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Author

La Palma, Marina Debellagente

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That Awful Mess, Life:
The Language of Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio* . . .

Like those prototypical modernists, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, Carlo Emilio Gadda poses a stylistic challenge never fully met by writers who follow. But I believe we must look beyond the formal sphere to comprehend Gadda's insistent experimentation; his linguistic manipulations reveal a psychological and socio-political contradiction. My notion, simply put, is that the rage driving Gadda's texts is not so much, as critics have suggested, a failed idealism but rather a kind of fatalism or determinism based on the very paradigm he was rejecting.

In their manifestoes, the Italian Futurists welcomed war as a kind of "hygiene" that would rid the world of everything they considered outmoded and unhealthy—which included women and the feminine in general. Futurism gave the world cultural representations of a new order, portrayed as a progressive and scientific project, that fascism would attempt to bring to life.

The self-presentation of the Fascist regime's goals came to dominate the political life of Italy for nearly two decades. Their social program privileged the Family as the unit for reproducing as many children as possible (*male* children, of course, since the program was integrally tied to an imperialist militarism.) In *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, Gadda pours contempt on this notion; yet the contemporary reader may detect, in this loose and truncated chronicle of detection, the very concepts it attacks.

While claiming to despise the Fascist reproduction program, which

relegates women to a biologically determined role, Gadda seems possessed, at least metaphorically, by this application of biological determinism. As critics rightly point out, the text depicts people through a web of biological processes. But the most highly charged and visceral reality in the text is that of "*Fenditure*". Female characters are focused upon most specifically in relation to their *reproductive & sexual* organs and functions.

Pasticciaccio's female characters are, to put it simply, *fascinating*. Wealthy, refined, melancholy Lilitiana Balducci—the narrative's central victim—fascinates inspector Ingravallo, the novel's "protagonist." As objects of fascination, women in this novel are portrayed in excruciating detail—visual, olfactory, sociological, psychological, sartorial—from a clinical description of the fine lace undergarments and delicate exposed skin of Lilitiana's corpse, to a long gaze (multiple and masculine) at an unkempt but beautiful street urchin during her interrogation, to an obsessive evocation of a gob of saliva hanging from the mouth of the hag-like Zamira.

Females seem to represent in this book a procreative imperative, an obscene proliferative capacity associated with the vegetal order. Fecund and regurgitative (like Zamira's spittle), they fascinate because they repulse, reflecting the ad hoc, contingent nature of reality. Gadda claimed that his "baroque" literary style merely reflected life's arbitrary winding futility. His writing proceeds by a series of digressions that may be seen as attempts to track down "life" as an orderly process. The underlying feeling is despair at ever finding equilibrium within the frightful anarchy of nature. His cornucopia of imagery constitutes a neurotic fixation upon the female, attempting to fix her in an assigned iconographic role which—I am suggesting—parallels her assigned social role within fascism.

In *I viaggi la morte* Gadda writes: "La lingua, specchio di totale essere, e del totale pensiero, viene da una cospirazione di forze, intellettuali o spontanee, razionali o istintive..." We may thus see in his language a reflection of his thought, with all the archeologies and contradictions to which the mind is prone. In the same book he speaks of language as a "lavoro collettivo" Gadda's texts displays that "carnivalizing" impulse towards the interpenetration of registers which Bakhtin saw as integral to the novel's vitality. Gadda's employment

of the speech modes of various strata of Italian society does indeed partly give voice to these. The text slides ceaselessly among different linguistic registers, with only one interlude of poise. This comes during the interrogation of a beautiful girl named Ines. While Ines, dressed in dirty rags, is under scrutiny by the policemen, the tone alters into something like compassion for “a poor girl over whom life has poured so much misery.”

An astonishing range of imagery and registers comes into play. The economy of Gadda's prose is one of over-production, a potlatch. But it's not a *jouissance* implying the sense of unfettered play and generosity; the excess here seems to issue from desperation. Manufactured as a linguistic simulacrum of the world in its overwhelming variety and indecipherability, the text may represent a mimetic protective fetish.

Admitting into its orbit speech genres from different levels of society, Gadda's linguistic performance is also a vehicle for his “political unconscious”, the ideology that prevailed in Italy during his formative years. The work is compulsively, obsessively, even *explicitly* about language. With this in mind, let us examine some of the language of *Quer Pasticciaccio Brutto de Via Merulana*.

The first crime in this “detective story” is the theft of a great deal of expensive jewelry from the Countess Menegazzi. Her name underscores what I would point to as a key to Gadda's attitude toward the female. She is, literally, “minus testicles” [mene—meno—minus / gazzi—cazzi]. In American vernacular she has “no balls.”¹ Instead, she has a box full of valuable jewelry. These jewels form the “prey” (or fetish) for the long, circuitous hunt that is the narrative thread of this book. At the same time, both the specific jewels and wealth in general are strongly identified with excrement.

In the early pages of the novel the jewels are robbed from “quel sacrario di memorie” the bedroom of the “blonde countess”. In the final pages they are discovered hidden in a chamber pot in the filthy hovel of a young woman referred to several times as “la patata”. Moving from rich widow to poor peasant girl, from Venetian refinement to Lazian vegetal squalor, from third floor urban apartment to rural shack, the story makes a long trajectory from high to low, fixated upon the ersatz or sublimated female genitalia, the jewels.

Folk wisdom characterizes a wife as a treasure chest, connotationally combining the sexual and economic aspects of the institution of marriage and the role of Wife. Jewels or a jewel box thus signify both wealth and private parts. In the case of both the countess's stolen jewelry and the jewelry Liliana bestows upon her young cousin before her death, it is a pretty boy who springs them loose from their female possessor. The murderer may or may not be one of these boys.

Mythical associations are consistently evoked in relation to the contested metals and stones. Other descriptions of the treasure—such as the police-dossier inventory of the stolen goods—employ scientific and bureaucratic terms, undercutting and ironizing mythical proportions accrued in the other register. The most notable mythic scene is an extended dream sequence unexpectedly remembered by Sergeant Pestalozzi as he rides a scooter down from a high hilly area. A topaze goes through a series of transformations: pazzo—topazzino—giallazo—topo—topaccio—girasole—sole—disco maligno—ruota—fanale... and so on, culminating up in a bacchanalian dance with a Circe-like “enchantress”. It ends its animated fugue by climbing up the legs and into the groin of a dancing contessa, towards (what else?) an all-encompassing “cleft”.

In this hallucinogenic extravaganza, Pestalozzi, who is Inspector Ingravallo's assistant, becomes an extension of the narrator's persona. In fact, most of the men in this text seem to be “doubles” for the narrator and by extension, Gadda. Sergeant Santarella, who lives with nine women in his household, is described as awash in a sea of females. This seems to be the author's position too, awash in a sea of excess, surrounded by the swirl of a fecundity regarded as essentially “feminine”, rich, fascinating and threatening.

Two crimes (a jewel theft and a murder) form the backbone of this story. Their site, an apartment building on via Merulana, is known in the neighborhood as the “palace of gold” because it is home to several rich families whose wealth comes from business speculation during the First World War (the story is set in 1926.) These *nouveau riche* are called “sharks” in the local argot, implying a certain ferocity in the methods by which their wealth was obtained. With Gadda, there is little possibility of an interpretation in terms of “class consciousness”.

Although he is acutely aware of class differences, this attention is at the service of a vision not of social conflict in a struggle for justice but of chaotic and meaningless difference ordained by who knows what fate or destiny.

“Fate” crops up with great frequency in Gadda’s dense and animated text. He invokes the “field of the forces of destiny” and calls Italy a “fatal peninsula”, alluding to “l’inerto buratino del probabile”. “Era scritto che il diciannove de via Merulana, il palazzo del oro, o dei pescicani che fosse, era scritto che doveva fiorire anche lui un bel fiore...” When Ingravallo goes out to San Marino, Gadda’s lyrical evocation of the beautiful Roman morning is considerably undercut by: “Era una giornata meravigliosa...di quelle così splendidamente romane che perfino uno statale di ottavo grado...pure quello se sente...un quarche cosa che risomija a la felicità.” As if the bureaucratic level of the policeman’s career were a state of being, a fate, that precluded certain emotions.

This sense of predestination is particularly associated with the female characters or women in general. For example, the passage describing the state of mind of the widow Menegazzi before the intruder arrives and robs her jewels: “come tutte le donne sole in casa” [viveva in] “anticipazione del evento...il quale, dai e dai, no pote’ a meno, alfine, di arrivare davvero anche lui.” When Ingravallo arrives at the scene of Liliانا’s murder, before he enters the building, a circle of neighborhood women are discussing the unluckiness of certain numbers. And, as Ingravallo interrogates people at the scene of the crime, Menegazzi intones repeatedly “er dixiesete e el peyor numero” (This notion of unlucky numbers also figures strongly in the plot of *La cognizione del dolore*.)

Finally, I’d like to take note of a certain contrast between two types of characters and descriptive registers in this book. As if the social/ mental landscape were divided thus:

Indoors = bourgeois, bureaucratic, mercantile, sterile. That is, Liliانا, the cops, even Zamira, who is a predatory businesswoman. *Outdoors* = an outsider point of view, criminal, deviant, the countryside (now suburbs) of Rome and its “primitive” inhabitants, implicit or explicit classical landscapes, all that is left of archaic and barbarian Italy (reminiscent of some of Pasolini’s associations with these concepts.) In

a sense this book is an apotheosis of class (or gender) conflict, except that the differences are seen as essential and eternal.

The primitive, squalid, poor from the sub-urbs steal from and murder the urban rich. If, for example, we viewed this plot through a classical iconography—in which representation of gender difference was often coded by color: pale skin for women and bronzed skin for men, it might be read as the masculine (outdoor) turning against the feminine (indoor). But I believe that the poor, as representatives of anarchy, proliferation and uncontrollability, are identified with the feminine by Gadda in this work. The latter elements take revenge on the former. Hence the latent but profound anxiety expressed by this text.

The representation of women in this novel seems to be inextricably tied to prevailing, deeply coded notions of Woman as Other, as a part of a “Nature” that threatens to undermine and devour Man, who is, at every point, synonymous with civilization. Mussolini was a man of action who employed the rhetoric of Progress . . . at the service of a reactionary return to the “values” of the Roman empire. The futility implied and fostered by fascism is perhaps the futility of struggle by those who are “weaker”. In the case of the traditionally “weaker” sex, the struggle is far more complex, for it is representation and roles *within* the system of dominant culture which demand the kind of deconstruction an instance of which I have here tried to demonstrate.

Marina deBellagente LaPalma

Note:

1. There is some basis for concluding that Menagazzi's name implies that she, being a widow, is deprived of a phallus (or, more precisely, of her husband's *penis*.) However, my point here is not to uncover Gadda's possible, intended or *likely* meanings. What I am interested in is a broader, perhaps less clear-cut but more enduring set of associations underlying his choices. The discursive conflation of “penis” with “testicles” has an illustrious precedent in Freud's discussions of what he comes to call the “castration complex”. At any rate, it is the conflation of “penis” with *phallus*—occurring at opportune moments and vehemently denied at other junctures—which is far more problematic for critical theory.

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