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Grounding the Fantastic: An Ecocritical Reading of I. U. Tarchetti's "Uno spirito in un lampone"

Cinzia Sartini Blum

Novelist and poet Iginio Ugo Tarchetti (1839–1869)¹ has been widely credited with transplanting the fantastic genre into Italy. Accordingly, critics have tended to measure his *racconti fantastici* against prominent foreign models, such as Edgar Allan Poe's and E. T. A. Hoffmann's most famous tales, which validate Tzvetan Todorov's influential characterization of the genre as defined by the hesitant, often fearful reaction of characters and readers when presented with seemingly inexplicable or impossible phenomena—the vacillation between a natural and supernatural interpretation of events.² By such standards, Tarchetti's work has been often found wanting: both lacking in originality because derivative—in some instances he is even accused of plagiarism³—and of scarce import because marginally related to the fantastic genre. Vincenzo Moretti sums up such assessments as follows: “Si può dire che, se con il Tarchetti nasce in Italia il genere fantastico, esso nasce morto, perché diventa subito altro da sé: occasione di esercizi ironici oppure metafora di non troppo chiare e chiarite situazioni psichiche” (“One might say that if the fantastic genre is born in Italy with Tarchetti, it is stillborn since it immediately becomes different from itself: an opportunity for ironic exercises or a metaphor for insufficiently clear and clarified psychological situations”).⁴

Different conclusions can be reached if one considers the fantastic not as a discrete genre of anti-realist narrative in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature which is strictly defined by structural parameters, but rather as a multiform literary mode which “can grow from any soil” (to borrow a phrase from Calvino's memo on the fantastic imagination)⁵ and whose evolution

¹ “Iginio” is a variant of “Iginio.” Some scholars use the latter; Tarchetti, however, signed his letters as “Iginio,” and this is the name that also appears in the memoirs of his close friend, Salvatore Farina. For biobibliographical information, see Enrico Ghidetti, “Introduzione,” in *Tutte le opere*, ed. Enrico Ghidetti, 2 Vols. (Bologna: Cappelli, 1967), 5–61.

² For a recent survey of the contested territory of the fantastic, see Irena Grubica and Zdeněk Beran, “Introducion: (Re)Searching for the Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle,” in *The Fantastic of the Fin de Siècle*, eds. Irena Grubica and Zdeněk Beran (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 1–15. For theories and histories of the fantastic in Italy, see Remo Ceserani et al., eds., *La narrazione fantastica* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983); Remo Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996); Monica Farnetti, ed., *Geografia storia e poetiche del fantastico* (Florence: Olschki, 1995); Stefano Lazzarin, *Il modo fantastico* (Rome: Laterza, 2000); Angelo M. Mangini and Luigi Weber, eds., *Il visionario, il fantastico, il meraviglioso tra Otto e Novecento* (Ravenna: Allori, 2004); Angelo M. Mangini, *Letteratura come anamorfosi. Teoria e prassi del fantastico nell'Italia del primo Novecento* (Bologna: Bonomia University Press, 2007); and Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis, eds., *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic: Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

³ On the question of plagiarism, see Lawrence Venuti, “I. U. Tarchetti's Politics of Translation; or, a Plagiarism of Mary Shelley,” in *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 1992), 196–230.

⁴ Vincenzo Moretti, “Iginio Ugo Tarchetti e il racconto fantastico,” in *Scapigliatura e dintorni: Ottocentisti minori e minimi verso il Novecento* (Milan: Lampi di stampa, 2005), 17–30, 27. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁵ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage, 1993), 89.

reflects changing ways of seeing and knowing the world.⁶ From this perspective, Tarchetti appears to have contributed to a development of the mode shaped by an unresolved competition between reason and the imagination: an embattled fantastic particularly attuned to dealing with problematic psychological and social phenomena, manifestations of the kind of cognitive disequilibrium that results from an inability to meet the demands of a rapidly changing environment.⁷ By focusing on the problem of knowing, and by avoiding the common tendency to posit an antithetical relationship between flights of the imagination as the matter of the fantastic mode and the real world as the matter of the mimetic mode, we can explore how this branch of the fantastic exposes the roots of the established symbolic and social order. Through such an approach we discover that, while seemingly offering an escape from reality, the fantastic leads us to face fundamental assumptions about the laws that govern the world which are blotted out by conventional cognitive maps and discursive ways.

Thus contextualized, Tarchetti's work reveals vital connections that are otherwise obscured. His interest in the bizarre, the macabre, the uncanny, and the paranormal, which he shares with more illustrious practitioners of the fantastic in the nineteenth century, can be recognized as a way to address unsettling and controversial questions related to modernity's destabilizing effects on the boundaries of individual and national identity in post-unification Italy. Such questions include, most notably, the crisis of traditional certainties brought about by scientific developments and other disorienting processes of socio-economic, political, and cultural change; and, as a result of transformation in almost all spheres of life, the urge to redefine the very nature and role of art and the artist. Some prominent scholars have called attention to pressing issues addressed by Tarchetti: art's role in society; gender and class anxieties; and contradictions

⁶ My approach to the fantastic (first articulated in Cinzia Sartini Blum, "Futurist Metamorphoses: Reading Marinetti's Manifestos in the Light of the Fantastic," *L'Anello che non tiene* 22 [Spring-Fall 2010]: 11–23 [see especially 12–13]), seeks to find a middle ground between two prevalent, divergent approaches: on the one hand, the theoretical effort to define the fantastic as a discrete literary genre; on the other hand, the generic use of the term to indicate fantasy literature in general, from traditional fairy tales to futuristic science fiction. Following Rosemary Jackson's lead (see *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* [London: Routledge, 1988]), I view the fantastic as an intrinsically multifaceted and perennially evolving mode; and, building on Lucio Lugnani's effort to revise Vladimir Todorov's seminal classification ("Per una delimitazione del 'genere,'" in *La narrazione fantastica*, eds. Remo Ceserani et al., [Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983], 37–73), I propose definitions of various forms of the fantastic based on different configurations of the relationship between reason and the imagination. I use the modifiers *supernatural*, *surreal*, *subdued*, and *embattled* to indicate four major configurations. The term *supernatural* refers to the vast territory of the fantastic (commonly associated with the terms magic, religious, and marvelous) in which reality is untroublingly connected with, but subordinated to, a supernaturally ordained imaginary dimension. In the *surreal* fantastic, reality may also be subordinated to the imaginary in the sense that the latter is invested with superior visionary powers; the relationship is troubled, however, as the imaginary originates in the repressed subconscious, which resurfaces to threaten the reality paradigm. In the *subdued* fantastic, the supernatural and/or surreal temporarily disrupt the reality paradigm, but they are ultimately domesticated, dispelled, deconstructed, and rationalized; in other words, the imaginary (supernatural, subconscious, unfamiliar) is first estranged, then reconnected and subordinated to the rational, natural, familiar, and real, thus affirming the power of reason over the imagination. Finally, I use the expression *embattled fantastic* to define an unresolved estrangement: an encounter with the imaginary that not only puts into question, but also potentially reshapes the reality paradigm.

⁷ I refer to Piaget's theory of cognitive "equilibration" as the process of creating balance between our mental formulas and the new information we encounter, and "disequilibrium" as the result of inability to manage new information by assimilation, i.e., by modifying discrepant information so that it fits into our current knowledge base, and/or by accommodation, i.e., by modifying our current mental formulas and expanding our knowledge base. See Jean Piaget, *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures: The Central Problem of Intellectual Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

arising from the process of Italy's unification.⁸ The present essay aims to contribute to such efforts by offering an ecocritical reading of “Uno spirito in un lampone” (“A Spirit in a Raspberry”), one of the stories published in Tarchetti's *Racconti fantastici* (1869).⁹ The approach adopted in this investigation is ecocritical in the basic sense that it examines ecological themes: nature, in fact, plays a crucial role in the story, which has been largely neglected by critics. More importantly, it can also be defined as ecocritical in the broader sense of a method of inquiry inspired by fundamental ecological principles: the recognition of the material conditions of all phenomena; the appreciation of diversity, complexity, and interconnectedness;¹⁰ the choice of the principle of relevance over the pursuit of originality; the concern over the negative consequences of imbalanced relationships with the other driven by “the compulsion to conquer, humanize, control, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing”;¹¹ and the valorization of life-sustaining energy, based on the notion that reality is constantly changing, and that literature (as food for thought) cannot only reflect change, but be itself a force of change.¹²

While a narrow focus on ecological themes may result in a reductive, possibly distorting approach, and hence in misappropriation—i.e., searching the text for elements that are relevant to our present concerns/sensibility and ascribing our value sets to the text—a method of inquiry inspired by ecological principles aims to ground the text in its own complex cultural context, including the material culture of non-literary experiences. This is the aim of the following analysis, which is accordingly structured around two main questions. What are the cultural and social productions, conditions, and issues that inspire Tarchetti's work? And how does his writing—in particular, his reflections on and emplotment of the relationship between reality and the imagination—contribute to the development of the fantastic mode? “Uno spirito in un lampone” offers fertile ground to address these questions from an ecocritical perspective. As we shall see, the story puts into question the natural order and, by pointing to a connection between the treatment of women and the treatment of nature, exposes imbalances and abuses in the established order of social structures and institutions.

⁸ See, most notably, Lawrence Venuti, “Introduction,” in *Fantastic Tales* by I. U. Tarchetti, ed. and trans. Lawrence Venuti (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 1–19; David Del Principe, *Rebellion, Death, and Aesthetics in Italy: The Demons of Scapigliatura* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); Francesca Billiani, “Delusional Identities: The Politics of the Italian Gothic and Fantastic in Igino Ugo Tarchetti's Trilogy *Amore nell'arte* and Luigi Gualdo's Short Stories, ‘Allucinazione,’ ‘La canzone di Weber’ and ‘Narcisa,’” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008): 480–499; and *Ibid.*, “Il testo fantasticizzato e goticizzato come metafora della destrutturazione del discorso ‘nazione’: Attorno agli scrittori scapigliati,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011).

⁹ The collection included five short stories, all presumably composed between the end of 1867 and the beginning of 1868.

¹⁰ According to the first law of ecology, as famously defined by Commoner, everything is connected to everything else. See Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

¹¹ William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and H. Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105–123, 112. This article originally appeared in *Iowa Review* 9, no. 1 (1978): 71–86.

¹² See the seminal articulations of these principles in Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology,” and Hubert Zapf, “Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts with Examples from American Literature,” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 17 (2001): 85–100. I am especially interested in Rueckert's approach to the creative imagination as a renewable energy-source that sustains the human community, and the literary text as stored energy that can be released by reading, teaching, and critical discourse.

Spirited Nature: Haunting the Hunter

“Uno spirito in un lampone” features a first-person narrator whose ostensible role is to lend credence to the incredible, and who turns out to serve as an intermediary between the readers and the source of the story, undisclosed until the end. At the outset, he states the intention to narrate, with as much detail as possible, the prodigious event that filled with terror and marvel the population of a small village in Calabria in 1854. The protagonist is the young Baron of B., the omission of whose name, due to a “promessa formale” (“formal promise”) bolsters the initial characterization of the “avventura meravigliosa” (“marvelous adventure”) as truth.¹³ Having inherited a large estate in one of the most enchanting spots in Calabria, the Baron lives happily in his single-minded pursuit of the manly pleasures cherished by Southern, aristocratic landowners: hunting, horses, and amorous affairs. The mountainous barrier that isolates the scenario of his carefree existence suggests a limited mental horizon and insulation from any troubling influences:

Come tutti i meridionali aveva la passione della caccia, dei cavalli e dell’amore—tre passioni che spesso sembrano camminare di conserva come tre buoni puledri di posta—poteva appagare a suo talento, né s’era mai dato un pensiero di più; non aveva neppur mai immaginato che al di là di quelle creste frastagliate degli Apennini, vi fossero degli altri paesi, degli altri uomini, e delle altre passioni.

(Like all Southerners, he had a passion for hunting, horses, and love—three passions that often seem to walk in concert like three good post-colts—and he could satisfy them at his pleasure, untroubled by any other concern. Nor did he ever imagine that beyond the jagged ridges of the Apennines might lie other lands, other men, other passions).¹⁴

A few months before the prodigious event to be recounted—the narrator informs us—the blissful world of the baronial estate is briefly disrupted by a mournful affair: the mysterious disappearance of a young maid (Clara) with a reputation for loose behavior (“tresche amorose con alcuni dei domestici”; [“amorous intrigues with some of the servants”]).¹⁵ A hot-tempered gamekeeper, who had taken an unrequited fancy to the girl, arouses vague suspicions that remain unproven. The sad incident soon forgotten, the good Baron and his domestic servants resume their customary life of mindless joy and tranquility until it is again, and most radically, disrupted one fateful November morning. Vaguely upset by a bad dream (an omen of things to come?), the Baron decides to go hunting, with his dogs as sole companions, to settle accounts with the wild pigeons that have dared alight on his sown field. But the hunting expedition turns into a punishing experience for the Baron, who finds himself engaged in an uneven battle against nature. The soggy furrows of the grassless field impede his progress despite his “impenetrable” boots.¹⁶ And the pigeons, with a vexing display of military cunning, challenge and neutralize the hunter’s dogged efforts to persecute them (“i colombi avevano appostate qua e là le loro

¹³ Iginio Tarchetti, “Uno spirito in un lampone,” in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 2, ed. Enrico Ghidetti (Bologna: Cappelli, 1967), 73–85, 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

sentinelle avanzate, precisamente come avrebbe fatto un bravo reggimento della vecchia guardia imperiale”;¹⁷ [“the pigeons had positioned their forward sentries in various places, exactly as a good regiment of the old imperial guard would have done”]). Tired and thirsty, the Baron seeks refreshment by eating the ripe berries of a lush raspberry bush, which oddly grows in the barren field. Soon thereafter he begins experiencing singular phenomena that are described as manifestations of a doubling of his personality:

E che cosa sono questi strani desiderî che sento, queste volontà che non ho mai avute, questa specie di confusione e di duplicità che provo in tutti i miei sensi? Sarei io pazzo? . . . Vediamo, riordiniamo le nostre idee . . . Le nostre idee! Sì perfettamente . . . perché sento che queste idee non sono tutte mie. Però . . . è presto detto riordinarle! Non è possibile, sento nel cervello qualche cosa che si è disorganizzata, cioè . . . dirò meglio . . . che si è organizzato diversamente da prima . . . qualche cosa di superfluo, di esuberante; una cosa che vuol farsi posto nella testa, che non fa male, ma che pure spinge, urta in modo assai penoso le pareti del cranio . . . Parmi di essere un uomo doppio. Un uomo doppio! Che stranezza! E pure . . . sì, senza dubbio . . . capisco in questo momento come si possa essere un uomo doppio.

(And what are these strange desires I feel, these wishes I have never had, this sort of confusion and doubleness I am experiencing in all my senses? Could it be that I am crazy? . . . Let us see, let us reorganize our thoughts . . . Our thoughts! Yes, that’s right . . . because I feel as if these ideas are not all mine. But . . . reorganizing them is sooner said than done! It’s not possible; I feel something disorganized in my brain, or more precisely, organized differently than before . . . something superfluous, exuberant; something that wants to make room for itself in my head, that doesn’t cause harm and yet pushes, knocks very painfully against the walls of my skull . . . I feel as if I am a double man. A double man! How strange! And yet . . . yes, no doubt . . . I understand now how one can be double).¹⁸

The “strange” transformation affects sensibility, emotional response, mental functioning, and social behavior in ways that are clearly gendered as feminine: the baron experiences vanity, susceptibility to natural beauty, fear of violence, pity for the hunted birds, and attraction toward men (known as a serial womanizer, he blushes like a maiden at the sight of strapping lads). Class distinctions are also destabilized, as he feels compelled to treat commoners with familiarity and affection, as if they were his peers.

The doubling has a paralyzing effect on the Baron’s willpower, as two wills compete for dominance.¹⁹ His powers of feeling and empathic understanding, however, are progressively

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁹ In his study on the theme of the double, “The Double Within,” Matthew Reza argues that Tarchetti’s approach is original because, unlike the external doppelgängers of nineteenth-century fantastic literature that emerge from the host, his internal doubles are distinguished by their difference rather than by their similarity to the hosts. See Matthew Reza, “The Double Within: Coexistent Minds and the Fantastic in Ugo Tarchetti,” *Romance Studies* 36, no. 4 (2018): 167–179.

expanded to the point of reaching an epiphany that transcends the boundaries of individual life through love:

[E]gli comprese in quel momento che cosa fosse la grande unità, l'immensa complessività dell'amore, il quale essendo nelle leggi inesorabili della vita un sentimento diviso fra due, non può essere compreso da ciascuno che per metà. Era la fusione piena e completa di due spiriti, fusione di cui l'amore non è che una aspirazione, e le dolcezze dell'amore un'ombra, un'eco, un sogno di quelle dolcezze.

(At that moment he understood the great unity, the immense totality of love, which is a sentiment divided in two by the inexorable laws of life, and therefore can be only halfway understood by any one person. It was the full and complete fusion of two spirits, a fusion toward which love is just an aspiration, and the delights of love a shadow, an echo, a dream of those delights).²⁰

This experience of spiritual fusion leads to the climax of the Baron's metamorphosis, which takes place in front of Clara's portrait, under the eyes of terrified members of the household and the community, gathered at the castle to witness the Baron's follies. Drawn to the portrait by an irresistible force, the Baron assumes the features of the slain girl and gives her a voice by exposing her killer, the gamekeeper, who cries out Clara's name, faints, and, on regaining consciousness, confesses to murdering the girl "in un eccesso di gelosia" ("in a jealous fit").²¹ The normal order of things is thereafter swiftly restored. The Baron is liberated from spirit possession with a strong dose of an emetic that makes him vomit the undigested berries; Clara's body is disinterred and given a proper "Christian burial"; and the killer is sentenced to twelve years of hard labor. In concluding the story, the narrator declares that he heard the marvelous tale from the killer himself, two years before the completion of his sentence.²²

Impenetrable Boots / Penetrable Boundaries

The repeated characterization of the Baron's boots as "impenetrabili" ("impenetrable")²³ a seemingly negligible detail, provides a useful point of departure for an in-depth analysis of the story. Why does Tarchetti focus attention on the impenetrable quality of this item of the hunter's

²⁰ Tarchetti, "Uno spirito in un lampone," 82–83.

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² In Venuti's translation, the convict persuades the narrator to visit him in the penal institution in Cosenza, presumably to tell him the "marvelous tale" (Iginio Tarchetti, "A Spirit in a Raspberry," in *Fantastic Tales*, ed. and trans. Lawrence Venuti [San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992], 41–51, 51). In the Italian original, however, the narrator does not indicate a reason for visiting the penitentiary; hence his encounter with the convict appears to be a fortuitous result of the visit, not its purpose: "Nel 1865 io lo conobbi nello stabilimento carcerario di Cosenza che mi era [sic] recato a visitare. Mancavagli allora due anni a compiere la sua pena; e fu da lui stesso che intesi questo racconto meraviglioso" (136; "In 1865, I met him in the penal institution at Cosenza which I had gone to visit. At that time, he had two years remaining on his sentence. It was he himself who told me this marvelous story").

²³ Waterproofing was a relatively recent invention. In 1835, the *Nuovo dizionario universale e ragionato di agricoltura* recognized the inventors of the technique of waterproofing, in particular Carlo Elli, who received an award in 1830 for discovering a method for rendering shoes impermeable and "per aver composti degli stivali da caccia assai pieghevoli e leggieri" ("for making very flexible, lightweight hunting boots"). See Francesco Gera, ed., *Nuovo dizionario universale e ragionato di agricoltura, economia*, Vol. 3 (Venice: Giuseppe Antonelli, 1835), 91.

gear? The detail ironically foreshadows a central theme of the story, the instability and penetrability of boundaries. The image of the impenetrable boots sinking in mud heralds a process of destabilization and transformation whereby the divisions of human/non-human, life/death, mind/matter are undermined, and boundaries of class and gender—between the self-possessed, property-owning master and the servant woman killed for resisting sexual possession—are crossed. This theme is developed through instances of metamorphosis involving nature: the figurative anthropomorphization of pigeons and the literal transfusion of the slain girl’s spirit into a plant. Metamorphosis here highlights non-human agency that can be viewed as a means of nature’s “revenge.” The field of action is land that has been developed exclusively for human consumption. When the avid hunter ventures into the sown ground to punish the trespassing pigeons, his attack against nature backfires on him. Acting as a military formation, the birds cleverly foil the attack; and fatigue from treading on soggy, deforested soil causes the hunter to crave the prodigious berries for refreshment. As a result of the Baron’s attack against nature, the crime against a woman is also exposed and punished. Nature avenges the gamekeeper’s victim by taunting another “manly man” and, ironically, by turning the latter into its medium: having ingested the fruit of the plant sprouted from the victim’s breast, the Baron becomes a sexually hybrid prodigy—an extraordinary change with positive effects both on himself (the expansion of his capacities) and the community (the advancement of justice).

Some of the previously mentioned ecological principles appear to be at work in this fantastic plot: the focus on the material conditions of all phenomena, including a prodigious event such as spirit possession, which in this story literalizes the adage “you are what you eat”,²⁴ the valorization of diversity, complexity, and interconnectedness, which is evident in the positive consequences of the Baron’s fantastic experience; and the implicit lesson that negative consequences result from an imbalanced (anthropocentric and androcentric) relationship with the other driven by the toxic compulsion to control and exploit—a lesson that in the story exposes associations between woman and nature in the symbolic order and in the power system of patriarchal society.²⁵ Consequently, the story may also appear to support the ecocritical principle

²⁴ On the history of the adage and the changing cultural significance of the relation between food and identity, see Steven Shapin, “You Are What You Eat: Historical Changes in Ideas about Food and Identity,” *Historical Research* 87, no. 237 (August 2014): 377–392. The notion that nutrition has a bearing on both health and state of mind can be traced to various sources. For the present discussion, the most relevant is Feuerbach’s “Das Geheimnis des Opfers, oder der Mensch ist was er isst” (1862, “The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is What He Eats”). See Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, “Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder der Mensch ist was er isst,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, eds. W. Bolin and F. Jodl, 10 vols., 2nd ed. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Verlag, 1959-1960), 10: 41–67. Here the famous phrase “man is what he eats” refers to the idea that “men, as living organisms, are not divisible into bodies and souls” (Melvin Chernob, “Feuerbach’s ‘Man Is What He Eats’: A Rectification,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24, no. 3 [July-September 1963]: 397–406, 406). This idea—a fundamental premise of Feuerbach’s formulation of a naturalized ethics in which the notions of will, spirit, and self-fulfillment are grounded in natural laws, sensuous motivations, and intersubjective relationships—is consistent with the ecological principle of the material conditions of all phenomena.

²⁵ The focus on the negative consequences of imbalanced relationships with the other—one of the ecological principles invoked above—is based on the premise that anthropocentric and androcentric hierarchies are interconnected, a premise which, as Del Principe points out, Ecofeminism shares with EcoGothic studies: “An EcoGothic approach poses a challenge to a familiar Gothic subject—nature—taking a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear. Ecofeminism has played a key role in shaping such a perspective, providing a theoretical base that, by exposing interlocking androcentric and anthropocentric hierarchies, misogyny and speciesism, seeks to question the mutual oppression of women, animals, and nature” (David Del Principe, “Introduction: The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century,” *Gothic Studies* 16, no. 1 [May 2014]: 1–8, 1).

that the creative imagination can be a source of life-sustaining energy for both the individual and the community: a means of addressing imbalances, a positive force for change.

One can trace more contextually specific ecological implications of the story by noting that concerns about the relationship between deforestation and hydrogeological disruption are manifest in the parliamentary debate on forestry legislation and management in post-unification Italy. The dominant approach to the question, informed by concerns for economic development and the primacy of private property rights, was countered by those who argued that the exercise of those rights should be limited to protect woodlands in consideration of their beneficial impact, particularly in terms of hydrogeological protection. The debate was influenced by George Perkins Marsh, a pioneer of environmentalism and an advocate for women's rights who served as the first U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Italy (1861–1882). His seminal book, *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864), played a leading role in recognizing the interdependency of the natural world, the disruptive changes caused by human actions, and the need to restore disturbed harmonies.²⁶ Recent studies on the “subaltern ecologies” of Southern Italy have shown that, in the aftermath of unification, the interrelated factors of internal colonialism and environmental devastation played a major role in social unrest.²⁷ It is important to remember that during his brief military career Tarchetti was deployed in Southern Italy (1861–1863), and therefore witnessed both the difficult economic conditions that gave rise to banditry and the repressive response of the national government. It is also important to underscore that Tarchetti's social critique was not limited to the “backward” South. To this effect, we can draw a relevant connection between “Uno spirito in un lampone” and the novel *Paolina* (1867), set in Milan, in which the ruthless Marquis of B. (a hunter, like the Baron of B.) plays a central role as evil predator of innocent young women. The rape that the Marquis commits out of pique is presented as an abhorrent symptom of the moral dissolution that results from social injustice—the unbalanced distribution of resources and punishment.

Normalcy Restored

The previous considerations on the role of the creative imagination as a positive force for change lead us to reexamine the conclusion of the story, in particular the rapid transition from the climactic experience of cognitive expansion to the anti-climactic restoration of normalcy. The former evokes the idea of Romantic cognosis and anticipates the decadent trope of *degenderation* as defined by Barbara Spackman: the dissolution of distinctions—between art and symptom, health and madness, man and woman, degeneration and evolution—as a figure for psychic alterity, a precondition for creativity.²⁸ The latter reduces the experience of cognitive expansion to a freakish disturbance of the normal ways of the world—in other words, “the master narrative's demand for differentiations and orderly progress.”²⁹ But the final return to order is cast in an ambiguous light by the attribution of the story to the killer who is serving the

²⁶ See Bruno Vecchio, “Un documento in materia forestale nell'Italia del secondo Ottocento. I dibattiti parlamentari, 1869–1877,” *Storia urbana* 69, no. 4 (1994): 177–204; and Marzia Marchi, *Un precursore dell'ambientalismo nell'Italia dell'Ottocento. Il geografo americano George Perkins Marsh* (Bologna: Università degli studi di Bologna, 2019), <https://amsacta.unibo.it>.

²⁷ See Roberto Sciarelli, “Subaltern Ecologies in Southern Italy,” *Ambiente & Societade*, 24 (2021): 1–25.

²⁸ Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), viii, 25.

²⁹ Julian Carter, “Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology and the Primitive Pervert,” in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. by Vernon A. Rosario (London: Routledge, 1997), 155–176, 163.

remainder of a twelve-year sentence, a framing device that, in addition to deferring the authenticity of the marvelous story,³⁰ calls attention to the imbalance between the fate of the victim of a heinous crime and the perpetrator's fate as adjudicated by the community. This question has not been previously addressed, as scholars tend to focus on the fantastic experience of the Baron—a perspective that risks reproducing the anthropocentric and androcentric bias he embodies in the beginning of the story.

Through a different, ecocritical lens, we have examined how the Baron's transformation brings about vital change by giving voice to the voiceless: non-human nature, a silenced female member of the community, and a stifled side of his own nature.³¹ The story's conclusion, however, brings again into focus the question of (im)balance. Spirited nature, embodied by the slain girl, is reassuringly exorcised and buried through a scientific remedy and a religious ritual; and there is no evidence that the narrow mental horizons of the baron have been permanently expanded. The final revelation about the source of the story, furthermore, calls into question the role of the justice system as a model of, and means for maintaining social equilibrium. The significant detail of the lenient sentence, in fact, demands consideration of the laws effective at the time (1854 according to the preamble) in Calabria. The mildness of the sentence is puzzling considering that homicide was punishable with death in the absence of mitigating circumstances, both according to the 1819 Penal code of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies,³² and the 1859 Code of the Kingdom of Sardinia,³³ which was extended to the rest of Italy after Unification. By staging the conclusion of the story in a penal institution, and by specifically mentioning the limited extent of the punishment, Tarchetti seems to imply that the severity of the crime, according to the current legal system, was diminished by mitigating circumstances, presumably the blinding rage provoked by the girl's promiscuous behavior and/or rejection of her suitor. It is worth mentioning, in this regard, that the unequal legal standing of women in the newly constituted nation-state was sanctioned by the *Codice di Famiglia*, or Family Code (substantially

³⁰ On the multifarious deployment of this narrative device in the *Racconti fantastici*, see Matthew Reza, "Reporting the Fantastic: Deferral and Pan-determinism in Ugo Tarchetti," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 53, no. 4 (October 2017): 430–443. I concur with Reza's argument that the mechanism of deferral/displacement of the impossible plays a significant role in accommodating the fantastic and the real, and in mediating "between unquestioning acceptance and doubt, which in turn reflects cultural attitudes towards pseudoscience in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Italy: some were sceptical, others accepting of the impossible" (438).

³¹ Tarchetti commented on the importance of living in harmony with nature and on stern men's tendency to disparage natural emotions in a column published in *L'Emporio Pittoresco* (15–21 March, 1868), the periodical he edited from January to June 1868. The column, entitled "Conversazioni," consisted of fragmentary comments on a wide range of subjects (Iginio Tarchetti, "Conversazioni," *L'Emporio Pittoresco* vol. 8, no. 185 [15–21 March 1868]: 162–163). Tarchetti's concern over disharmony and imbalance can be evinced from various topics addressed in these pieces, including political conflict, institutional instability, socio-economic injustice, and the health benefits of skating as illustration of the argument that balance is first law of life (Ibid., "Conversazioni," *L'Emporio Pittoresco*, vol. 8, no. 176 [12–18 January, 1868]: 18–19). On the connection between Tarchetti's creative practices and his work as a journalist, see Cinzia Sartini Blum, "Tarchetti's *fame*: Revisiting the Myth of the Scapigliato as Misfit Genius," *Italica* 92, no. 2 (2015): 337–357.

³² See *Codice per lo Regno delle Due Sicilie. Parte Seconda: Leggi Penali* (Naples: Real Tipografia del Ministero di Stato della Cancelleria Generale, 1819). Death was prescribed for parricide, infanticide, and various kinds of premeditated murder. The fourth degree of "ferri" (hard labor) was prescribed for other kinds of voluntary homicide (article 355). The sentence could be reduced if the homicide was provoked by physical injuries or other unspecified "misdeeds."

³³ See *Codice penale per gli Stati di S. M. il Re di Sardegna* (Turin: Stamperia reale, 1859), which was also published in the Sonzogno series "Biblioteca Legale" advertised in *L'Emporio Pittoresco* at the time of Tarchetti's editorship. Articles 522–553 stated that voluntary homicide was punished with death or hard labor for life. Article 562 recognized heat of passion upon provocation as a mitigating circumstance.

inspired by the Napoleonic Code), enacted in 1865, the year in which the narrator reports having heard the marvelous tale. At a time of destabilizing developments both within and across Italy's borders, including women's political agitation and demands for rights,³⁴ Italian Family Law reaffirmed the patriarchal family as the foundation of social order by sanctioning traditional notions of woman's "natural" state of subjection to patriarchal authority, and by incorporating woman's legal personality into that of the husband through marriage, her "destiny." By extension, therefore, the lack of proportionality between crime and punishment highlighted in the story conjures the social imbalances perpetuated by the system of power that, in the aftermath of Italy's Risorgimento, responded to actual and feared change with a rigid commitment to repressive sociopolitical practices under the guise of upholding the natural order. As art historian Alexander Potts cogently put it, "If one thing consistently characterizes ideas of natural order, is that they are not permanent, but arise out of permanent conceptions of social order."³⁵

While a seemingly negligible detail in the story's conclusion points to the broad question of women's social state and legal standing in post-unification Italy, an initial detail points, more narrowly, to possible autobiographical, self-ironic reverberations: the promiscuous maid's name, Clara, was also the name of the woman with whom Tarchetti had a passionate relationship in 1865 (the date indicated at the end of the story). Considering that Iginio was reportedly devastated when his beloved Clara suddenly broke off the relationship after seven months,³⁶ one might hypothesize a personal source of inspiration both for the murder that serves as the premise of the story and for the leniency displayed towards the spurned lover's crime of passion in the end. Entertaining such a hypothesis, however, is not tantamount to endorsing the early commentators' tendency to focus on Tarchetti's sentimental life as his main or sole source of literary inspiration. Rather, the textual and contextual complexities I seek to explore support the argument that Tarchetti's work is most productively approached, in keeping with ecocritical principles, by tracing a network of ties with the cultural environment and never losing sight of the material conditions in which a particular text was produced.

Fruitful Grafts

I use the heading "fruitful grafts" to introduce my approach to the question of Tarchetti's sources of inspiration. The graft's traditional range as figuration, in fact, includes the art of writing with which it shares etymological roots—*graphein*; and the metaphor conveys the idea of the "infinite possibilities of mutation" which, as Calvino noted in his reflections on folktales, constitute "the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things."³⁷ Accordingly, the expression "fruitful grafts" directs attention, not to questions of originality or lack thereof, but rather to the

³⁴ In the years leading up to the publication of *Racconti fantastici* there were evident signs of the growing movement for women's emancipation. See Gisela Bock, *Women in European History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002) and Nadia Maria Filippini and Anna Scattino, eds., *Una democrazia incompiuta. Donne e politica in Italia dall'Ottocento ai nostri giorni* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007). In Italy, one of the most prominent figures of the movement was Clara Maffei, whose salon Tarchetti attended.

³⁵ Alexander Potts, "Natural Order and the Call of the Wild: The Politics of Animal Picturing," *Oxford Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (1990): 12–33, 12.

³⁶ See Francesco Giarelli, *Vent'anni di giornalismo. 1868-1888* (Cairo: Codogno, 1898), 210.

³⁷ Italo Calvino, *Italian Folktales: Selected and Retold by Italo Calvino*, trans. by George Martin (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), xix. On the figurative range of the graft, see Vin Nardizzi, "Graft(ing)," in *Critical Semantics: New Transnational Keywords*, ed. by Anston Bosman (Stanford: Arcade, 2018), <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/grafting>.

generative power of the graft: the vital intersection of different planes of knowledge, the fruitful (in)fusion of diverse source materials, and the functional permutation of infinite combinatory possibilities.

Various studies have identified a plurality of possible sources for “Uno spirito in un lampone”: borrowings from foreign fantastic fiction; traces of canonical literary models; suggestions from fairy tales and folktales (most notably, the topos of the discovery of a murderer through a supernatural event); and echoes of contemporary debates on science and pseudo-science (like many of his contemporaries, Tarchetti was interested in spiritism).³⁸ Such a plurality, however, has been mostly viewed as a sign of decline, rather than fruitful evolution of the fantastic: evidence of the depletion of the potential of an imported genre, leading to the conclusion that the significance of Tarchetti’s experiments is confined to the marginal phenomenon of Scapigliatura.

Some scholars, most influentially Lawrence Venuti and David Del Principe, have recognized the broader relevance of Tarchetti’s fantastic tales. While endorsing the notion that Tarchetti’s work relies consistently on foreign texts in the Gothic tradition, Venuti affirmed the value of “the sheer inventiveness and profound social commitment of his writing.”³⁹ Referring both to the Anglo-American context and to later developments in the Italian context, he measured the significance of Tarchetti’s work as an anticipation of postmodern developments exemplified by Buzzati, Calvino, and other practitioners of the mode that Calvino dubbed “mental” or “intellectual” fantastic.⁴⁰ In the collection of Tarchetti’s fantastic tales that he edited and translated, Venuti identifies “Le Bourgmaster en bouteille” (1862, “The Burgomaster in a Bottle”) by Émile Erckmann and Louis-Alexandre Chatrian as the main source of “Spirito in un lampone,” and includes his English translation to facilitate comparison.⁴¹ Pointing to the vitality of the graft, he comments that Tarchetti drew upon the French writers’ “witty use of metempsychosis to lambaste a petty bureaucrat, but he substantially revised it to examine an Italian problem: the complacency of the southern aristocracy.”⁴²

³⁸ Traces of canonical literary models identified by scholars include the tale of Daphne and other Ovidian tales of metamorphosis, the marvelous episode of Polidoro in Virgil’s *Eneid*, Dante’s *selva dei suicidi*, the myrtle bush that entraps Astolfo in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, and the enchanted forest in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*. On these and other possible sources of inspiration, see Giuseppe Autiero, “Una (disorganica) summa di topoi fantastici: ‘Uno spirito in un lampone’ di Igino Ugo Tarchetti,” in *La tentazione del fantastico: Racconti italiani da Gualdo a Svevo*, eds. Antonio D’Elia et al. (Cosenza: Pellegrini Editore, 2007), 83–90. See also Moretti, “Igino Ugo Tarchetti e il racconto fantastico.” Especially noteworthy is the connection that Moretti draws between Tarchetti’s interest in spiritism and his experiments in the fantastic (22).

³⁹ Lawrence Venuti, “Introduction,” in *Fantastic Tales* by I. U. Tarchetti, ed. and trans. Lawrence Venuti (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 1–19, 16.

⁴⁰ As editor of *Racconti fantastici dell’Ottocento* (Milan: Mondadori, 1983), Calvino distinguished between “visionary” and “mental” forms of the fantastic—the former dominant at the beginning of the nineteenth-century century, the latter prevalent at the end. See also Italo Calvino, “Definizioni di territori: il fantastico” in *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 216: “Nel Novecento è un uso intellettuale (e non più emozionale) del fantastico che s’impone: come gioco, ironia, ammicco, e anche come meditazione sugli incubi o i desideri nascosti dell’uomo contemporaneo” (“In the twentieth century an intellectual [no longer emotional] use of the fantastic becomes dominant: as play, irony, wink, and also as meditation on the hidden nightmares and desires of contemporary man”).

⁴¹ Émile Erckmann and Louis-Alexandre Chatrian, “The Burgomaster in a Bottle,” in *Fantastic Tales* by I. U. Tarchetti, ed. and trans. Lawrence Venuti (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 147–161.

⁴² Venuti, “Introduction,” in *Fantastic Tales*, 13. Other scholars have interpreted the Baron’s failure to fulfil his duty (to provide protection/order) as a symptom of the decline of the Southern aristocracy, thus highlighting the significance of the semi-feudal Southern setting as “la terra dell’alterità, della lontananza, della magia e

Further exploration of this comparison lends valuable insights. The main connection with the presumed hypotext is indeed traceable to the primary thematic nucleus of metempsychosis, as indicated by Venuti. More specifically, the fantastic thematic core consists in the temporary transmigration of a spiritual entity into a living body through a natural process: the decomposition of human remains into nutrients for a plant material that is in turn ingested by a human being. Wine in one story, and raspberries in the other, serve the supernatural mediatory function of conduits between the material and the spiritual realm: the “bon vivant” Hippel, travel companion of the narrator, is possessed by the spirit of the deceased burgomaster as a result of drinking the fermented product of the vine rooted in the burgomaster’s grave; and the happy-go-lucky Baron B. is possessed by his maid’s spirit after eating the fruits of the bush that had taken root on her corpse. There is a possible figurative source for this thematic nucleus: the long-standing analogical link between plant fluid and human blood. There is also, more importantly, a religious precedent: the doctrine of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the sacred mystery of the Eucharist. By drawing a connection with the eucharistic ritual we can highlight a paradigm shift from the traditional religious plane to a new pseudoscientific cognitive dimension: the transcendent aspect is sublated into worldly experience as both stories ground a supernatural phenomenon in an ecological cycle—the food chain through which nature recycles itself in a balancing act between life and death.

Since the sacrament of the Eucharist is celebrated as a channel of divine grace—a means of spiritual renewal through communion—the comparison between religious belief and pseudoscientific fantasy raises an important question: Do the phenomena staged in the two stories also serve as a means by which a person can be bettered? While neither text presents evidence that the possessed individual is ultimately changed for the better, both tales offer the reader food for thought through irony, romantically understood as an epistemological, aesthetic, and practical antidote to excess. In “Le Bourgmeistre en bouteille,” the host body is under the sway of two conflicting mindsets: the spirit of a mean miser struggles with the mind of a self-indulgent epicurean. Irony here may teach a lesson about the value of equilibrium by exposing the toxic effects of contrary manifestations of excess: avarice (excessive/wrongful collection), of which are guilty both the miserly burgomaster who in life only cared about enlarging his property, and also the dishonest gravedigger who sells the grapes imbued with the burgomaster’s “quintessence”; and gluttony (excessive consumption), which drives the narrator’s travel companion to greedily drink a noxious wine. The first-person narrator contributes to an overall sense of equilibrium: his tone alternates between horror and humor; his advice moderates the reactions of his crazed companion; and his comments about liquor’s “magical power” to inspire “fantasy and even phantasmagoria” hint at a realistic explanation for Hippel’s ravings.⁴³ Tarchetti’s story also combines, ironically, opposing inclinations and principles by showing how the spirit of a sensitive young maid expands the capacities of her narrow-minded master. But here attention is directed to questions of gender, most notably the relationship between gender, perception, and imagination. This is not the case in “Le Bourgmeistre en bouteille,” unless we take into consideration the story’s paratext, where authorship is credited to Émile Erckmann-Chatrion—the joint pseudonym under which Erckmann and Chatrion became well known.⁴⁴ An

dell’arretratezza antropologica” (Autiero, “Una [disorganica] summa di topoi fantastici,” 90; [“as the land of otherness, distance, magic, and anthropological backwardness”]).

⁴³ Émile Erckmann and Louis-Alexandre Chatrion, “The Burgomaster in a Bottle,” in *Fantastic Tales*, 155.

⁴⁴ Émile Erckmann-Chatrion, “Le Bourgmeistre en bouteille,” in *Histoires et contes fantastiques* (Strasbourg: Dannbach, 1849). When the story was reprinted in the journal *L’Artiste* (June 22, 1856), Erckmann was credited

article penned by Keningale Cook for the literary periodical *London Society* shows how this pseudonym may have influenced the authors' contemporaries to view the literary partnership as an ideal "marriage of completion,"⁴⁵ and the duo as two halves of a whole combining dualistically gendered capacities: the fertile imagination of the sensitive (feminine) Erckmann and the logical mind of the tough (masculine) Chatrian, "critic and subduer of Erckmann's vagaries."⁴⁶ The article portrays the partners' physiognomy in detail, emphasizing the virile, leonine bearing of Chatrian and the feminine features of Erckmann (his "delicately formed" face and "sensitive mouth").⁴⁷ In closing Cook attributes the power of the literary partnership to the "mystic, strange support their mated intellects afford each other."⁴⁸

Circling back to the purpose of this paratextual digression, we can now point to a previously unexplored connection with the text that has been broadly recognized as the main source of inspiration for "Uno spirito in un lampone." Tarchetti's story brings to the fore the trope only indirectly evoked by Erckmann-Chatrian's work: the communion of complementary masculine and feminine features (gender ambiguity) as a figure for psychic alterity and creativity—a trope that in the transition from the Romantic to the Decadent imagination lost connotations of fecund interfusion (tethered to the Romantic ideal of an organic, harmonious whole of diverse parts) becoming increasingly associated with a rhetoric of sickness.⁴⁹ "Uno spirito in un lampone" anticipates this evolution of the trope inasmuch as the Romantic notion of the harmonious union of the masculine and the feminine is disturbed by appearing in the context of ghostly possession.

Del Principe connected various elements of the story to the modern sensibility of Decadent aestheticism by arguing that the images of the mirror and the portrait are indicative of the aesthete's desire to enhance life with art, and by focusing on thematic offshoots of the trope of gender ambiguity: existential duality, cross-sexuality, homoeroticism, and the association of effeminacy with sensitivity to non-violence—the "'feminine' policy of pacifism."⁵⁰ Another productive line of inquiry, which I will pursue in the remainder of this essay, is to examine the role of gender in relation to one of the questions I set out to investigate: the embattled relationship between reality and the imagination. Since a fundamental goal of ecocriticism is to explore connections between world and texts, this investigation leads us to examine how

with the authorship of a non-existent German original translated by Chatrian, probably to benefit from the popularity of German fantastic literature. Most of the collaborators' later work was signed "Erckmann-Chatrian."

⁴⁵ Keningale Cook, "French Novelists: IX. Erckmann-Chatrian," *London society*, 25 (January 1874): 490–499, 490.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 498.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 491.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 498.

⁴⁹ The theme of sexually ambiguity in conjunction with the image of the berries recalls Fragoletta, the sexually ambiguous protagonist of the homonymous novel by Henri de Latouche (1829), which ushered a series of androgynous figures in French romantic literature. Smith highlighted the connection between gender ambiguity and literary anti-conformism as follows: "Latouche's innovative treatment in Fragoletta of the androgynous figure and of the novel as genre heralded later Romantic representations of sexual ambiguity by Balzac (*La Zambinella*, *Seraphita/Seraphitus*) and Gautier (*Madeleine de Maupin/Theodore*), among others, and situates him as a forerunner in the development of an ambiguous aesthetic. The character's ambivalent nature stirs our imagination and leads us to question established principles of sexual difference, just as the text's unconventional form causes us to re-evaluate a prejudice of sacred classical unity. The Romantic androgyne thus functions as a signifier whose referent can be seen as the subversive and revolutionary spirit of a new generation of authors who sought to escape literary conformity and to expose the injustice and the fallibility of cultural and intellectual absolutism." See Nigel E. Smith, "Androgyny and The Refusal of Classicism: Rereading Fragoletta," *Romance Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1996): 81–93, 93.

⁵⁰ Del Principe, *Rebellion, Death, and Aesthetics in Italy*, 121.

Tarchetti and, more broadly, Scapigliatura address what may be viewed as a quintessential ecocritical question.

The Embattled Imagination

To pursue this line of inquiry we need to consider the broader context of Tarchetti's writings, which provide various access points—both inventive and reflective—to the question of the relationship between reality and the imagination. One particularly useful point is offered by the initial reflections in “Riccardo Weitzen,” a story that was published in the collection *Amore nell'arte* (1869, Love in Art) but could have been also included in *Racconti fantastici* since it deals with the fantastic theme of a posthumous revenge. In his introduction, before proceeding to argue that the existence of paranormal phenomena can be neither proven nor disproven (a question that is obviously relevant to the story), the first-person narrator/author's persona muses about the role of the imagination as a driving force of progress (a question that is not overtly related to the story). The human experience, he argues, is characterized by a battle between the imaginary and the real world, a notion consistent with a late-Romantic, pre-Decadent understanding of the relationship between art and reality. But this notion is complicated by what follows. Positing a continuum between the perceivable and the imaginary world, he envisions the potential for great modern literature to work towards the progressive goal of human happiness by “fusing” the two forces—the real and the ideal—that pull humanity in opposite directions:

Come non vi è nulla di individuato, di isolato, nell'immensità delle masse che compongono l'universo, ma tutto si riunisce e si sfuma per mezzo delle piccole masse intermedie, non potrebbe essere che l'ideale e il realismo si congiungessero tra di loro per certe leggi che a noi non è dato di conoscere, per certo mistero che a noi non è concesso di afferrare; e che gli uomini non facessero che definire con queste due parole i due punti estremi di questa linea, quali sono il mondo sensibile ed il mondo immaginario? Qualunque sia quel vero che a noi non è dato di percepire, egli è però ben certo che dei grandi legami esistono tra di loro. La loro conciliazione, secondo la natura umana, ha formato la lotta di tutti i tempi, come forma la lotta dell'oggi: l'umanità tende ad equilibrarsi tra queste due grandi attrazioni, come quella che si sente dominata da entrambe, e non ignora costituirsi dalla loro azione il segreto delle sue lotte e della sua vita.

La letteratura moderna, conscia di questa verità, si è rivolta alla soluzione di un grande quesito: “idealizzare il reale”; fondere assieme queste due potenze, costringere l'immaginazione, l'idea a soffermarsi sulla realtà, ad anatomizzarla, a rivestirla de' suoi colori, delle sue forme delle sue seduzioni divine. Quella grande letteratura, che è la letteratura francese: Karr, Vittor [sic] Hugo, Girardin, e più di tutti Michelet co' suoi libri divini dell'amore e della donna, hanno dimostrata possibile questa conciliazione, indirizzandola allo scopo dell'umana felicità.

(As there is nothing identified, nothing isolated in the immensity of matter that makes up the universe, and instead everything gathers and fades by way of the intermediate particles, could it be that the ideal and realism are connected to each other by certain laws that we cannot understand, for some mystery that we are not allowed to comprehend? Could it be that with these two terms men did nothing

but establish the two extreme points on a line, which are the perceivable world and the imaginary world? Whatever the truth may be that we are not in a position to discern, it is however quite certain that some strong bonds exist between them. Their reconciliation, according to human nature, caused the battle of all time, as it causes the battle of today: humanity tends to be balanced between these two strong pulls, as it feels controlled by both and is aware that the secret of its battles and existence is the result of their action.

Modern literature, conscious of this truth, has focused on the solution of a big issue: “idealizing the real”; that is, fusing together these two powers, forcing the imagination, the mind, to linger on reality, to anatomize it, to clothe it with its colors, with its forms, with its divine seductions. Great literature—the French literature by Karr, Victor Hugo, Girardin, and above all Michelet with his divine books on love and women—has proved this conciliation possible, steering it towards the goal of human happiness).⁵¹

Among the cohort of French authors cited in support of this argument, Jules Michelet’s books on women and love are singled out as the greatest proof that a reconciliation between the real/perceivable world and ideal/imaginary world is possible and indeed necessary for progress. We are therefore directed to Michelet’s writings on the natural and historical role of women—*L’Amour* (1859) and *La Femme* (1860)—in search of additional clues as to the kind of “conciliation” envisioned in the quoted passage. Inspired by progressive principles of democratic pantheism, Michelet radically departed from the long-standing tendency to consider women a subject unworthy of the historian’s attention by placing them instead at the center of his program for the moral regeneration of humanity. At the same time, he continued to conflate all women, as embodiments of a natural wound/lack, with archetypes of material femininity, and to view their place in society through a paternalistic lens.⁵² Despite his avowed commitment to defending women, he remained seemingly oblivious to the contemporary movement for greater gender equality. As Colette Gaudin noted, “his vision is not without ambiguity” as to the value of the feminine “natural” factor in the destiny of humanity: “He belonged indeed to the nineteenth century, an era when elevating women to poetic divinity was a mere alibi for excluding them from public life, and he converged with the Romantic ideology that idealized women while infantilizing them.”⁵³

Tarchetti’s representation of the struggle for human progress is similarly characterized by ambiguity. The charged language he uses to visualize the power that the imagination is supposed to exert—the power to “anatomize” reality and “clothe it with its colors, with its forms, with its divine seductions”—is eerily evocative of the image of reality as a beautifully seductive cadaver. There are echoes of Romanticism in the project of (re)enchancing reality through the power of aesthetic sensibility and feeling, but this pursuit is premised on, and hence complicitous with dissection of reality, a clear reverberation of both the modern approach to science that the romantics rebutted for its alienating impact, and the literary approach that it inspired. In Cristina Mazzoni’s words, “just as realism and naturalism thrive on the assumption of pathological

⁵¹ Iginio Tarchetti, “Riccardo Weitzen,” in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 1, ed. Enrico Ghidetti (Bologna: Cappelli, 1967), 598–599.

⁵² See, e.g., the chapter “No Life for Woman without Man” in *Woman (La Femme)*, trans. J. W. Palmer (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1860), 42–52.

⁵³ Colette Gaudin, “Woman, My Symbol,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 45–54. See pages 46–50.

subjects, so also, at the metaliterary level, medical practice itself is central to literary self-representation.”⁵⁴ The topic of the anatomist dissecting a beautiful female cadaver was a common one for the realist and naturalist writer, and—it is worth noting—is also treated at length, in enthusiastic terms, by Michelet, who was an eager student of anatomy.⁵⁵ This topic also figures prominently in writings by the Scapigliati. The most notable instances are Camillo Boito’s story “Un corpo” (“A Body”) and Arrigo Boito’s poem “Lezione di anatomia” (“An Anatomy Lesson”), texts in which the trope of the beautiful female cadaver is evocative of the so-called “Veneri anatomiche” (“anatomical Venuses”), the eerily sensual, life-size wax models—beautified with lustrous cascades of human hair, real eye lashes, ribbons, and pearl necklaces—that were commonly used for educational purposes at the time.⁵⁶

We can examine the deeper implications of this trope, and thus explicate further Tarchetti’s representation of the relationship between reality and the imagination, by addressing the central theme of “deathly love” in “Riccardo Weitzen” and the other two stories collected under the title *Amore nell’arte*.⁵⁷ The obsessive conjunction of love, art, and death in this collection points to complicity—namely, a shared reactionary symbolic order—between the artist’s lofty ideals and the power structures of a conservative society in the throes of modernization. The three stories connect airy abstraction (sublime perfection in love and art) with a morbid sexual urge: the longing for an ideal woman—a figure of secularized transcendence that ubiquitously appears in Romantic literature as a narcissistic projection of the artist’s aesthetic vision—turns into desire for a woman’s beautiful corpse. The artist’s deathly love, however, fails to entirely suppress the woman’s spirit, which remains as a haunting presence in the text. The connection that Tarchetti draws between idealism, necrophilia, and ghostly possession intimates that the ideal sustains, and is sustained by, the mystification and repression of contingent realities, which in modern society are no longer contained, channeled, and sublimated through a relatively stable symbolic system predicated on religious beliefs. In his quest for a self-generated ideal of perfection, the would-be autonomous, uncorrupted artist demands an “earthly analogue” of his transcendental vision and evokes his narcissistic object of desire by adopting a Romantic conceptual idiom that figures love as a disembodied proposition and the beloved as an otherworldly muse.⁵⁸ But the repressed other returns to haunt his imagination as the ghost of his guilty conscience. The inspiring lifeless woman thus reveals the workings of idealization as a form of “devivification” and a means of exploitation of the other for the sake of limitless self-expansion. I use the term “devivification” to evoke, by contrast, the ecocritical approach to the creative imagination as a renewable energy-source sustaining the human community, and its products as, in Rueckert’s words, “active, alive,

⁵⁴ Cristina Mazzoni, “Is Beauty only Skin Deep? Constructing the Female Corpse in Scapigliatura,” *Italian Culture* 12, no. 1 (1994): 175–187, 175.

⁵⁵ Michelet’s passion for anatomy is manifest in some pages of *La Femme* in which he describes impressions and reflections inspired by the sight of women’s and children’s brains (*Woman*, 44–48; 69–71).

⁵⁶ See Mazzoni, “Is Beauty only Skin Deep?,” 184. Mazzoni offers an overview of the iconographic tradition of dissection, dating back to the early fourteenth century, which—she argues—culminates in literature with “Un corpo” and “Lezione di anatomia.” On this trope, see also David Del Principe, “Scalpels and Paint Brushes: Art, Death, and ‘Decadence’ in Camillo Boito, Ugo Tarchetti and Scapigliatura,” *Romance Languages Annual* 6 (1994): 238–243.

⁵⁷ For an in-depth exploration of this theme, see Cinizia Sartini Blum, “Deathly Love: Tracing the Necro Logic of the Decadent Imagination in I.U. Tarchetti’s *Amore nell’arte*,” *Italian Culture* 35, no. 1 (2017): 21–33. For a psychoanalytical reading of the love-death-art nexus, see Angelo M. Mangini, *La voluttà crudele. Fantastico e malinconia nell’opera di Iginio Ugo Tarchetti* (Rome: Carocci, 2000), 73–92.

⁵⁸ See David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 170; and James D. Wilson, “The Romantic Love Object: The Woman as Narcissistic Projection,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 15, no. 4 (December 1978): 388–402, 388.

and generative, rather than as inert, as a kind of corpse upon which one performs an autopsy, or as an art object one takes possession of, or as an antagonist [. . .] one must overcome.”⁵⁹ The destiny of the wretched protagonists of *Amore nell’arte* shows that an approach to the other driven by desire for limitless self-expansion dooms “great souls” to alienation, madness, and an untimely demise. In this respect, Tarchetti’s stories remind us of the typical curse of Romantic heroes such as René in Chateaubriand’s homonymous novella (1802) and the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor* (1816), paradigmatic embodiments of the tormented genius for whom society is an obstacle to sublime pursuits. But as the ideal pursuits of Tarchetti’s artists are inextricable from material excess (fame, financial success, sexual gratification), the author also shows how abstract ideals of love and art are deeply entangled with the materialistic concerns of the society with which they are ostensibly at odds—entanglements which would be later magnified by the profligate hedonism of Decadent aesthetes such as Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes* and Gabriele D’Annunzio’s *Andrea Sperelli*. Tarchetti’s haunted protagonists thus reveal vital connections between the Romantic and the Decadent imagination.⁶⁰

Conclusion

When grounded in wide-ranging contextual exploration, close textual analysis of Tarchetti’s tales leads to the conclusion that his contributions, far from being “stillborn,” are a vital part of the development from the visionary/emotional to the mental/intellectual fantastic. His ironic investigation of hidden truths; his complicated relationship with multifarious sources of inspiration; and, most notably, his intricate exploration of the relationship between reality and the imagination: all these dimensions of Tarchetti’s work do not evince a lack of originality, but rather a wealth of complexity.

Tarchetti’s reflections evoke Romantic notions about the relationship between reality and the creative imagination: nature and the human imagination are connected to each other and to the divine by the same creative power; the imagination is therefore the highest human faculty and the most effective way to achieve truth. Accordingly, works of imagination should have a moral, didactic purpose, and should contribute to the creation of a better world. His stories, however, dramatize more complex, problematic connections between reality and the imagination. The necrophilic fantasies collected in *Amore dell’arte*, in particular, lead the reader to conclude that art exposes society’s imbalances and abuses, but at the same time may be guilty of similar crimes/abuses against nature: aesthetic(izing) misappropriation, driven by insatiable desire for self-expansion through immanent transcendence (through abstract ideals that are both disconnected from, and exploitative of embodied existence), results in the devivification of corporeal reality for the purpose of exploitation. The ghosts that haunt Tarchetti’s stories offer ironic evidence of these crimes. They are therefore also evidence of Tarchetti’s contribution to the development of the fantastic mode as an ambiguous means of exploring the nightmares that haunt modern progress.

The vital connection between modern progress and the evolution of the fantastic is cogently articulated by Calvino in “Cibernetica e fantasmi” (“Cybernetics and Ghosts”): “La linea di forza della letteratura moderna è nella sua coscienza di dare la parola a tutto ciò che nell’inconscio sociale o individuale è rimasto non detto: questa è la sfida che continuamente essa rilancia. Più le

⁵⁹ Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology,” 110.

⁶⁰ For recent investigations of the interrelations between Romanticism and Decadence, see Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy, eds., *Decadent Romanticism: 1780–1914* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015).

nostre case sono illuminate e prospere più le loro mura grondano di fantasmi; i sogni del progresso e della razionalità sono visitati da incubi” (“The line of force of modern literature lies in the awareness of giving voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious: this is the challenge that it renews time and again. The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts. Dreams of progress and reason are haunted by nightmares.”).⁶¹ In the same essay, Calvino also offers reflections on the ambiguous power of literature which can be invoked to highlight, not only Tarchetti’s contribution to the fantastic mode, but also the reader’s contribution to expanding, through interpretation, its vital potential: “La letteratura può lavorare tanto nel senso critico quanto nel senso della conferma delle cose come stanno e come si fanno. Il confine non è sempre chiaramente segnato; dirò che a questo punto è l’atteggiamento della lettura che diventa decisivo; è al lettore che spetta di far sì che la letteratura espliciti la sua forza critica, e ciò può avvenire indipendentemente dalla intenzione dell’autore” (“Literature can perform a critical role as much as the role of confirming things as they are and as we know them to be. The boundary is not always clearly marked. I would say that, at this juncture, it is the spirit in which one reads that plays a decisive role: it is up to the reader to see to it that literature exerts its critical force, and this can occur independently of the author’s intentions”).⁶² It is in this spirit that I have approached Tarchetti’s work, aiming to open it up to new critical vitality, while remaining alert to the potential pitfalls of interpretive misappropriation.

⁶¹ Calvino, *Una pietra sopra*, 175.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 180.