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From Giorgio Agamben's Italian Category of 'Comedy' to 'Profanation' as the Political Task of Modernity

Ingravallo's Soaring Descent, or Dante according to Carlo Emilio Gadda

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ABSTRACT: In a 1996 essay entitled 'Comedia', Giorgio Agamben argues that Dante's title accounts for the comic but reparable ontological split of the Christian Middle Ages, which is intrinsically opposed to the tragic, irreparable conflict proper to ancient classical theatre. The Italian philosopher leaves aside the traditional explanations of comedy (a sad beginning with a felicitous ending, a mixed literary style). He finds Dante's 'poema sacro' to be a 'comedy' because its Christian framework allows for redemption, the reconciliation of the Adamic fracture, which was unavailable to classical culture. At the core of the Comedy lies the 'comic' experience of Dante the Pilgrim: 'the justification of the culprit', instead of the 'tragic culpability of the innocent' characteristic of Virgil's Aeneas. Dante's firm position within a medieval Christian context makes Dante the Pilgrim's adventure 'parodic', according to Agamben, instead of 'figural', as Auerbach claimed. The composition of the ontological split, he continues, warrants the anti-tragic quality of Christian life on earth. Christ has come to wash away humankind's sins, thereby mending an ontological fracture that dates back to the Adamic fall. Now humankind can be redeemed and made one again. In contrast, in ancient Greek culture the split between *maschera* and *persona* was in principle not amendable, and as such it marked the birth of theatre. For Dante the Pilgrim therefore, Agamben continues, getting ready to face Heaven as he does [...]

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Dante according to Carlo Emilio Gadda

Manuela Marchesini

In a 1996 essay entitled 'Comedia', Giorgio Agamben argues that Dante's title accounts for the comic but reparable ontological split of the Christian Middle Ages, which is intrinsically opposed to the tragic, irreparable conflict proper to ancient classical theatre.¹ The Italian philosopher leaves aside the traditional explanations of comedy (a sad beginning with a felicitous ending, a mixed literary style). He finds Dante's 'poema sacro' to be a 'comedy' because its Christian framework allows for redemption, the reconciliation of the Adamic fracture, which was unavailable to classical culture. At the core of the *Comedy* lies the 'comic' experience of Dante the Pilgrim: 'the justification of the guilty', instead of 'the guilt of the just' characteristic of Virgil's Aeneas.² Dante's firm position within a medieval Christian context makes Dante the Pilgrim's adventure 'parodic', according to Agamben, instead of 'figural', as Auerbach claimed.³ The composition of the ontological split, he continues, warrants the anti-tragic quality of Christian life on earth. Christ has come to wash away humankind's sins, thereby mending an ontological fracture that dates back to the Adamic fall. Now humankind can be redeemed and made one again. In contrast, in ancient Greek culture the split between *maschera* and *persona* was in principle not amendable, and as such it marked the birth of theatre.⁴ For Dante the Pilgrim therefore, Agamben continues, getting ready to face heaven as he does

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in *Purg.* XXXI means not only acknowledging his own sins, showing contrition, and being subject to cleansing, but also dropping the tragic pretences which Oedipus had nurtured in favour of the natural innocence to which the Christian human being can be restored.⁵

In his recent *Profanations*, Agamben returns with a twist and a vengeance to the theme of the comic, now parodic/ontological, duplicity that has permeated the Western tradition through Romantic idealism, modernism, and beyond.⁶ Literature then becomes the space of ‘parody’ or ‘paraontology’ (as in Dante), as opposed to ‘fiction’ or ‘ontology’ (as in Petrarch’s pure poetry of the *aura* or the ineffable *flatus vocis*).⁷ According to Agamben, ‘parody’ is in fact the polar opposite of ‘fiction’ because ‘unlike fiction, parody does not call into question the reality of its object; indeed, this object is so intolerably real for parody that it becomes necessary to keep it at a distance’.⁸ In this sense, Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura are the (literary) embodiments of ‘parody’ and ‘fiction’. ‘Romantic irony’ can be included in the same register. Although it presupposes a dual tension in which a split in language corresponds to a split in being, it is still another form of parody because totality, even if attainable, remains at its core.

‘Mourning’ is the emotional disposition towards something we have lost without any hope of ever recovering it. Mourning becomes a powerful category through which we can observe our modern times. ‘The space of parody – which is literature –’, Agamben continues, ‘is [...] necessarily and theologically marked by mourning and by the distorted grimace.’⁹ Insofar as ‘mourning’ is the name for the emotion expressing the inability of language to find a name, to reach a wholeness that is lost but still sought after, Agamben also names it as the name of the game, thus joining those thinkers who have adopted it as a category of modernity.¹⁰ In this context, there is no way out of the alternation between elation (or epiphany) and nostalgia (or mourning), the two extremes of the same relation to totality. Likewise, a strictly ‘secular’ response, Agamben argues – or, we could say, a postmodern one – is only a limited alternative. Sometimes, these so-called alternatives display a penchant for totalitarianism, albeit one of fragmentation or relativism, making them susceptible to being grouped along with idealism.

In an effort to propel the contemporary debate out of the sputtering dialectic of modernism versus postmodernism, Agamben proposes ‘profanation’ as a new disposition that could potentially mark the overcoming of this never-ending logic of perpetual reversals (ontological/

parodic, sublime/anti-sublime, totalitarianism/relativism) in which the malady of the twentieth century lies. Profanation could signal, Agamben suggests, the passage from the dialectic of sacred and secular to the altogether impious mix within which historical Western modernity and contemporaneity could recognize themselves by means of an entirely inappropriate, playful, desecrating reuse of the sacred. Unlike the reversal of the ideological structure of the sacred typical of a certain secularism, playful profanation is not limited to turning the sacred upside down. On the contrary, Agamben argues, play could free humanity from the sphere of the sacred without abolishing it. By invoking the rich concept of *gioco*, 'play' or 'game' in English, Agamben appears to call for our actual performative playing to change, rather than for the modification of a game (or games), whether through the institution of new rules or the exclusion of rules altogether.¹¹ Unfortunately, Agamben laments, play in this tentative sense, as an activity of profanation, is declining everywhere. This is why he advocates returning play to its truly secular, or profanation-like, vocation as an important political task of the present time: 'The profanation of the unprofanable is the political task of the coming generation', he concludes.¹²

I would like to bring Agamben's ideas to bear on Gadda's *Pasticciaccio* and vice versa.¹³ While preserving the specificity of their different fields of operation, this mutual exposure contributes to reframing the Culture War of yore. On the one hand, we have a novel published after World War II with a tortuous gestation and convoluted publication history and reception, written by an author who happened to outlive his creative 'canto del cigno'; on the other, a philosophical and essayistic speculation on contemporary events.¹⁴ The function of Dante's *Comedy* in each author spans from the textual to the allegorical, but rests upon one single crucial common denominator: both Gadda and Agamben take literature seriously. The assumption of novelist and philosopher alike is, in Stathis Gourgouris's words, that 'literature can', indeed does, 'think'.¹⁵ In a similar vein, the present essay, part of a larger project unfolding along the same lines, attempts a 'close reading' in the spirit that Edward Said has solicited from the humanities in his lectures at Columbia – or, to put it differently, a tentative 'exercise' of *critica* in the wake of modern Italian Romance philology and textual criticism from Pasquali through Contini and Debenedetti (a lineage of which Agamben's approach appears to be mindful).¹⁶

If playful profanation represents the contemporary attempt to exit twentieth-century idealist/postmodernist dialectics, and perhaps even to exit dialectics altogether, then Gadda's *Pasticciaccio* may be its manifesto. *Pasticciaccio* enacts the radical contamination, rather than the reversal, of some of the most crucial features of a Christian setting – hell in heaven and vice versa – by exploiting one of its most traditionally revered and familiar Western forms, Dante's *Comedy*. Gadda's novel expresses a profoundly utopian call for an attitude that can hardly be reduced to either the modernist or the postmodernist camp, at least insofar as these two camps have recourse to the same totalizing rhetoric. This is why, in my view, Gadda's *Pasticciaccio*, as well as his legacy, which largely rests upon this novel, has proved to be at once broadly enjoyed and elusive to grasp and process for readers and emulators alike – another trait that Gadda's legacy has in common with Dante's.

I will pass over the general Dantesque infernal allegory of *Pasticciaccio* in order to expand on its final scene.¹⁷ My thesis is that *Pasticciaccio*'s allegorical use of Dante's *Comedy* does not just unravel its interpretive knot. It also points to a utopian overcoming of binarism that concurs with Agamben's reflections. *Pasticciaccio*'s closure is neither an epiphany (in the sense of a final celebration of the missing piece that completes the puzzle of the novel), nor does it signal a collapse into ambiguity or irrationality (in the sense that everything is left undecided, wavering between one possibility and its opposite). Gadda maintains his interpellation of wholeness unequivocally throughout the novel; this is a whodunit awaiting its culprit. At the end of *Pasticciaccio*, we experience the coincidence of closure and beginning affording us a glimpse of totality – in other words, the truth of the whodunit. But we also realize the specific nature of the totality on which Gadda has been toiling, and we recognize its features. For a reader of Leibniz such as Gadda, the totality of the monad must be complex and multilayered, as the novel's maddening plot notoriously is.¹⁸ Above and beyond Leibniz, though, I would add, lies a rigorously immanent and non-dialectical totality, as shown by Gadda's use and abuse of Dante's *Comedy*. *Pasticciaccio* enacts the utopia of a radically immanent human comedy that, through its practice of literature, resonates with Agamben's appeal to profanatory playfulness. Redemption as such is neither ruled out nor enforced, least of all at the end of *Pasticciaccio*. It simply takes a back seat to the process of 'recognition' and 'acceptance', which in Gadda's personal lexicon have always been 'cognizione'. In my view, *Pasticciaccio* dis-

plays a mature, 'comic' Gadda who is able to take a certain distance from the earlier, desperately tragic, eponymous, genuinely truncated fresco of *La cognizione del dolore*.¹⁹

Pasticciaccio displays a largely parodic intent that goes beyond a perusal of Dante's *Comedy*, one of the patriotic cultural flagships adopted by the Italian fascist regime as a symbol of Italianness in the eyes of the world.²⁰ It goes beyond the conventional portrayal of hell as emblematic of the political times of the fictional, fascist Rome of 1927. Two different things occur at once. First, the last three chapters of the novel rewrite in clearly infernal tones a modern descent to hell divided between the parallel journeys of two truth seekers, Officer Ingravallo and Corporal Pestalozzi. It is important to recall that those same infernal features are already prominent in the very beginning of the novel. Second, *Pasticciaccio* is also interspersed, *contrappunto*-like, with elements coming from Dante's other canticles. In other words, as much as hell informs the apparently orderly setting of the novel from its outset, we come to realize that purgatory and heaven permeate it as well, most notably in the hell-like closure that fuses together *Inf.* XXXIV, *Purg.* XXXI, and *Par.* XXXIII. Let us see how these two points unfold in the text and to what consequences they lead.

It is proleptically stated at the opening of the novel that the maid Assunta Crocchiapani is the designated culprit, the murderer of her benefactor Liliana Balducci. It will be sufficient to pay attention to one of the elementary aspects of the Dantesque cosmology – the placement of Lucifer within a Catholic Thomist revision of the ancient Aristotelian/Ptolemaic cosmology. At Ingravallo's Sunday lunch with the Balduccis, before the crime has even been committed, as the narrator/Ingravallo insists on the convivial scene, a speculative comment about Assunta, revealing what is bound to happen, is proffered. Her 'eyes' (a Dantesque token of heaven and a recurrent feature of Assunta's beauty) and her *derrière* lie, Gadda writes with a hesitation screaming for attention, '[i]n the centre [...] of the whole [...] Ptolemaic system; yes, Ptolemaic'.²¹ In other words, Assunta's attributes metonymically place her right where Lucifer is supposed to be in the Thomist universe whose most popular representation is, of course, Dante's *Inferno*: at the bottom of hell.²² Thus there are strong reasons to assume that the bourgeois domestic interior of the Balduccis – this only apparently thriving and orderly Roman family of 1927, this expression of the purest bourgeois and fas-

cist ideology – is ‘already’ hell ‘to begin with’. It constitutes, in other words, a point of departure.

It is not what the story is about, certainly not the bottom line. *Pasticciaccio* unfolds as the narration of the unravelling of this reality, the coming apart of the *gomitolo* or *gnommero* of the real into shards of surprising truth that no one, least of all Ingravallo, can escape. The often-noted gemination typical of *Pasticciaccio* not only mirrors the instability of the psychological subject but is an all too fitting infernal hallmark. In hell, appearances are always deceptive and trickery is the norm, in Dante’s *Inferno* as in Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio*. But if this were all there was to Gadda’s use of Dante, we would still be dealing with a simple parody. Dante would function as a tool to question fascist social mores and institutions through a spirited depiction of their reversal. How? Through *Pasticciaccio*’s methodical subversion of the main tenets of Italian fascist ideology, portrayed in its various, but always historically precise, manifestations: Mussolini’s natal policy (Liliana’s frustrated desire for maternity); the fascist politics of social order (the episodes of crime at the centre of the novel, inasmuch as they deny the Regime’s ambition for a cleansed Rome); and especially the fascist rhetoric concerning sex, gender, and sexual orientation (parodied throughout the novel, in the whole spectrum between the male and female poles).

But if Gadda’s antifascist critique is blistering, it is also retrospective. Moreover, Gadda’s virulent antifascist pamphlet, *Eros e Priapo*, has also been shown to be from a later date than its author would have liked – that is to say, subsequent to Gadda’s early entanglement with the fascist press.²³ Gadda’s ambiguity on this matter has only been exacerbated by the nature of the unpublished *Eros e Priapo*. If, as Barbara Spackman has convincingly shown, virility is the interpellation which, within fascist discourse, is the condensation of all others (incorporating religious, political, familial, racial, and gender biases), then *Eros e Priapo*, where Gadda feminizes the Italian crowds in order to stigmatize them as fascist and thus deserving of the violence that they themselves invoked, appears to be caught in the same binary logic that he was supposedly chastising through ridicule.²⁴ The neurotic Gadda was ideologically conservative.²⁵

My point, however, is that *Pasticciaccio* conveys something different from an antifascism tainted by the discursive logic of fascism itself. *Pasticciaccio*’s whodunit arguably takes its distance from the

forsaken *Eros e Priapo*, which throughout his life Gadda chose not to publish. *Pasticciaccio* manages to problematize the binary logic that had informed the often-disquieting pages of the pamphlet by coming to terms with it in its own way – that is to say, in *literary* terms. A circumstantial reading of *Pasticciaccio* through Dante brings out not just Gadda's sustained, trenchant reflection on gender and sexual orientation, but more specifically his distinct way of resolving the issue: *Pasticciaccio* dismisses as inadequate the earlier Freudian dramatizations of *Eros e Priapo*, opting instead for a radical leap in quality by exploiting Dante's *Comedy*. Dante's presence in the novel is in fact precise but also not overly fussy; it surely requires no Dante scholar to perceive it. In other words, Dante's function in *Pasticciaccio* is, beyond the self-referential model of the 'pellegrino di cognizione', that of a totemic emblem of all the traditional, conservative discourses of his more or less educated Italian readership – not just the autarchic Italian culture of the 'Ventennio nero'. It seems to me that, as an adaptation of Dante's *Comedy*, *Pasticciaccio* enacts a 'massacre' of its source – a label that Carmelo Bene would have bestowed upon it as his warmest compliment.²⁶

Second, purgatory and heaven permeate *Pasticciaccio* as much as hell, most notably in the novel's hellish ending. Throughout the novel, Gadda takes aim at the boundary-setting rhetoric of sex and gender, which binds together the various fascist discourses. Such a wholesale reappropriation of the *Comedy* as applied to the gender issues interwoven with fascist rhetoric infuses Gadda's novel with a blasphemous energy capable of making *Pasticciaccio* into the indictment of fascist ideology that *Eros e Priapo* aspired to be but was not. By the same token, the tenor of *Pasticciaccio*'s revisiting of Dante also opens it to a dialogue with Agamben's philosophical speculations which, as far as I can see, themselves stem from a reflection on Dante's 'comedy' as the exemplary instance of the 'Italian category' in its parodic or paraontological pole (Petrarch representing the other pole of 'fiction' or 'ontology') to be transgressed or desecrated in the present of 'profanation'. Profanation indeed becomes manifest at *Pasticciaccio*'s conclusion, precisely where the crux of the unfinished novel would conventionally lie. *Pasticciaccio* ends with a maddeningly complex twofold plot, centred on a minor offence (a jewellery robbery) and a horrific crime (a murder), both perpetrated at 219 via Merulana. In the concluding scene of the novel, Officer Ingravallo, in spite of his determination, apparently fails to unveil the identity of the murderer. A heated confrontation

occurs with a female suspect, Assunta Crocchiapani, a sensually appealing young woman whom the *commissario* had met, before the crime was committed, at the Balduccis'. Ingravallo attempts to level a disgusted *j'accuse* at the woman; however, after the first articulation of the charge, his self-confidence immediately fails him. Assunta, indignant, flatly denies the accusation. The book concludes in the following way:

Egli non intese, l a pe' llà, ciò che la sua anima era in procinto d'intendere. Quella piega nera verticale tra i due sopraccigli dell'ira, nel volto bianchissimo della ragazza, lo indusse a riflettere: a ripentirsi, quasi.²⁷

Gadda obstinately insisted he had nothing more to add, because the whodunit had already been solved or, as he said, 'literarily resolved' ('letterariamente concluso'): 'Il poliziotto capisce chi è l'assassino e questo basta.'²⁸ In spite of Gadda's opinion, it has been argued that the hyperrationalist Ingravallo surrenders to the relational complexities of human existence, to sexual impotence because he is unable to separate from the mother ('dar lancia in abisso'), or to imprisonment within his own neurosis, unable to tell right from wrong, innocence from sin, the rational from the irrational.²⁹ This would be an uncharacteristically easy way out for an author who was an engineer by training and by trade and who kept an unpublished philosophy dissertation on Leibniz in his drawer. But more to the point: if Assunta is not the killer, why is she Lucifer at the start, at the Balduccis' lunch that sets the tone for the story? Again, why, as the novel draws to a close, do we find her standing next to the 'festuca in vetro' of her father's body, at the bottom of this frozen Roman Cocytus? Furthermore, why is Officer Ingravallo not only unable to solve the crime, but himself incongruously on the verge of repentance? 'Ripentirsi', in Italian, points to a repeated action of 'pentirsi': of what sin has Ingravallo been repenting, not once, but over and over again? And what keeps him from doing so now, as is highlighted by the word 'quasi' ('almost')? As regards Gadda the man, we could speculate about the unspoken 'tabe' that he mentioned on a few occasions, pointing to a painful and private knot of familial and personal grief.³⁰ It is hard to know, and we may never know. For the reality of the fiction, though, the quick answer, in my view, is that *Pasticciaccio* remains unsolved as a whodunit only if we conceive of the mystery novel, *il giallo* in Italian, as a genre codified by a set of specific conventions. Particularly, if we expect that every mystery novel not only names, but unfurls the rationale of the story as its denouement,

à la Conan Doyle or Christie, Gadda the engineer devises (and has fun with!) the mechanism of a mystery story. He does so in his own manner – ‘literarily’, he would say – much as Manzoni, from whose *Promessi sposi* (with its only relatively happy ending) Gadda had learned a great deal, did with the historical novel and the feuilleton.³¹ Like Manzoni, he seeks to make a variety of points, which include, but are not exhausted by, the identification of the culprit.

In *Pasticciaccio* Gadda maintains that which makes mysteries tick, just as he preserves the pulsating core of Dante’s *Comedy* – the journey-like search for truth. Unlike many other mystery writers, past and future, however, he goes for exploration instead of explanations: he deploys the whole *Comedy* through the use of a perspectival device that he had first discussed in 1924 in his reflections on ‘racconto ab interiore’ and ‘ab exteriore’ in the aborted *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento*.³² In this respect, clarity can be gained by comparing *Pasticciaccio*’s finale with a very concise and enjoyable short story by Andrea Camilleri, ‘Montalbano ha paura’.³³

Officer Salvo Montalbano (whom Camilleri, according to his own admission, modelled after Gadda’s Ingravallo) is here the real focus of a story that, ironically, yet again shows the fictional *poliziotto* literally *in exitu*: Camilleri chose this story to close the Meridiani edition of his Montalbano collection. I find the consonances between *Pasticciaccio*’s finale and Camilleri’s story somehow eerie – for their closeness as much as for their distance. At the outset, Montalbano and perennial fiancée Livia are engaged in convivial conversation with Livia’s best friend and her husband. The husband, an engineer, tells Montalbano that he envies his job as a detective, because police work puts Salvo in touch with human nature in a way an engineer will never be. Montalbano is deeply unnerved by the man and even more so by his comment. Livia comes to the rescue, clarifying that Salvo Montalbano has no interest whatsoever in psychology: ‘Lui si ferma alle prove’, she flatly states.³⁴ In a few words, Livia sums up the essence of Salvo’s purported nature: his embrace of daylight truths and straightforward male rationality. This feature, proffered in the self-assured shorthand of an accomplished television and film scriptwriter such as Camilleri, is analogous to the pretence maintained by Corporal Pestalozzi in the course of his dealings with Zamira Pacori in *Pasticciaccio*. It appears in a famous episode of Gadda’s novel, which centres around the perceived confrontation between the supposedly male forces of reason (the Cartesian corporal)

and the supposedly female irrational and threatening forces of deception (the criminal, witch-like Zamira Pacori). Camilleri's rationale for Montalbano's last engagement with crime is thus precisely to test the sunny Cartesian side of his officer.

For that purpose, Camilleri removes Montalbano from his beloved Sicily and plunges him into an Alpine setting on the pretext of a short vacation. Here, clearly estranged from his usual Mediterranean habitat, Montalbano is bound to confront his demons. But time is of the essence, for the narrator as for the reader, so while Livia naps to dispel the trip's fatigue, Salvo takes an initial walk around the cabin. Destiny immediately makes its presence felt in the guise of what appears to be a mountain accident. Behind a curve in the path, Salvo sees a woman dangerously dangling in the void, suspended only by the hand of a man who – we learn after he has come to help – is her husband. The woman supposedly made a false step and slipped; her husband had rushed to her rescue and they had found themselves in the dire predicament that Salvo witnessed. Hugs and sighs of relief follow the recovery. The woman lies on the ground, eyes shut, recuperating from the fright. The scene then skips to the following day, when the husband knocks on Montalbano's door. At that point, he confesses to Salvo what the latter (as he tells him up front) had already figured out on his own: that the actual implications of the accident went well beyond its happy ending. The unexpected accident suddenly became, for a not-so-loving husband, a potentially free ticket out of an undesired marriage. Visited by evil but irrepressible thoughts of letting the wife die, the man had in fact been less than prompt in coming to her rescue. The woman, on the other hand, had clearly perceived his hesitation and intuitively grasped its motives. In order to cope with the double trauma, she had obstinately kept her eyes shut even after she was brought to safety. She wished to avoid her husband's eyes, Dante's celebrated window of the soul, where she had just read all the infidelity and evil that, until that moment, she had not been acquainted with. The husband's subsequent visit to Montalbano is like a secular confession: it relieves him of guilt and allows a pardon that would let him move on with his life. Stone-faced, the generous Montalbano fulfils his duty, taking in the man's disclosures and then sending him off back to his wife. In the concluding paragraph, which returns to the psychological theme of the beginning, we also touch upon the moral of the story, the secret motive, or hint of a motive, behind Montalbano's farewell to police work:

Era vero, Livia aveva ragione. Lui aveva paura, si scantava di calarsi negli 'abissi dell'animo umano,' come diceva quell'imbecille di Matteo Castellini [the engineer]. Aveva scanto perché sapeva benissimo che, raggiunto il fondo di uno qualsiasi di questi strapiombi, ci avrebbe immancabilmente trovato uno specchio. Che rifletteva la sua faccia.³⁵

In an initially muted manner, and more openly at the end, Montalbano's fateful self-discovery is akin to Officer Ingravallo's: each sees himself in a mirror reflecting the evil of human nature. Gadda and Camilleri diverge not in intelligence or familiarity with the tools of a trade that they both command very well, but in how they practise it. Gadda's repeated claim of a 'literary' solution in *Pasticciaccio* points precisely to that manner, which comes from a pact among reader, author, and text that playfully includes, but is not consumed by, the conventions of a specific genre. The detective story and the Dantean frame of a journey, two of the most prevalent devices for portraying the human quest, are kept, historicized, and carefully cannibalized and profaned. In contrast, they do not appear in Camilleri's 'Montalbano ha paura'. This is not a value judgement; it is a fact. As such, it bears witness to the existence of diverse literary practices, which are not necessarily in competition but certainly differ. Camilleri's creation is a homage to Officer Ingravallo, but perhaps more than to Gadda's novel, it seems to refer to Pietro Germi's successful film version of the story, the 1959 *Quel maledetto imbroglio*. As Pasolini wrote in his review of the film, *Pasticciaccio* had in fact provided Germi with the ground to execute perhaps his best work. It neither attempted nor needed to catch up with the literary *Pasticciaccio*.³⁶ These considerations would later play a role, I contend, in Pasolini's decision to distance himself from film (abjuring his *ciclo della vita*) and to return to literature with the canvas of *Petrolio*. In other words, at the end of *Pasticciaccio* the truth is unfolded, though not in the telegram-like manner of Montalbano. Gadda opts for a literary solution proper to a literature that thinks, which for him, as for his beloved Caravaggio, amounts to adding shadow rather than light.

Ingravallo's wavering 'quasi' cannot refer to any uncertainty about Assunta's culpability. Everything in the novel is carefully arranged to let the reader, as much as Ingravallo himself, grow to accept unequivocally the idea that this 1927 Rome is in fact hell and that Assunta is in fact her benefactor's killer, punished as is Dante's Giudecca – albeit vicariously in the body of her father. Detective Ingravallo, like us, has sufficient clues to reach a plausible rational solution of the whodunit, in

spite of the complexities of a plot that, make no mistake, leaves no loose ends. Gadda was a graduate of the Milanese Polytechnic; ‘his structures are sound’. Structure is not where the flaw is supposed to be in Gadda’s world.³⁷ In spite of all the doubling, twisting, and wicked tricks of the narrator, the option of real undecidability is ruled out by the fact that Assunta is and has always been the culprit since the Balduccis’ lunch at the beginning of the novel. Yet, it is Ingravallo who happens to ‘repent, almost’. Why? Because, in addition to its infernal template, *Pasticciaccio* also extensively engages with the rest of the *Comedy* – remarkably so in the closing scene, which is nothing less than a twisted version of Dante’s supreme vision of God and divine truth in a concert of reflecting gazes knitting together Dante the Pilgrim, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Bernard. In a blasphemous move, Assunta the culprit – the Lucifer at the centre of this 1927 Roman fascist hell – also happens to be the bearer of the Virgin Mary’s holy features. And in fact, as is evinced by Gadda’s correspondence with his publisher, *Assunta* had indeed been the title Gadda had considered for the novel before *Pasticciaccio*.³⁸ For Gadda to entertain such a possibility, profanation must truly be the hallmark of the novel.

Whereas Camilleri had offered a descriptive ‘explication’ of Montalbano’s fears, *Pasticciaccio* stages the process of the ‘exploration’ or ‘acquaintance with the knowledge’ concerning the statutorily impure lack of boundaries of which Ingravallo becomes aware at the end of his journey from the city to the Roman countryside. Assunta, Liliana’s killer, is meticulously robed as Beatrice, while, at the same time, Ingravallo’s identification with Assunta gives readers a hint about the nature of his own self-perception as the feminine ‘polso villosa, la mano implacabile e nera dell’omicida’³⁹ that had committed the crime – a triumph dictated by his status as both an apologetic Dante the Pilgrim and an Assunta in the glory of her femininity. From this point of view, Ingravallo, embracing Assunta’s determination to punish Liliana for her mistress’s hypocritical, unethical values, is at least as fearless as Assunta. Gadda conceived *Pasticciaccio* as the epic of a modern pilgrim of knowledge who, having set out on a journey in a godless world, eventually comes to enact, with the reader’s complicity, the story of a contemporary, historical condition of ambivalence. *Pasticciaccio*’s finale neither mourns the loss of an originally innocent state nor celebrates its redemption by faith – literary or otherwise. It cares relatively little for the absence or the presence of any overarching structure. Instead, it shifts its attention to

the messy, impure merging of two (or more) viewpoints – Ingravallo’s, Assunta’s, the narrator’s – which are all part of that same system. In Assunta’s final confrontation with Ingravallo, her culpability is shown and decried but only ‘quasi’, because it is complemented, not excused, by the innocence and even holiness of her glorious femininity. She is unequivocally guilty of the murder, but also wholesome and heavenly as the glorious woman she is; Ingravallo sees himself in both. On the subject of crime, Gadda wrote as early as 1924, in his *Cahier d’étude* (the so-called *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento*), the early canvas of *Pasticciaccio*: ‘*Anche i fatti anormali e terribili rientrano nella legge, se pure apparentemente sono ex lege.*’⁴⁰

On the same occasion, while discussing the narratology of the ‘Gioco “ab interiore”’ in the construction and development of the novel, he answers his own question regarding the extent to which a reader and author could possibly have insight into the ‘inner personality’ (‘interno della personalità’) of the opposite sex, reflecting:

Forse a noi appare di essere solamente maschi, ma in realtà nei misteriosi fondi della natura, siamo semplicemente dei ‘polarizzati’ e ‘potenzialmente’ possiamo essere l’uno e l’altro. E di questa potenzialità, precedente il nostro sviluppo, ci siamo dimenticati. ‘Sed latet in imo.’ Perciò abbiamo forse della femminilità qualche cosa di più che una intuizione letteraria della intuizione fisiologica.⁴¹

In other words, if the *Pasticciaccio* inscribes a vision of Assunta/Ingravallo as simultaneously Lucifer/Medusa (in the sense of the laughing, not just threatening, Medusa at the core of Hélène Cixous’s famous essay⁴²) and as Madonna/Beatrice, it is because, at the end of the novel, ‘repentance’ is (almost) tempered by the joy that stems from ‘self-comprehension’ and ‘acceptance’. It is an experience that points beyond Freudian and Freudian-inspired narratives, which are all based upon an ordinary murderous event. The killing of the father by his sons and the ensuing reaction are events, as Hélène Cixous has argued, that establish in one stroke society, exogamy, and the sacred. The sons kill the father but restore paternal authority as a right, thus renouncing the possession of all women, leading to the emergence of a desire that would later be known as Oedipal. Womanhood, in this context, comes to be viewed as a more or less tragic series of lacks. Lacan’s symbolic and Kristeva’s semiotic correct the Freudian theory, but the ‘logical establishment

of the originary scene', as Kristeva calls it, is not really disputed. I see Gadda as doing precisely this in *Pasticciaccio*.

The point is not to condone or excuse Assunta's horrific action (there is no Lethe River to wash away Ingravallo/Assunta's sin) but to acknowledge (to re-cognize, *riconoscere*) that Assunta, assassin though she is, as the man/woman Ingravallo is as well, has *also* been able to puncture the overblown family romance of her neurotic, hypocritical, fascist benefactor Liliana Balducci. Unlike the unspeakably violent and unresolved confrontation with the mother of *La cognizione del dolore*, *Pasticciaccio* marks at least one step forward towards joy as self-acceptance – it may be hell, but it is our paradise, too. Eventually, the philosopher-detective Ingravallo is also able to recognize himself *in* and *as* the evil Assunta. In the mirror of Assunta, Ingravallo/Gadda sees his own ambivalence towards the very same object of attraction/repulsion (Liliana) – in all senses, I dare say, ethically, existentially, and in terms of gender. Assunta and Ingravallo are facets of the same entity. Like Gadda himself, they are both destitute, nurturing the atavistic socio-economic common guilt of their status as outsiders, an uninvited remnant. They are those who did not die (like Gadda's own beloved younger brother, in World War I), but obstinately lived on – 'un romantico preso a calci dal destino', as Gadda defined himself, pleading to be left alone ('per favore mi lasci nell'ombra'), both sexually 'polarizzati' and 'onnipotenziali',⁴³ playing the game of gender performance.

In conclusion, Ingravallo cannot finish his otherwise perfectly logically motivated accusatory sentence against Assunta because his male subjectivity dissolves into Assunta's as much as her feminine one dissolves into his. It is the psychological diaphragm separating the 'I' from the 'you' that gives in.⁴⁴ Not only Assunta is a Madonna/Lucifer, in the sense of the aforementioned Medusa, but Ingravallo/Gadda also recognizes himself in her exactly as his predecessor, the other 'pellegrino di cognizione', had done centuries before. This is no *Comedy*, however, and even less its reversal; it is its massacre. *Pasticciaccio*'s proper category is thus Agamben's 'profanation', rather than 'parody' or secularization. Whereas secularization and profanation are both political operations, it is clear that for Agamben only the latter has liberating potential, whence his plea for the present time that was mentioned earlier. By using the *Comedy* in a highly inappropriate manner, *Pasticciaccio* arguably neutralizes what it profanes: fascist ideology and the conventional modernist epiphany. We are headed back, that is to say, to

the indistinction of the ‘nocciolo euristico’, back to the state in which co-present potentialities are what they are – *potentialities* – not merely defined as tragic but also exhilaratingly free or ‘comic’, as Agamben would have it. And they are dangerous too, I might add, because the hideous risk is that of blaming the victim. Did Gadda mean to say that Liliana deserved to die because of her shortcomings, because she was an insufficient Beatrice? That heavenly Assunta is perhaps saved in spite of being her murderer? Of course not. But the fact that Liliana has been a victim should not prevented us from seeing the extent to which Assunta is also a victim, and more often than not a victim of women like her, or more exactly of women who side, as she does, with an ideology that victimizes women like her. Likewise, it should not blind us to the extent to which both Liliana and Assunta carry their guilt as a heavenly badge of honour – Assunta is as proud of her irrepressible vitality and sexual appeal and drive as Liliana is of her piety. Brought up to oblige the Lilianas of the world, in Ingravallo Gadda also comically embraces its Assuntas.

NOTES

- 1 See Giorgio Agamben, *Categorie italiane: Studi di poetica* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), pp. 3–27. The text originally appeared as Giorgio Agamben, ‘Comedia’, *Paragone*, 346 (1978), pp. 3–27, and is translated in English in Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- 2 Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, p. 14; *The End of the Poem*, p. 10.
- 3 For a new reading of Auerbach’s classic work, see Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), which originally appeared as an introduction to Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 4 On this point, see Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- 5 Agamben, *Categorie italiane*, p. 25.
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2005), translated into English as Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007). Agamben’s categories resemble Gianfranco Contini’s critical and controversial characterization of Italian literature in two lineages – *linea espressionista* (plurilingualism stemming from Dante) versus *linea uni- or mono-linguistica* (stemming from Petrarch). See Gianfranco Contini, ‘Espressionismo let-

- terario', in *Ultimi esercizi ed elzeviri (1968–1987)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), pp. 41–106.
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, pp. 48–50.
 - 8 Ibid., p. 48.
 - 9 Ibid., p. 50.
 - 10 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), xiv, pp. 243–58. For a recent treatment, see Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
 - 11 For an analysis of play/game in a multidisciplinary context, see Stefano Franchi, 'Endgames. Game and Play at the End of Philosophy' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 1997).
 - 12 Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 92.
 - 13 Carlo Emilio Gadda, 'Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana', in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2 vols (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), II, ed. by Giorgio Pinotti, Dante Isella, and Raffaella Rodondi, pp. 11–276. For an English translation, see Carlo Emilio Gadda, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: Braziller, 2007).
 - 14 *Pasticciaccio* was published on two different occasions: first, between 1944 and 1946, it was serialized in the journal *Letteratura*; then, in 1957, it was published in book form by Garzanti.
 - 15 See Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?*, especially the Introduction, pp. ix–xxiv.
 - 16 Edward Said, 'The Return to Philology', in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, pp. 57–84; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). For the role of criticism in Italy, see Alfonso Berardinelli, *La forma del saggio: Definizione e attualità di un genere letterario* (Venice: Marsilio, 2002) and Manuela Marchesini, *Scrittori in funzione d'altro: Longhi, Contini, Gadda* (Modena: Mucchi, 2005).
 - 17 Manuela Marchesini, 'Beyond Pasolini and Calvino: Exordium and Closure in Carlo Emilio Gadda's Impure Literature', *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana*, 9.1 (2006), pp. 111–27, and Manuela Marchesini, 'Literature as the Experience of Boundary Crossing: Gadda's Descent to Hell and the Solution to *That Awful Mess of Via Merulana*', *MLN*, 119.1 (2004), pp. 109–34, which also contains a classified bibliography on the topic.
 - 18 For a classified bibliography on Gadda the 'philosopher', see Marchesini, *Scrittori in funzione d'altro*, pp. 141–56 and Mario Porro, *Letteratura come filosofia naturale* (Milan: Medusa, 2009), pp. 159–226.
 - 19 In Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Romanzi e racconti*, I, ed. by Raffaella Rodondi, Guido Lucchini, and Emilio Manzotti, pp. 565–772. For an English translation, see Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Acquainted with Grief*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: Braziller, 1969).

- 20 Along the lines of Società Dante Alighieri; see Luigi Scorrano, *Il Dante 'fascista': Saggi, letture, note dantesche* (Ravenna: Longo, 2001).
- 21 Gadda, 'Quer pasticciaccio', in *Romanzi e racconti*, II, p. 11.
- 22 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols (New York: Cosimo, 2007), V, p. 2989.
- 23 Carlo Emilio Gadda, 'Eros e Priapo (Da furore a cenere)', in *Saggi giornali favole e altri scritti*, ed. by Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni, and Dante Isella, 2 vols (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), II, pp. 213–374; Robert Dombroski, 'Fascismo e psicanalisi', in *Lesistenza ubbidiente* (Naples: Guida, 1984).
- 24 Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. xi and pp. 24–26.
- 25 'Gadda dunque ci si presenta nel *Pasticciaccio* come esagitato e schiacciato fra due errori: il sopravvivenne positivismo naturalistico di un liberale prefascista di destra, e il coatto lirismo deformante di un antifascista limato e disgregato dall'impari lotta collo stato', wrote Pasolini in his 1958 review of '*Pasticciaccio*', now in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Passione e ideologia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1973), p. 19.
- 26 'Peregrino del mondo di cognizione' as Gadda would call Dante in 1961, in 'A Raffele Mattioli dedicando queste pagine', included in 'Verso la Certosa', now in Gadda, *Saggi giornali favole e altri scritti*, p. 278. On Bene's approach to the staging of literary classics – or his *variazioni* – see Manuela Marchesini, 'Between Collodi's Ringmaster and Manzoni's Capocomico: Antihumanism or the Circus of Life in Carmelo Bene's Pinocchio', in *Approaches to Teaching Collodi's Pinocchio and Its Adaptations*, ed. by Michael Sherberg (New York: MLA Books, 2006), pp. 136–43.
- 27 Gadda, 'Quer pasticciaccio', in *Romanzi e racconti*, II, p. 276 ('He didn't understand, then and there, what his spirit was on the point of understanding. That black, vertical fold above the two eyebrows of rage, in the pale white face of the girl, paralyzed him, prompted him to reflect: to repent, almost', *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, p. 388).
- 28 Gadda's pronouncement in a 1968 interview published on *Prisma*, now in the 'Note ai testi' of Gadda, *Romanzi e racconti*, II, p. 1155.
- 29 The frequent recurrence of many conspicuously sexual images in *Pasticciaccio* has prompted a series of Freudian and Lacanian readings focused on Detective Ingravallo's attempts to separate himself from his mother and to achieve masculinity through an ultimate acknowledgement of the feminine. See Manuela Bertone, *Il romanzo come sistema: molteplicità e differenza in Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993), who argues that, at the end of *Pasticciaccio*, Ingravallo achieves his masculinity at the expense of the negated feminine. For different, but still Freud-inspired, readings of *Pasticciaccio*'s ending, see Ferdinando Amigoni, *La più semplice macchina: Lettura freudiana del Pasticciaccio* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), pp. 195–313; Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, *Born Illiterate: Gender and Representation in Gadda's Pasticciaccio* (Leicester: Troubador, 1999), pp. 30–38; Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, 'Regeneration in Gadda's Pasticciaccio', *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 14.1 (1995), pp. 117–21; Mau-

- rizio De Benedictis, *La piega nera: Groviglio stilistico ed enigma della femminilità in Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Anzio: De Rubeis, 1991), pp. 139–68.
- 30 Carlo Emilio Gadda, ‘*Per favore, mi lasci nell’ombra*’: *interviste 1950–1972*, ed. by Claudio Vela (Milan: Adelphi, 1993); Giulio Cattaneo, *Il gran lombardo* (Milan: Garzanti, 1973); and Giancarlo Roscioni, *Il duca di sant’Aquila: Infanzia e giovinezza di Gadda* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).
- 31 For the anti-idyllic Manzoni, see Ezio Raimondi, *Il romanzo senza idillio: saggio sui Promessi sposi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974); for the Gadda–Manzoni relationship, see Ezio Raimondi, *Barocco moderno: Carlo Emilio Gadda e Roberto Longhi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), pp. 118–26; a classified bibliography on the topic can be found in Marchesini, *Scrittori in funzione d’altro Longhi, Contini, Gadda*, pp. 98–99 and the accompanying footnote.
- 32 Wolfgang Iser, ‘What is Literary Anthropology? The Difference between Explanatory and exploratory fictions’, in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. by Michael P. Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 157–69. *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento: Cahier d’étude* is in Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Scritti vari e postumi*, ed. by Andrea Silvestri et al. (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), pp. 381–614; see more specifically pp. 462–63.
- 33 Andrea Camilleri, ‘Montalbano ha paura’, in *Storie di Montalbano*, ed. by Mauro Novelli, Nino Borsellino, and Antonio Franchini (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 1630–44.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 1622.
- 35 Andrea Camilleri, ‘Montalbano ha paura’, p. 1644 (‘It was true, Livia was right. He was afraid, he dared not delve into the “abysses of the human heart,” as that fool Matteo Castellini would say. He did not dare, because he knew perfectly well that once he had reached the bottom of one of those abysses, he would undoubtedly find a mirror reflecting his own face’).
- 36 Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘Lo stile di Germi’, in *I film degli altri*, ed. by Tullio Kezich (Parma: Guanda, 1996), pp. 18–19. By embracing *Pasticciaccio*’s ‘realism’ and the picturesque qualities of Roman regional colour, Pietro Germi’s ‘qualunquismo puritano’, Pasolini wrote, ‘produced a sentimental movie, a conventional film noir with a conventional ending’. ‘Che cosa aveva dato Gadda a Germi, col *Pasticciaccio*?’ Pasolini continues, ‘Qualcosa di enorme. [...] Una volta ridotta la materia del gigante gaddiano alle norme della buona tecnica e del buon sentimento, Germi ha girato, con tutta la tecnica e il sentimento, il migliore film della sua carriera.’ On *Pasticciaccio*’s film and stage adaptations, see Manuela Marchesini, ‘“Il segreto macchinismo dietro il quadrante dell’orologio”: For a New Visual Rendition of Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio*’, *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 5 (2007), available online at <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue5/articles/marchesinipasticcio05.php>> [accessed 17 July 2010].
- 37 Manuela Marchesini, ‘L’elica e il sistema: I miti del somaro di Carlo Emilio Gadda’, *Italica* 74.2 (1997), pp. 235–48.
- 38 In a 14 May 1957 letter to Garzanti, Gadda states: ‘Er palazzo de l’oro. (formula che ricorre nel testo.) Nuvole in fuga. L’Assunta. Se mi dà qualche giorno’.

- He continues, 'posso proporre altri, sentito anche il parere di amici' (now in 'Note ai testi' of *Quer pasticciaccio*, in Gadda, *Romanzi e racconti*, p. 1152).
- 39 *Pasticciaccio*, pp. 67–68 ('the hairy wrist, the black, implacable hand of the homicide'; *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana*, p. 81).
- 40 Gadda, *Scritti vari e postumi*, p. 407 (italics in the text) ('The abnormal and terrible facts, too, fall under the law, although seemingly they are *ex lege*').
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 463 ('Perhaps we appear to ourselves as males, but in fact in the mysterious depths of nature we are simply "polarized" and "potentially" we can be either. It is a potentiality which precedes our development and which we have forgotten. But it remains dormant in the depth. For this reason, we may have something more than a literary intuition of the physiological intuition of the feminine').
- 42 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle De Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 245–64.
- 43 Gadda, *Scritti vari e postumi*, p. 463.
- 44 Kaja Silverman, 'The Dream of the Nineteenth Century', *Camera Obscura* 51/17.3 (2002), pp. 1–29.

Manuela Marchesini, 'From Giorgio Agamben's Italian Category of 'Comedy' to 'Profanation' as the Political Task of Modernity: Ingravallo's Soaring Descent, or Dante according to Carlo Emilio Gadda', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnotati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 285–303 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_17>

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