fenomeni che ci sopraffà e ci nega perfino un avvicinamento alla coscienza' (Rushing 1997, 413); and later on, 'Calvino aveva una passione per la struttura, per i giochi combinatori e matematici che lo spinge a volte verso l'estremità del cristallo freddo, allo stesso momento che riconosce (e tematizza) il pericolo' (415). The structure of the 'freddo cristallo' thus embodies the author's intention to pursue a coherent, precise, and concise epistemological structure.

to impose a known, orderly, and familiar epistemological system onto unknown and scary events. As the following analysis shows, the creation of narratives can be interpreted as the act of imposing a familiar ‘scheme of classifications’ (Kennedy 2007, 37) onto the unknown. The by-product of this epistemological enterprise can be identified in the rubbish inhabiting these narratives.

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‘Il gatto e il poliziotto’ ([1948] 2003) tells the story of police officer Baravino as he is sent with his squad to search a building thought to conceal weapons and host dangerous revolutionaries. During his wanderings around the flat complex, the protagonist finds a cat, which he decides to follow in the hope of discovering and neutralising any hidden threat. The short story emblematically ends when the police officer following the animal reaches the roof terrace of the building and finds it cuddled up in a girl’s lap while she reads aloud.<sup>27</sup>

Amongst the first elements to stand out in this short story are the two different narrative levels articulating its pace and determining the sensation of rapidity which permeates the text. While reading about what Baravino actually goes through and the people he sees, the reader is also given an insight into his speculations on the nature of what he sees, and into what he believes is hiding behind closed doors and crumbling walls. Thus, this short story is as much about a police officer searching a building as it is about a police officer pre-emptively fantasising about what he will find. Characters that use their imagination to manipulate reality are a common trope of Calvino’s fiction.<sup>28</sup> Baravino is one of them. This behaviour is clear from the beginning of the story:

Da poco tempo quindi egli aveva saputo d’un *segreto* che esisteva in fondo a quella città apparentemente placida e operosa: *dietro le mura di cemento che s’allineavano lungo le vie, in recinti appartati, in scantinati oscuri, una foresta d’armi lucide e minacciose giaceva guardinga come aculei d’istrice. Si parlava di giacimenti di mitragliatrici, di miniere sotterranee di proiettili; c’era, si diceva, chi dietro una porta murata teneva un cannone intero in una stanza.* Come tracce metallifere che indicano l’approssimarsi d’una regione mineraria, nelle

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<sup>27</sup> The image of the girl reading can be seen not only as one of the motifs recurring much later in Calvino’s *oeuvre* (such as the figure of the female reader in *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*), but also an overturning of the motif of the male reader/writer versus female non-reader/non-writer of slightly later works such as *Gli amori difficili*, and in particular ‘L’avventura di un lettore’ (1958) and ‘L’avventura di un poeta’ (1958).

<sup>28</sup> The characters in *Gli amori difficili* for example are often caught up in their own fantasies as is the case for Baravino. See Isotta Barberino in ‘L’avventura di una bagnante’; Amedeo Oliva in ‘L’avventura di un lettore’; Federico V. in ‘L’avventura di un viaggiatore’.

case della città si riscontravano *pistole cucite dentro i materassi, fucili inchiodati sotto gli impiantiti*. (Calvino 2003, 352, my emphasis)

The ‘foresta d’armi’ that he so strongly fears is the result of the ‘segreto’, rather than being the outcome of his experience. The subsequent ‘visions’ of perils are the consequence of the re-elaboration of that linguistic reality. This impression is reinforced when ‘ogni catasta di rottami gli *sembrava* custodisse incomprensibili minacce’ (352, my emphasis), or when he thinks of heavy weaponry such as the cannon ‘[se lo *immaginava*] nel salotto buono’ (352, my emphasis), so much so that ‘*vedeva* il cannone tra i divani di velluto stinto guerniti di pizzo, con le ruote fangose sul tappeto e l’affusto che toccava il lampadario’ (352, my emphasis).

The act of *not* seeing is central to the protagonist’s capability to imagine. He creates a fictional reality that he fears as much as the real one. Whatever is concealed from sight is perceived as impenetrable and, consequently, dangerous and menacing. The sensation of threat is so strong that Baravino ends up imagining conspiracies that frighten even himself.<sup>29</sup> Because of his fears and anxieties, the protagonist re-arranges the data from the outside world in reductive and incorrect ways. His interpretation of, and assumptions regarding, external phenomena are the result of his sense of insecurity rather than the outcome of an epistemological undertaking. The act of fictionalisation makes up for the impossibility of predicting the future and the product of this process becomes a known, predictable, and familiar alternative to what could not be immediately understood. Baravino exorcises his own fear of an ambush and death through the creation of a narrative that prepares him to face the worst. Satisfying both his will to know what is awaiting him behind closed doors, and providing him with a sense of control over events, the creation of potential narratives offers Baravino the chance to test his hypotheses against the odds of conspiracies and to speculate on what is going to take place.<sup>30</sup>

The process of creation of narratives becomes a rationalising tool. It works as a ‘principio ordinatore’, arising from, and *subsisting on*, chaos. The space where the orderly power of literature can be

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<sup>29</sup> In the notes to the text by Bruno Falcetto, he writes that ‘Il gatto e il poliziotto’ was originally published with the title ‘Armi nascoste’, which ‘esce sull’ “Unità” di Torino [...] per poi confluire con il titolo definitivo nella prima edizione di *Ultimo viene il corvo*. [Nella versione precedente della storia] *i toni militari e militanti si possono cogliere in maniera molto più chiara*’ (Falcetto 2003, 1302, my emphasis). Thus, though the military undertones are moderated in this later version, they are still perceptible in the trope of the conspiracy.

<sup>30</sup> This process of understanding is akin to what Pierpaolo Antonello observes in relation to later works, such as *Palomar*: ‘È come se Calvino avesse tentato costantemente di sfoltire la foresta del reale per trovarne la forma definitiva, strutturale e salda, una forma che ha i connotati della rete mentale, di un cristallo di relazioni logico-formali. In realtà, come sappiamo, la forbice si divarica in direzioni opposte, nel senso che il signor Palomar (come risultato ultimo dell’estetica calviniana) *da una parte si perde nel folto di una descrizione totale, di una mappa 1:1 della realtà ("la superficie inesauribile delle cose")*, dall’altra cerca di astrarre regole generali, modelli di comprensione della realtà per saldarli in un tutto cristallino che riesca a spegnere l’agorafobia di Calvino verso l’indeterminatezza caotica del molteplice’ (Antonello 1998, 109, my emphasis). Like the character Palomar, Baravino finds himself trapped in a chaotic universe he tries to re-organise within more familiar, cerebral coordinates.

expressed can only be the space of disorder and chaos. The building, which is inhabited by unpredictable situations and menacing people, is what stimulates the protagonist's 'ansia di compensare l'ineluttabile caoticità del reale' (Scaffai 2017, 151) through the production of alternative narrative developments. The chaos of the building is tamed by the orderly power of Baravino's fantasy.

The role of rubbish in this short story is revealed in the intricate relation between knowledge, imagination, order, and chaos. The first encounter with it corresponds to the presentation of the building where the short story takes place:

Intorno al *cortile ingombro di barili d'immondizie* correavano a ogni piano le ringhiere dei ballatoi di ferro rugginose e storte; ed a queste ringhiere, e a spaghi tirati dall'una all'altra, panni appesi e stracci, e lungo i ballatoi portefinestre con legni al posto di vetri, traversati da neri tubi delle stufe, e al termine dei ballatoi, uno sopra l'altro come in scrostate torri, le baracche dei cessi. (Calvino 2003, 353, my emphasis)

The presence of rubbish leads the reader's gaze onto other filthy images. The things inhabiting this decaying building are obsolete ('stracci, scrostate torri') and dysfunctional ('ringhiere rugginose e storte, portefinestre con legni al posto di vetri'). In presenting this decrepit and dirty environment, this text represents the transience of matter. In 'L'Adalgisa', Gadda represented the failure of taxonomic knowledge to capture matter's perpetual state of becoming. Likewise, the degraded objects in this text are indicative both of the realisation of the transient nature of matter, and of its continuous configuration and reconfiguration according to principles of entropy and chaos. This echoes the continuous oscillation between chaos and cosmos so often staged by Calvino in later texts.

After the initial horrific and putrescent presentation of the building, more rubbish is introduced:

L'agente Baravino guardava con sgomento dagli usci socchiusi nelle stanze: in ogni armadio, dietro qualsiasi stipite potevano celarsi armi terribili; perché ogni inquilino, ogni donnetta, li guardava con pena mista ad ansia? Se qualcuno tra loro era il nemico, perché non avrebbero potuto esserlo tutti? *Dietro i muri delle scale, le immondizie buttate nei condotti verticali cadevano con tonfi*; non potevano essere le armi di cui ci s'affrettava a sbarazzarsi? Scesero in una stanza bassa, dove una famigliola stava cenando a un lungo desco a quadrettoni rossi. (Calvino 2003, 354, my emphasis)

A third less obvious instance of accumulated and disorderly stuff appears just before the cat is introduced in the story. As was the case in the previous passages, the police officer fears an ambush and ends up in a lumber-room, which predictably undergoes a process of fantastic and narrative transfiguration:

Gira, gira, Baravino non frugava in nessun posto. Provò a aprire una porta: resisteva. *Forse il cannone! Se l'immaginava nel salotto buono di quella casa del suo paese, con un vaso di rose artificiali che spuntava dalla bocca da fuoco, un passamano di pizzo sugli scudi e statuine di ceramica posate con innocenza sui congegni.* La porta cedé a un tratto: non era un salotto ma un ripostiglio, *con sedie sparpagliate e casse. Tutta dinamite? Ecco!* [...] era il nonno che spingeva via la carrozzella più presto che poteva. (355, my emphasis)

The appearance of amorphous and disorderly matter, be it rubbish or merely abandoned stuff, corresponds to Baravino's realisation of the incorrectness of his narrative hypotheses. As the protagonist's narratives prove untrustworthy, their protective power and the allure of control they provide reveal themselves to be useless and superfluous. The process of narrative creation is thus intertwined with 'waste and negativity' (Boscagli 2014, 253).

These observations resonate with Calvino's later reflections on the danger of atomic waste, which he described in the article 'Il superfluo' published in 1956 in *Il Contemporaneo*. Here Calvino conjectures on the safest way of disposing of hazardous atomic waste by proposing alternatives, such as burying it. Eventually, he settles on the idea of sending it into outer space by filling 'grandi missili pieni di spazzatura atomica [che] saranno scaraventati nello spazio, lontano dal nostro sistema planetario, a roteare fuori dalle forze di gravità, forse a dar guai a una lontana Galassia' ([1956] 1995, 2242). This essay has been disregarded by scholarship, but it can be interpreted as a theoretical *trait d'union* between the earlier work, which includes *La formica argentina* (1952) or these short stories, and the more theoretically informed eco-political formulations found in later works like *Le città invisibili* (1972). 'Il superfluo' expands on and exacerbates Baravino's fear of waste by problematising the disposal of toxic waste in a more programmatic and theoretical form. This article is also concerned with the perception of pervasive, uncontrolled mass-production, which partly anticipates the slightly later text 'Il mare dell'oggettività' (1959) and which is problematised in more fictional terms in *Le città invisibili*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See for example the cities of Leonia, Eusapia, and Bersabea. The theme of rubbish, and more in general of refuse, can be found across other 'invisible cities' as well.

The plotlines based on the dangers hidden in the building also have an exorcising function. They materialise Baravino's own anxieties and his attempts to confront them. By narrativising his fears, the protagonist drives them out of his imagination and detoxifies himself. This process echoes the exorcising function of rubbish disposal presented in 'La poubelle agréée' and investigated by Andrea Severi (2008). According to Severi:

Calvino utilizza la metafora del rito purificatorio: *'l'enlèvement des ordures ménagères* può essere anche visto come un'offerta agli inferi, agli dei della scomparsa e della perdita, l'adempimento di un voto [...]. Il contenuto della poubelle rappresenta la parte del nostro essere e avere che deve quotidianamente sprofondare nel buio perché un'altra parte del nostro essere e avere resti a godere la luce del sole, sia e sia avuta veramente'. *E questo rito di purificazione quotidiana diventa anche modo di esorcizzare la morte, di allontanare il più possibile quel momento in cui ci identificheremo a pieno con quelle scorie prima solo da noi prodotte.* (Severi 2008, my emphasis)

The misconceived narrative developments are like the content of the *poubelle* that exorcises death, as Severi writes. They are about life-threatening situations and represent 'la parte del [suo] essere e avere [sprofondata] nel buio'. In discarding them, Baravino distances himself from the threat of death, as he becomes more knowledgeable and his understanding of reality becomes more accurate. At the same time, Baravino's decision to free himself from these toxic narrations corresponds to a courageous choice and creative moment. Like the later text 'La poubelle agréée', 'Il gatto e il poliziotto' illustrates how 'art is produced by the same mechanism through which both order and self are maintained: an act of separation from waste and debris' (Boscagli 2014, 253) which is also inextricably combined with an ongoing epistemological enterprise.

The presence of rubbish in this short story can be read as the re-appearance of empty tales, devoid of any epistemological value. In Gianluca Cuozzo's words '[come i rifiuti] anche la scrittura, secondo Calvino, è fatta di queste scelte selettive e luttuose, che producono le scorie delle storie mai ultimate, dei romanzi progettati e inadempiti, delle parole mai scritte' (Cuozzo 2014, 38). The unrealistic and uninformative tales materialised in bin bags can be interpreted as the narrative and epistemological by-product left behind by the protagonist in his quest to apperceive and make sense of the real. Rubbish proves how 'dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (Douglas 2001, 36), namely those elements that lie outside of usual systems of reference and cannot be easily included in

clear-cut categories of rational comprehension. Baravino can thus be seen as one of the earliest characters in Calvino's work to be engaged in a *knowing* and creative enterprise. His presence backdates the appearance of this trope in the author's *oeuvre*.

These observations on Calvino's writings echo Greg Kennedy's study (2007). In offering a historical overview and philosophical considerations into the way rubbish was perceived and disposed of in the nineteenth-century Western world, Kennedy states:

Now no matter what its size and apparent condition, waste was considered a hothouse teeming with potential diseases. As remarked with respect to food [...] from our perspective of modern science, germs represent nature's last stand, *they menace human health because they elude human control, and the metaphysical will to power dictates that whatsoever cannot be tamed must be destroyed*. [...] The technological solution to the metaphysical menace of waste was the 'garbage destructor', later known as incinerator. (Kennedy 2007, 91, my emphasis)

And later:

This will to total mastery through wholesale destruction of matter suggests an underlying violence at work in the technological solution. It makes a crisis in humanity's relation to waste. Sanitation, which sought to create the conditions for truly human, rational flourishing, now meant the controlled absence of nature. [...] This revolution in waste gave birth to trash. (92)

According to Kennedy's study, the urban management and control of rubbish became progressively stricter in order to keep at bay the organic and uncontrollable world of germs and their proliferation. Garbage then holds a subversive potential which is determined not only by its unclear epistemological value, but also by its ontological configuration. As Kennedy noted, the modern urge to dispose swiftly of rubbish has emerged at the same time as germ theory, which 'transmuted waste, which went from being an offensive [...] by-product of civilization to being a mortal hazard. The mutation called for the complete destruction [...] of waste' (Kennedy 2007, 101).<sup>32</sup> Part of the monstrosity of rubbish lies in the fact that it is a fertile ground for the proliferation of imperceptible yet real microorganisms whose toxicity might not be visually ascertained but whose effects are certainly tangible. Exerting

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<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, Kennedy also offers reflections on the way that cities deal with rubbish to provide an overview of the modern understanding of rubbish. For example, he notes that the history of modern cities is linked to their 'constant negotiation with their waste, a negotiation that tried to reconcile the physical and symbolic aspects of waste that associate it with nature, together with the implications of human distinctions from valueless nature that waste expresses' (Kennedy 2007, 101).

human, administrative, and practical control over unbridled and dangerous matter becomes essential in urban realities. The practice of destroying rubbish by incineration represents the elimination, literally the annihilation, of whatever escapes human control, much like the *toxic* narratives made up by Baravino.

When set against this short story, Kennedy's theoretical insights are illuminating: '[w]hat reason cannot conceptually work with, it relegates to the negative classification of dirt or pollution. [...] Waste, like dirt, is what our reason can no longer usefully comprehend and categorize' (Kennedy 2007, 6). In Baravino's case, this incomprehensible and un-categorisable dirt has a narrative nature.

Further proof of this hypothesis comes from the finale of the short story, when Baravino reaches the roof terrace and looks at the world from above. Once Baravino's point of view is high above, 'non aveva più paura' (Calvino 2003, 157) because '[v]edeva l'enorme città sotto di sé: costruzioni di *ferro geometriche* s'alzavano dentro i *recinti* delle fabbriche, rami di nuvole si muovevano sui fusti delle ciminiere [...]. A un alzarsi di vento Baravino vide contro di sé quella *intricata distesa di cemento e ferro*' (158, my emphasis). Like Calvino, Baravino shows 'una tendenza verso la geometria' (Rushing 1997, 415) which is instrumental to undertake 'un approfondimento e avvicinamento epistemologico [che] ha luogo nel processo di trovare una forma da applicare al magma' (415). From his vantage point, the protagonist can now catalogue the world in 'costruzioni geometriche' and 'recinti'. He no longer needs to protect himself or to predict events in disproved narrative fabrications. Rubbish disappears from the story.

Similar formulations of these themes are found in 'La panchina' ([1955] 2019).<sup>33</sup> In this short story, blue-collar, migrant worker Marcovaldo longs to sleep on a bench in the town park in order to escape the suffocating heat trapped in the attic where he lives with his family. As is usual in the short stories with him as protagonist, his attempts to improve his living conditions through a more direct contact with nature are left unsatisfied and the story closes on a bitterly comical note.

More radically than Baravino, Marcovaldo is repeatedly depicted as a deluded character whose understanding of reality is warped by his own misreading the world. Throughout the collection, the protagonist gathers the signs of what he thinks nature is in the city, starts fantasising about the benefits

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<sup>33</sup> This text, which was originally published as part of *I racconti* (1958), was eventually included with some changes in the collection *Marcovaldo, ovvero Le stagioni in città* (1963) with the title 'Villeggiatura in panchina'. For a detailed overview on the philological tradition of this text see Maria Corti's chapter 'Le tre panchine' in *Il viaggio testuale* (Corti 1978, 201-220) and Mario Barenghi, 'Marcovaldo ovvero Le Stagioni in città', in *Note e notizie sui testi* (Barenghi 2003, 1373-1374).

that would come from a possible reconnection with it and, eventually, comically suffers the consequences of believing his own idealised and romanticised fiction.<sup>34</sup> Short stories later collected in the 1963 collection, like ‘Funghi in città’, ‘La cura delle vespe’, or ‘Il coniglio velenoso’, show this recurrent narrative structure and portray the physical and embarrassing consequences – be they food poisoning or allergic reactions – of the protagonist’s deluded approach to urban reality. By revealing their poisonous nature and betraying the protagonist’s inability to decipher the natural world, these natural, intoxicating objects reveal their increasing alienation from metropolitan realities, and the consequent estrangement of those like Marcovaldo who still want to believe in a reconciliation between nature and the city. In this regard, Ricci observed, ‘it is obvious that Marcovaldo misreads reality, *seeing what others do not see, while failing to see that which others note*. [...] His attempts at reintegration into the new life-style remain ineffectual precisely because they are misrepresentations of reality, be it proletarian or otherwise’ (Ricci 1990, 34, my emphasis).

In ‘La panchina’, Marcovaldo is far from ‘la presa di coscienza della differenza tra la realtà e le sue fantasie “esotiche”’ (Buonanno 2016, 24), and actively idealises the reality around him. This is clear from the first lines of the story:

‘Oh, potessi dormire qui, solo in mezzo a questo fresco verde e non nella mia stanza bassa e calda; qui nel silenzio, non nel russare e parlare nel sonno di tutta la famiglia e correre di tram giù nella strada; qui nel buio naturale della notte, non in quello artificiale delle persiane chiuse, zebrato dal riverbero dei fanali e vedere foglie e cielo aprendo gli occhi!’ Con questi pensieri tutti i giorni Marcovaldo incominciava le sue otto ore giornaliere [...] di manovale non qualificato. (Calvino 2019, 253)

Imposing on reality a wished-for meaning is indicative both of Marcovaldo’s desire to make the external world match his expectations and of his attempt to investigate and make sense of it, which recalls the link between epistemological undertaking and narrative manipulation found in ‘Il gatto e il poliziotto’. Before his reading of reality becomes a *misreading*, the protagonist tries to understand the natural or human-derived events within the urban eco-system through a direct experience of urban reality.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The section of *I racconti* where ‘La panchina’ can be found is significantly entitled *Gli idilli difficili*, which anticipates the regular frustration of the protagonist’s attempts to connect with nature.

<sup>35</sup> Traditionally, the scholarship on the collection has tended to focus on the opposition between Marcovaldo’s search for the signs of nature and his condition as captive in a modern, industrial, and alienating city. This is found especially in scholars such as Corti (1978) and Ricci (1990). More recently, the contribution of scholars such as Scaffai has contributed to overcome this dichotomic system, given that ‘la critica al consumismo pare [...] un referente superficiale rispetto ai temi più profondi e complessivi: da un lato, la riconfigurazione dello spazio in base a nuove, paradossali coordinate; dall’altro la tensione conoscitiva che permetta se non altro di immaginare la “cartografia” impossibile di quello spazio’

What is the nature and function of rubbish in this context? In ‘Il gatto e il poliziotto’, rubbish was the materialisation of Baravino’s wrong narrative hypotheses. In ‘La panchina’ rubbish undertakes the role of a reality check. After the disruptive flashing of the orange traffic light and the harsh metallic noise of the welders in the street which hinder the protagonist’s sleep, the stench coming from the rubbish truck functions as a revelatory, enlightening presence. It literally and metaphorically wakes the protagonist up by stimulating his sense of smell and by temporarily suspending his beautifying and self-deluding tendencies:

Marcovaldo, cercando d’aprir gli occhi meno che poteva [...] corse a ributtarsi sulla panca. [...] il puzzo lo svegliò. Poco distante c’era il camion della nettezza urbana che va la notte a tirar su i tombini dei rifiuti. Distingueva, nella mezzaluce dei fanali, la gru che gracchiava a scatti, le ombre degli uomini ritti in cima alla montagna di spazzatura, che guidavano per mano il recipiente appeso alla carrucola, lo rovesciavano, pestavano con colpi di pala, con voci cupe e rotte come gli strappi della gru: – Alza... Molla... Va’ in malora... – e certi cozzi metallici come opachi gong, e il riprendere del motore, lento, per poi fermarsi poco più in là e ricominciare la manovra. Ma il sonno di Marcovaldo era ormai in una zona in cui i rumori non lo raggiungevano più, e quelli poi, pur così sgraziati e raschianti, venivano come fasciati da un alone soffice d’attutimento, forse per la consistenza stessa della spazzatura stipata nei furgoni: *ma era il puzzo a tenerlo sveglio, il puzzo acuito da un’intollerabile idea di puzzo, per cui anche i rumori, quei rumori attutiti e remoti, e l’immagine in controluce dell’autocarro con la gru non giungevano alla mente come rumore e vista ma soltanto come puzzo. E Marcovaldo smanitava, inseguendo invano con la fantasia delle narici la fragranza d’un roseto.* (Calvino 2019, 259-260, my emphasis).

As was the case with the traffic lights he tries to cover with a bay-leaf wreath, or the noise produced by the welders which he tries to mask by activating the park’s main fountain, Marcovaldo recognises the displeasing quality of urban reality. However, his tendency to overrate reality and its consequent misinterpretation do not involve rubbish. While Ricci observes that Marcovaldo usually chooses to perceive ‘fanciful rather than factual’ (Ricci 1990, 38) information coming from the outside world, here the process of alteration of reality is suspended.<sup>36</sup> Marcovaldo can no longer delude himself

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(Scaffai 2017, 153, my emphasis). ‘La panchina’ should therefore be understood as staging the tension between knowing and *fabricating*, rather than displaying the opposition between city and nature.

<sup>36</sup> See ‘Funghi in città’ (1952), where Marcovaldo wants to believe that the mushrooms which grow close to the bus stop are edible; or ‘Il coniglio velenoso’ (1954), when he starts fantasising about a rabbit he steals from a hospital laboratory, without realising it had been poisoned in order to be experimented upon.

because ‘insegu[iva] *invano* con la *fantasia* delle narici la fragranza d’un roseto’ (Calvino 2019, 260, my emphasis). He is finally compelled to confront reality.<sup>37</sup> Rubbish produces an empirical awakening in the protagonist and simultaneously keeps his beautifying narrative impulses at bay.

Dealing with the cognitive understanding of dirt, Douglas observed:

In perceiving, we are building, taking some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tend to be treated as if they harmonised with the rest of the pattern. *Discordant ones tend to be rejected*. If they are accepted, the structure of assumptions has to be modified [...] there are several ways of treating anomalies. Negatively, we can *ignore, just not perceive them*, or perceiving we can condemn. Positively, we can deliberately confront the anomaly and *try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place*. (Douglas 2001, 37-39, my emphasis)

Upon smelling the rubbish, the protagonist is confronted with a decision: he can either continue to fictionalise urban reality or revise it and confront it without the positive alteration he often imposes on it. This time, Marcovaldo cannot deny the grimness of what he perceives, he does not reject ‘discordant cues’. If it is true that ‘[his] attempts at reintegration into the new lifestyle remain ineffectual precisely because they are misrepresentations of reality’ (Ricci 1990, 38), it must be acknowledged that this is not always the case in the short stories. The anomalies of reality filter through to Marcovaldo and they do so, in this case, through the mediation of the nose.<sup>38</sup> Ricci’s idea that ‘it is obvious that Marcovaldo misreads reality, seeing what others do not see while failing to see that which others note’ (38) is not necessarily an accurate one, because the olfactory impact of rubbish shows that the protagonist is now in touch with a shared idea of reality. Therefore, rubbish is no longer what escapes in the process of understanding the world, as was the case with Baravino. Here, it triggers a physical reaction in the protagonist who attempts to make it fit his own epistemological structure. Rubbish

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<sup>37</sup> In his article ‘La percezione della città nella letteratura italiana della migrazione’ (2016), Buonanno observes that the representation of the experience in the foreign city from the point of view of the migrant presents a ‘procedimento letterario [...] duplice. Da un lato abbiamo un processo che tende a riprodurre lo straniamento: il personaggio è spesso messo in situazioni che non comprende fino in fondo che gli producono una sensazione di turbamento, di spaesamento appunto. L’incontro con la realtà urbana viene allora rovesciato o in chiave onirica, o in chiave didattica, attraverso l’invito implicito a non dare per scontati gli oggetti della vita quotidiana, attraverso uno uso elevato dell’ironia’ (Buonanno 2016, 25). Despite bearing traces of both tendencies, the overriding feature in Marcovaldo’s story is the intention to normalise what initially causes ‘spaesamento’ by processing it epistemologically.

<sup>38</sup> The value and function of a sensorial approach to reality is investigated by Calvino in later writings such as *Sotto il sole giaguaro*, published posthumously in 1986. The epistemological function of the senses has been studied by Hume (1992a, 1992b), where she investigates the connection of the senses with sensuality. An interesting point of view on the value of smell in literature is provided by Fabbian (2012), which, however, does not cover Italo Calvino’s *Sotto il sole giaguaro*.

holds the potential to overturn Marcovaldo's 'structure of assumptions' (Douglas 2001, 37) and bring him back to a less fictional, less indirect experience of the real.

In 'La panchina', Marcovaldo is awakened not only by the stench that comes from the rubbish, but also by the noises that come from its collectors yelling: '- Alza... Molla... Va' in malora...' (Calvino 1990, 260).<sup>39</sup> The presence of these characters, perceived through sensory stimulation, creates important social resonances with the figure of the factory worker Marcovaldo. He and the bin men are involved with undefined matter which is becoming a defined something, through the process of industrial production, or matter that has been consumed, has lost its usefulness, and therefore needs to be disposed of. They are kept at the periphery of the process of production and are hardly involved in the process of consumption.<sup>40</sup> In short, they are examples of the social waste of modern society. In Zygmunt Bauman's words, they can be defined as 'wasted lives', outcasts of incipient modernity and industrialisation, who withstand:

[the] inescapable side-effect of order-building (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of economic progress (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood). (Bauman 2004, 5)<sup>41</sup>

The social positions of both the bin men and Marcovaldo are determined by their relation to the commodities and the polluting *remains* of these mass-produced items in this modernising city.<sup>42</sup> This echoes and expands the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism presented in Chapter Two. The commodity not only determines the value of those who produce it, as Marx said, but also of those who

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<sup>39</sup> In 'La poubelle agréée', Calvino discusses the precarious state of rubbish collectors and echoes what Marcovaldo is going through: '[v]oci che sovrappongono al ronzio smorzato dell'autocarro suoni inarticolati per i nostri orecchi [...]. La piramide sociale continua a rimescolare le sue stratificazioni etniche [...] l'uomo che scarica la *poubelle* nel cratere rotante del carro ne trae la nozione della quantità di beni da cui è escluso, che gli arrivano come spoglia inutilizzabile' (Calvino [1976] 1990, 100-103).

<sup>40</sup> This is even more evident when we consider that Marcovaldo migrated from the south of the country to an industrialised northern city. The bin men appearing in 'La poubelle', have also migrated from northern African countries to France: 'È proprio dei dèmoni e degli angeli presentarsi come stranieri, visitatori di un altro mondo. Così gli *éboueurs* affiorano dalle nebbie del mattino, i lineamenti che non si distaccano dall'indistinto: cere terree – i Nordafricani – un po' di baffi, uno zuccotto in capo; o – quelli dell'Africa nera – solo il bulbo degli occhi che rischiare il viso perso nel buio; voci che sovrappongono al ronzio smorzato dell'autocarro suoni inarticolati per i nostri orecchi, suoni apportatori di sollievo quando trapelano nel sonno della mattina assicurandoti che puoi continuare a dormire' (Calvino 1990, 68).

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Bauman opens his discussion with an overview of the modernity of the cities depicted in Calvino's *Le città invisibili* and in particular on Leonia (2004, 26).

<sup>42</sup> A similar interest in the depiction of different social classes in relation to rubbish can be found in Calvino's 'Desiderio in novembre' ([1949] 2003, 336-343), where the characters' social status is determined by their traffic with different pieces of clothing. The lower-class characters deal with second-hand, shabby clothes, while the upper-classes have access to furs and other luxurious items.

handle its disposal.<sup>43</sup> By *no longer being goods*, rubbish offers the protagonist the chance to have unmediated contact with reality and apperceive it through his senses. It also reveals the character's exclusion and eventual alienation from the cycle of consumption of goods.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The application of dust and rubbish theory to Gadda's 'L'Adalgisa' and Calvino's 'Il gatto e il poliziotto' and 'La panchina' has revealed the presence of an epistemological and narrative tension in the textual presence of dust and rubbish. Their appearance in the text uncovers not only the 'tensione conoscitiva' that underlies their visions and which has broadly been studied by scholarship, but also the close link established between the acts of knowing, ordering, and creating. Although driven by a similar intention to turn literature into a 'strumento conoscitivo', the results attained by the two writers are different. Gadda shows the failure of a scientific, philosophical, and epistemological system that does not conceive of the interconnectedness of the phenomena of reality. In the author's work, the idea of chaos and disorganised materiality is the most faithful way through which to depict the complex 'groviglio' of what is real. Conversely, in Calvino the tension between cosmos and chaos is never resolved. The oscillation between the love of order and fascination with disorder, usually ascribed to later work, appears in these earlier short stories. In both these analyses, the interpretation of discarded objects is intertwined with considerations of the social strata in which they appear. The protagonists' interaction with dust and rubbish enables the observation of specific social dynamics and of the reconfigured epistemological relationship with modernising Italian reality.

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<sup>43</sup> This is even more evident in 'La poubelle agréée', where Calvino highlights how the human relation to rubbish can offer important insights into the 'social pyramid' and the stratifications underlying any given society. Like Douglas' idea of dirt as having ultimately a controlling function over social hierarchies and dynamics, Calvino reflects on how 'l'essere stato assunto come spazzino è il primo gradino d'una ascesa sociale che farà anche del paria di oggi un appartenente alla massa consumatrice e a sua volta produttrice di rifiuti, mentre altri usciti dai deserti "in via di sviluppo" prenderanno il suo posto a caricare e scaricare i secchi' (Calvino 1990, 70). Severi expands on these observations and in particular on the passage from a traditional and agricultural society, the sustenance for which derives from 'Mother Earth', to a mass-producing one, where balances and products are regulated by 'Dio Capitale': 'la poubelle, a conti fatti, finisce per essere "gradita" [...] "all'anonimo processo economico che moltiplica i prodotti nuovi usciti freschi di fabbrica e i residui logori da buttar via, e che ci lascia metter mano solo a questo recipiente da riempire e svuotare, io e lo spazzino". Ennesima, dolorosa presa di coscienza dell'alienazione dell'uomo moderno, o capitolo dell'alienazione narrato *sub specie immunditiae*. In una sorta di comico ribaltamento, sembra quasi che siano diventati i rifiuti (o meglio, le merci-rifiuti, tanto per sintetizzare il ciclo) i fruitori della poubelle, e gli esseri umani – nella doppia versione di riempitori e svuotatori – i semplici esecutori materiali, automi diligenti di un processo eterodiretto' (Severi 2008). 'La poubelle' and the observation of the human relationship to rubbish offers a reflection on established social hierarchies and on their relations to modern and industrialised productive systems.

<sup>44</sup> In relation to the subject's alienation from its surroundings, Hume underlines that '[a] civilization that was safe and pleasant would make a nose practically unnecessary. *Our shift from nose to eye as dominant sense has widened a gap between self and surroundings*, and augmented what in the West has *been felt as a split between subject and object*' (Hume 1992b, 171, my emphasis). This underlines further the process of alienation from one's surroundings.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has placed itself in the field of material studies in 20th century Italian literature, by offering a study of objects and of the phenomenon of object fetishism through a highly theoretical approach. It aimed at detecting the impact on literature of the increasing material circulation in twentieth century Italy. The period included between 1930 and 1959, that precedes the economic boom of the sixties and that marked the transformation of Italy into an economic power, was the most appropriate time of which to undertake an investigation such as this. The transitional nature of this timeframe, the historical, cultural, economic, literary, and social transformations that were taking place at the time, contributed to the creation of a heterogeneous, vibrant, and ambivalent background for these texts, which are equally heterogeneous. The application of a variety of theories contributed to showing that objects can trigger a variety of different and at times contrasting emotions, reactions, and attitudes in their human counterparts. Things are also invested with conventional social functions and meanings, working as elements that circulate within particular social circles, or elements that reveal underlying social dynamics.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the objects found in these texts did not conform either to the definitions of epiphanic elements, as Arrigo Stara's and Sergio Zatti's works argued, or to the definitions of simple inhabitants of the characters' social environments, as Massimiliano Tortora argued. This dissertation has shown that things move between these two poles. They are at times gateways that offer access to a further understanding of reality, as can be seen in 'Un paio di occhiali' by Ortese, or elements that provide access to a more direct relationship with what is real, as in 'La panchina' by Calvino. By focusing on the material presence of things, this thesis has revealed the limitations of Tortora's, Stara's and Zatti's theories. None of these works considers the relevance that the physical presence of things has in literary texts of this period. While it is true that objects point towards a dimension that goes beyond reality or invite a more direct relation with it, it is also true that their physical and concrete presence plays a fundamental role in these texts, without their being perceived in the suffocating and overwhelming tones described by Calvino in 'Il mare dell'oggettività' (1959).

A confirmation of the relevance of things play in these texts can come, paradoxically, from the observation of their decay. As shown in the two examples in Chapter Four, the corpus includes instances of things that are no longer functioning and useful and become piles of discarded material, rubbish, and disorderly matter. The pervasive textual presence both of useful objects and or thrown away stuff suggests that, before being means to get to other dimensions, they are primarily concrete, physical companions and components of everyday life. They inhabit the textual universe even when they have lost all their purpose and fascination. While in some of the texts analysed in the corpus the

materiality of objects and rubbish was so overpowering as to trigger different and ambivalent emotions, these depictions never reach the harsh and cynical tones found in later texts of, for example, Buzzati or Calvino. This further proves the particularity and significance of the period analysed here, when the increased circulation and presence of things or commodities in day-to-day practices was no longer describable as simply an epiphanic element, and had not triggered yet the strong opposition or sense of threat found subsequently. By showing the limitations of the categories outlined by Stara, Zatti and Tortora in describing the objects found at this time of Italian literary history, as well as proposing new and less univocal interpretations of their role, this thesis has not only contributed with a finer understanding of the literary depiction of objects in the first half of the twentieth century, but it paves the way for investigation of the factors that might have provoked a change of attitude after 1959.

Alongside the exploration of the role of objects, this dissertation has also tested the boundaries of the idea of fetishism. This concept has changed throughout this dissertation, taking different declinations according to the theoretical approach followed. A substantial conceptual difference divides the chapters of this research. Chapters One and Two conceived of fetishism as a phenomenon that revolves around a concrete, superficially inert object and a human subject who invests upon it sentimental, erotic, or social values. Chapters Three and Four offered a different approach, based on the understanding of subjectivity and objectivity as categories that are hardly distinguishable from one another, from both an epistemological and an ontological point of view. Once the divide between subjects and objects is no longer clearly identifiable, the concept of fetishism altogether is undermined. One might even say it becomes banal and redundant. Departing from the derogative terms with which the anthropological, Marxist, and psychoanalytical schools used to define this phenomenon, the notion of fetishism proposed in the last two chapters leaves us with an interesting paradox. According to the new schools of thought, fetishism, defined as the irrational attachment to inanimate objects, imbues our day-to-day lives, therefore its identification is superfluous and it is even more unnecessary when the distinction between the fetishist subject and the fetishised object is undermined. Fetishism regulates our quotidian relation with objects while simultaneously being an outdated and inaccurate prism in which to look at our relation with them. Fetishism is far from being a mark of depravity, primitivism, and superstition. It is part of our daily lives.

The adoption of a solidly theoretical structure has not only enabled the exploration of the conceptual boundaries of fetishism, but it has also served metacritical purposes, offering examples of the limits of the theoretical approaches employed and of the elusiveness of the literary texts analysed. Chapter One required adjustments and combination of Fusillo's theories to analyse the texts of Morante, Ortese and Calvino, which offered a series of case studies that was much more varied than

those theorised by Fusillo. Similarly, Chapter Four called for a combination of theoretical approaches coming from anthropology, cultural studies, and literary criticism for the interpretation of short stories of Gadda and Calvino. An exemplary case of the limits of the theories used in this thesis is found in Chapter Three, where the philosophies of Jane Bennett and René Girard were employed to discuss epistemological and ontological issues, as well as ethical generosity and responsibility in texts by Buzzati and Landolfi. The textual analysis of the short stories has resonated only partially with those philosophical considerations, showing how the literary texts escape through the threads of theory and stage a more complex type of humanity from that painted by Bennett and Girard. The ethical generosity they advocated as a spontaneous response to the realisation of the interconnectedness of various beings and matter is in fact missing from the texts under examination.

Chapter Three was not the only instance that has prompted reflection on ethics, which in fact emerged at different points throughout this dissertation. Chapter Two, for example, dealt with issues connected with the economic value of humans and their loss of individuality and human qualities. This was illustrated particularly well in Moravia's short story 'L'avaro', where the female character was reified and turned into a good with an exchange value, literally becoming a surface on which to display precious goods and an object to buy and sell. Similar considerations can be made for Gadda's 'Notte di luna' and 'Quando il Girolamo ha smesso', where labourers are deprived of their individuality and turned into a mass of unidentified 'Eligi, Anselmi, Umberti, o Girolami'. The question of ethical engagement is posed in poignant and analogous terms in Chapter Four. In Calvino's short stories human characters are depicted as modern outcasts, who move in the periphery of societies, and whose lives Zygmunt Bauman effectively calls 'wasted'. Marcovaldo and the dustmen inhabit a hyper-productive, capitalist environment which progressively pushes them to the periphery of productive systems. Although both factory-worker Marcovaldo and the dustmen are in charge of the maintenance of such systems, which provide useful, brand-new goods or remove those goods when they become obsolete or useless, they are not granted access to the material resources of such materially prolific environments. Instead, they are left in a condition of destitution and poverty which they can hardly free themselves from. Though these texts were written in the forties and the fifties, the social and ethical questions they pose to twenty-first-century readers are topical and invite reflection on the human price that both then and now is paid for the maintenance of hyper-capitalist productive systems.

The link between the study of objects and social or sociological considerations has been another overarching theme of this dissertation. The social impact of the circulation, possession, desire, and disposal of things has recurred regularly throughout these chapters. Things have been used as tools to have access to, or exit from, social circles. In Chapter One, for example, they are employed to

conform to or declare one's dissociation from specific social groups. In Chapter Two, fetishised objects were shown to determine the social statuses of their users and to regulate and articulate their interactions and social rituals. Chapter Three has shown how, although the connection between the object and the humans is evident and even acknowledged in some instances, human society is still internally split and broken up into different and antagonistic groups which can hardly be reconciled despite their inherent similarities. Chapter Four draws attention to characters in transition between different social statuses and shows how this transitional status is reflected in the presence of objects that occupy an equally liminal position, in-between collectable items and rubbish. In a way, then, thinking and writing about objects has become a way to reflect on the humans who use them, and on the dynamics they establish between them.

In reaching the conclusion of this thesis, it might be useful to mention some of the possible research routes that can use it as a springboard. Thanks to its highly theoretical approach, this dissertation has offered transnational and transhistorical models which can be readily used to undertake a similarly structured analysis in other contexts with different texts and authors. The exploration of the epistemological potential of fantastic literature offered in Chapter Three, for example, can be used to study other works, such as the fantastic texts by Alberto Savinio, Massimo Bontempelli, Italo Calvino, or Primo Levi, which can be productively reinterpreted in an epistemological key. At the same time, these critical considerations can be extended to longer forms of writings, such as novels, and to different genres or modes, such as speculative fiction and science fiction. As briefly mentioned above, possible future avenues of research could comprise an investigation into how and when objects moved from being ambivalent and curious presences to being perceived in the magmatic and dazzling terms used by Calvino in 'Il mare dell'oggettività' (1959) or reflected by Buzzati's later short fiction, like *Le notti difficili* (1971). It would be productive to observe how and whether a theoretical and critical framework that conceives of matter as vibrant and lively, such as that used in Chapter Three of this dissertation, can engage in dialogue with increasingly suffocating perceptions of phenomenal reality such as those offered in the texts of these authors.

The use and view of objects and object fetishism in fiction has changed with time. The theoretical works on objects and the critical works on these texts have changed, too. Though informed by them, this thesis has further developed them and, at times, taken distance from them, showing that these motifs and themes are still growing and changing with time. It is hoped that, as the critical studies that contributed to this dissertation, these pages will be useful in the future study and understanding of a living and developing subject.



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