

**Indeterminacy in the Italian novel.
Five case studies from Tozzi, Landolfi, Vittorini,
Gadda and Ortese**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Leeds
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

December 2017

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to those who supported me in one way or another during the three years of my PhD.

First of all, I cannot thank enough my supervisors, Olivia and Gigliola for their precious guidance, for sharing their knowledge and expertise, for all the thought-provoking conversations, for their support, and for the trust they have given to me over the past three years. Your tremendous advice on research and on my career has been priceless and allowed me to grow as a researcher, a teacher, and a person. I am also very grateful for how all the staff of Italian at Leeds welcomed me, and in particular I would like to thank Claire, Chiara, Federica, Simone and Alessio B., for their smiles, their encouragements and their generous advice.

Moreover, I would like to thank the University of Leeds for awarding me the 110 Anniversary Scholarship that allowed me to take this degree, and the School of Languages, Cultures and Society, in which I found the nicest and engaging environment for doing research. I am grateful also to all those who supported CompLab@Leeds, especially Richard, Jacob, Beatrice and Hayley.

Thanks to my fantastic Leeds friends, with whom I shared this experience: to Alessio, for the long conversations on literary theory and rock music, for our CompLab, and for your wit; to Clara, for brightening up the darkest days of this Ph.D., for putting up with me, and being a true friend; and to Silvia for being always present. Thank you also to Serena for the engaging *conversazioni gaddiane*.

I am extremely grateful to all those who provided help and advice for this research, in particular, I want to express my gratitude to Federica Pedriali, Cristina Savettieri, and Marco Caracciolo. Words cannot describe how grateful I am to Stefania Sini for her encouragement and for being an inspiration.

I am also thankful to my dearest friends in Milan, who always welcome me back home and for being so close despite the 1000 miles between us. Thanks also to Alessandra, with whom, among so many other things, I can share the nostalgia of our *Milàn* from the U.K.

I could have not done this PhD without the love of my uncles and aunts, and of my wonderful mum. Being away from you has been the hardest part and I cannot thank you enough for understanding my decision of leaving and for being such an amazing family. Finally, I want to thank Jon for all the love and the support.

Abstract

This research analyses the manipulation of literary indeterminacy (i.e. the interpretative openness of a literary work) in the novel. It is based on reader-response theory and on the notion of literary indeterminacy as theorised by Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden. Its objective is twofold. Firstly, it aims to explore how textual strategies manipulate indeterminacy, and how the latter triggers the reader's interaction with the text. Secondly, it aims to examine how indeterminacy is handled in five Italian case-study novels, which critics have often described with terms belonging to the same semantic field as "indeterminacy" (for example: "openness" and "ambiguity"). Consequently, this research does not necessarily study *how* indeterminacy is increased or limited but, rather, the effects of its manipulation. The introductory chapter focuses on the notion of indeterminacy, its potentiality for textual exploration, and the research methodology. Moreover, it introduces the Italian context and the analysed *corpus*. Subsequently, one chapter is dedicated to each of the novels examined. Each individual analysis considers indeterminacy as operating in the text at different levels and with different strategies. In doing so, the case studies bring to light the different way in which each novel manipulates indeterminacy, as well as its links with each individual author's poetics. In particular, we find: a textual *vertigo effect* in Federigo Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*; an interplay with the fantastic mode in Tommaso Landolfi's *La pietra lunare*; an open and dialogical structure in Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*; the use of accumulative devices in Carlo Emilio Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*; and an hybrid form with elements from literary nonsense in Anna Maria Ortese's *L'Iguana*. In the conclusion, comparative remarks are drawn on how these novels manipulate indeterminacy to cope with the problem of realism in literature and how they elicit the reader's intervention.

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I. Introduction

What do we mean when we say that a literary work is undetermined, vague, or open? What allows the reader's intervention in literary works? What determines how great his intervention is? As we shall discuss, during the twentieth century, critics and theorists coming from phenomenological and aesthetic approaches – like for example Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser, and Umberto Eco – addressed these questions and defined a certain openness or indeterminacy as the distinguishing feature of literary works. Interestingly, they described indeterminacy as an element that *must* always be present but also that can be present in literary works in *different amounts*, thus implying that it can be manipulated by means of textual intervention. Nevertheless, although these critics provided a most valuable theoretical framework, they did not concretely analyse how indeterminacy can be produced and increased or minimised in textual practice.

Following a path that moves from reader-response theory, the objective of the research here presented is therefore twofold. Firstly, it aims to understand the role of indeterminacy in narrative fiction – and in particular within the genre of the novel. This entails analysing the possibility of its manipulation by means of different textual strategies, as well as the way in which it triggers the reader's intervention in the interaction with the literary text. Secondly, it aims at examining the role of literary indeterminacy in five Italian case-study novels that critics have often described by referring to terms belonging to the same semantic field as “indeterminacy” (for instance openness, vagueness, ungraspability, ambiguity, and the like). If on the one hand we will deal here with how indeterminacy is generated, on the other hand our concern will also be with what it generates, so that, besides describing how literary indeterminacy can be enhanced, we will also consider its concrete effects within individual novels. In examining *Con gli occhi chiusi* by Federigo Tozzi, *La pietra lunare* by Tommaso Landolfi, *Conversazione in Sicilia* by

Elio Vittorini, *La cognizione del dolore* by Carlo Emilio Gadda, and *L'Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese, we shall focus therefore on indeterminacy as operating at different textual levels and in the form of different textual strategies, which are often also crucial for the understanding of the individual authors' poetics.

1. Theoretical context

In this introductory chapter, I will first of all analyse how the undetermined character of literary works has been taken into account in twentieth-century critical debate, before moving on to analyse how indeterminacy can be maximised by means of specific textual strategies. In order to do so, I will reflect on the concepts of *indeterminacy*, *implied reader*, and *textual strategies* as they were theorised by Wolfgang Iser in the context of his theory of aesthetic response. In particular, I will focus on literary indeterminacy as a crucial feature for distinguishing a literary object from other types of objects, and I will consider the consequences that this has for the analysis of a literary work. I will then dedicate my attention to the possibility of manipulating the indeterminacy of a literary text (increasing or limiting it). This will be an essential point of discussion as all the novels analysed in this research seem exactly to manipulate the quantity of their indeterminacy in order to allow or encourage the reader's intervention.

After having clarified these theoretical aspects, I shall give an account of other studies that deal with the opening or closing of the reader's intervention in the act of reading. I will briefly review the most important phases and contributions for the debate on the reader-response theories, both internationally and in the specific context in which I will conduct my research, namely the Italian one. As I do so, I will also consider how indeterminacy-like phenomena have been dealt with so far particularly in the context of Italian literary criticism.

a. Literary indeterminacy

This research is based on the assumption that the manipulation of the indeterminacy of a literary work by means of different textual strategies can influence the role assigned to the reader's cooperation *inside* it. Thus, the first step to understand this process will be necessarily to chart the liminal space of cooperation between the text and the reader. In order to do so, I shall first clarify how the concepts of *indeterminacy*, *implied reader*, and *textual strategies* have been defined by German literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser, whose theoretical framework represents the starting point of this research.¹

The notion of *indeterminacy* in literature and in Iser's theory comes from Roman Ingarden's reflection on Husserl's phenomenological concept of 'intentionality'.² In his landmark work *The Literary Work of Art*, Ingarden attempted to define the ontology of literary objects (i.e., the *experiential* nature of literary works and not merely texts in their *physical* form). In the first place, he distinguished literary objects from *real* and *ideal* objects. Whereas real objects can be fully comprehended (and so determined) and ideal objects can be fully constituted by our comprehension, a literary object is only intentional and can, according to Ingarden, only be grasped as a schematic structure, called 'represented objectivity'.³ This schematic structure derives from the sentences contained in the text, which offer a guideline to the reader but which are also full of *spots of indeterminacy* (*Unbestimmtheitsstellen*). *Indeterminacy*

¹ I will particularly refer to Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) originally published in German in 1976; *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

² This concept, which Husserl derived from Brentano, refers to the fact that an act of consciousness is always 'consciousness *of* or *about*' something it refers to, even if this 'something' is not necessarily existing or real. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 3 vols (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982-1989).

³ 'Objects represented in a literary work are derived purely intentional objects projected by units of meaning.' Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 218.

is thus, according to Ingarden, the feature that differentiates the literary object from ideal and real objects:

[W]ith regard to determination of the objectives represented within it, every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation; in terms of the text, however, this supplementation can never be completed.⁴

Spots of indeterminacy can be more or less numerous but they can never be completely removed. As Ingarden shows us, through the example of a man:

If instead of simply “man”, we say “an old, experienced man”, we do remove, by addition of these attributive expressions, certain spots of indeterminacy; but an infinite number still remains to be removed. They would disappear only in an infinite series of determinations.⁵

Although some of the spots of indeterminacy can be removed by the use of different techniques (e.g. the addition of attributions or characteristics) further supplementations can only be provided by the reader’s intervention in the literary *performance*. This means that the literary *work* does not coincide with the literary *text* itself, but it is produced by an interaction between the text and the reader. We should also note that Ingarden’s suggestion that spots of indeterminacy can be removed means, conversely, that their number can also be increased; this possibility of a manipulation of the *quantity* of indeterminacy in a literary text is a crucial aspect for our perspective.

The interplay between the text and the reader is the basis of Iser’s theory of the *act of reading*, on which Ingarden’s notion of *indeterminacy* had a great influence. Iser borrows Ingarden’s language of indeterminacy explicitly in order to explore the relationship between the reader and the text during the act of reading. He writes:

it must be borne in mind that fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence. For this reason they cannot have the total determinacy of real objects, and, indeed, it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to “communicate” with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to

⁴ Ingarden, p. 251.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work's intention.⁶

If the reader takes part in the act of reading by supplying and co-constructing the work's meaning, this implies that he brings his own subjectivity to, and inside, the text. This does not mean that the process is arbitrary, however; as Iser explains:

[W]e can safely say that the relative indeterminacy of a text allows a spectrum of actualization. This, however, is not the same as saying that comprehension is arbitrary, for the mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy conditions the interaction between text and reader, and such a two-way process cannot be called arbitrary.⁷

Indeterminacy is therefore described as the "space" left to the reader to participate in a communication with the text that tends toward determinacy. Determinacy, however, can never be reached completely. In fact, determinacy is present in a literary work only as the counterpart of indeterminacy, as the goal to which both the text and the reader strive. Yet, this goal is never fully reached.

Indeterminacy, as the condition that allows the text to communicate with the reader, is necessarily present in every literary text. As just anticipated, our concern in this research, then, is not whether indeterminacy is or is not present in an individual work. Rather, our interest lies with its level or quantity, which can be manipulated thus opening or narrowing the space of intervention of the reader. As we shall see through the analyses of the five case studies presented in this research (in which we encounter higher levels of indeterminacy), this happens by means of various *strategies*.

In order for the interplay between text and reader to be effective, the text must exercise a certain control over the reader: 'In this process the reader is guided by a variety of narrative techniques, which might be called the strategies of the text'.⁸ Although Iser does not classify different kinds of textual strategies, he acknowledges that textual strategies can have different natures (i.e., narrative, poetic, syntactical, or semantic) and

⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 24.

⁷ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 24

⁸ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 61.

that their task is to offer the reader a frame in which he can construct the aesthetic object by using his imagination. Hence: ‘The strategies have to maneuver the reader into the right position, so that all he has to do is adopt the attitude mapped out for him.’⁹ That is to say, the strategies help the reader in fulfilling his own task in the literary work. This introduces another relevant concept to understand the process, the notion of *implied reader*.

The term, *implied reader*, itself carries some ambiguities since this concept is often confused with the *ideal reader* and sometimes with the *real reader* but, in Iser’s mind, “implied reader” was just a temporary heuristic label. Indeed, despite its name, what the implied reader actually defines is a set of structures *inside* the text. As Iser explains:

He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.¹⁰

If we focus our attention on the definition that Iser gives of the textual strategies and of the implied reader together, it is clear that the predispositions or attitude that make reading and the literary work’s meaning possible are set by means of the textual strategies. Therefore, *indeterminacy*, *textual strategies*, and *implied reader* are notions closely and firmly bound together, and, further, they need to be studied *inside* the text itself. Accordingly, my intention to analyse the indeterminacy at work in a selection of Italian novels requires that we deal with those textual strategies that set out the (pre)disposition the reader should take in order to

⁹ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 190.

¹⁰ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 34. Note that, just like many other critics and theorists, Iser refers to the implied reader as ‘he’. Others opted for ‘s/he’, but we have to keep in mind that for Iser the reader is not intended to be considered as an actual, embodied and, therefore, genderised person, but rather as a *function*, a formal feature of the text. ‘It’ would be probably the most appropriate pronoun to refer to this textual element. Nevertheless, in order not to make things more complicated than they are, I shall use “he”. This will also work more appropriately in dealing with the Italian literary criticism that I will quote from time to time. Here, indeed, the reader is always referred to as *il lettore*, with the male genderisation required by the Italian language.

fulfil his task (i.e., building the work's meaning). Focusing my analysis on some specific texts, and some specific kinds of textual strategies, then allows us to plot the way in which the reader is called upon to intervene in the productions of the literary work's meaning.

Classifying different groups of textual strategies and their effect on the reader enables greater insight into the mechanics of indeterminacy, as we will see in greater detail later (see section I.2.c).

b. The debate on reader-response

The interest in the dimension of the reader (both as the real, extra-textual interpreter and as an intra-textual function) marked most of the critics' reflection in the second half of the twentieth century but has seldom, or only embryonically, produced specific tools for textual analysis. *Indeterminacy* itself (sometimes loosely termed or explored as *openness*, *ungraspability*, *indefinability*, *vagueness* and even *reticence*) has been one of the most productive concepts in the theoretical debate, even if its stylistic consequences have been so far only marginally investigated.

During this period, different reader-oriented theories and studies about the emotional involvement practised on the reader by literary texts were published. The numerous approaches mainly differ from one another not in the way in which they consider the role of reader in itself, but, rather, in how they consider his relationship with the other polarity of the reading process: the text.¹¹ Theories that subordinate the reader's cooperation to the "certainty" of the written text tend to analyse the whole process as unidirectional. Such studies consider the text as relatively incomplete (and therefore needing a reader to fully activate it) but, nevertheless, they suppose that the literary work contains all the tracks that the reader needs to follow in order to fulfil his duty. These analyses focused primarily on the fact that specific rhetorical techniques structure the text and their effect *on* the reader. However, in so doing, they underestimated the cooperative role of the reader in the meaning-making process. We can list in this group

¹¹ For an introduction to the different theories of reading, see, among others, Federico Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2011).

the seminal studies by Wayne Booth (influenced by *New Criticism*), Tzvetan Todorov (who began to look at the reader as an internal element of the text), Gerald Prince (who described the *narratee* as an irresistible pole for identification of the real reader), and Michel Charles (who focused more on the dialogical aspect of the reading process and significantly localized the ground of interpretation in the *blanks* of the text).¹²

Closer to the positions held by Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, Jean-Paul Sartre and Georges Poulet (and, in general, the phenomenologists of the Geneva School), can be grouped together in a phenomenological perspective that describes the reading process as a convergence of the object-text and of the subject-reader. On the side of hermeneutics, instead we find the rigid theory of E. D. Hirsch (convinced that there is *one* valid interpretation of a work that the reader must passively recognise); Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, which considered a work in its historical reception by an audience; and the interpretation theory of Paul Ricoeur who perceived the reading process as the meeting point of two poles: an active one (the reader) and a passive one (the text), and thus that the creation of meaning requires the reader's active participation.¹³

By contrast, many studies within the fields of structuralism and semiotics brought the focus *outside* the text. They continued to assume the literal meaning of the text as the definitive starting point of the process of interpretation, whilst nevertheless considering the work as an open structure and the reader as the condition of the existence of the work. In general, structuralists and semioticians perceive the reader as a social figure, defined by social conventions. This group includes the theoretical

¹² Cf. Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961); Tzvetan Todorov, *Genre and Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gerald Prince, *Narratology: the Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982); Michel Charles, *Rhétorique de la lecture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977).

¹³ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen, 1950); Georges Poulet, 'Phenomenology of Reading', *New Literary History*, 1 (1969), 53-68; E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

reflections of Umberto Eco, Jonathan Culler, Roland Barthes, Robert Scholes, and Michael Riffaterre.¹⁴

Rather than recognising any authority within text, such perspectives consider the process of interpretation as directed by readers and, as such, completely individual. According to these conceptions, often deriving from a psychological approach, the reading process leads to an infinite amount of different interpretations, at least as numerous as the number of its individual readers. Here we find the theory of Norman Holland and David Bleich (who claimed that there is no dialogue between text and reader since the work comes from a personal synthesis made by the reader alone); even more extreme is the position of Stanley Fish, for whom the reading process does not *produce* the meaning of the work, but *coincides* with it. Moreover, Fish does not take into account the reader as an individual but rather as a member of an *interpretive community*, controlled in the act of interpretation by a set of social conventions.¹⁵ Finally, the deconstructionist scholars viewed the act of reading as a labyrinth (J. Hillis Miller and Paul De Man), or as a flux of meanings, substitutions, differences, leading to *misreading* rather than to an effective interpretation (Harold Bloom).¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), translated into English as *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); see also *Lector in fabula* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979), translated into English as *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production*, trans. by Terese Lyons (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) and *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) and *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

¹⁵ Cf. Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); David Bleich, *Reading and Feelings: an Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975); Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹⁶ For an introduction to the relationship between deconstructionism and literary criticism (with texts by Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida and Joseph Hillis Miller), cf. Harold Bloom and others, *Deconstructionism and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); cf. also Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

More recently, the rise of cognitive approaches to literature has entailed greater attention paid to the experience of reading from the perspective of the subjects involved. Research has been conducted in different fields, such as cognitive and evolutionary psychology, psycholinguistics, neuroscience, and philosophy of the mind. Particularly interesting is the literary research carried out in the theoretical framework of ‘enactivism’, such as Marco Caracciolo’s investigation into the relationship between the reading and embodiment. He studies the readers’ engagement with literary stories and the involvement of bodily experiences in the reading process. In doing so, he addresses the issue of ‘the experiential dimension of narrative [...], insisting on the situated, embodied quality of readers’ engagement with stories and on how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between texts and readers’ and on how ‘stories offer themselves as imaginative experiences because of the way they draw on and restructure readers’ familiarity with experience itself’.¹⁷

As we have seen, critical debate has been engaged for years in thorough and differentiated theoretical studies of the reading process. The research here presented focuses instead on the exploration of the rhetoric-linguistic, narrative, and structural layout of narrative texts in which different textual strategies are extensively used to manipulate indeterminacy. It is interested in how textual strategies, insofar as they create indeterminacy, affect and map out the type of interaction between the reader and the text, irrespective of the actual effect of the individual reading of the individual text. Whilst the models surveyed above gave some attention to the space allowed for reader’s intervention, there are as yet no attempts to chart thoroughly this concept and its manifestations in literature. Only Belgian critic, Georges Poulet offered some reflections on the role of the ineffable and the undetermined in his commentary on some selected passages from philosophers and authors from the Renaissance to

¹⁷ Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p. 4. See also David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

the twentieth-century, collected within his three volume work, *Le pensée indéterminée*.¹⁸

Although the terminology I am using and most of the theoretical tools of my research will refer mainly to Iser's works, I will also refer to some of the other theories mentioned above (for example by Eco and Riffaterre). The notions of *implied reader* and *indeterminacy* inhabit something of a paradox in literary studies. They have each been highly considered in the theoretical discourse (and also entered in the "palette" of textual analysis and in narratology or rhetoric's dictionary, as well as in reference texts) but neither *implied reader* nor *indeterminacy* have been systematised. One possible explanation as to this lack of careful critical attention might be the difficulty of defining the notion of *implied reader* itself. Due to the linguistic ambiguity of its name, and the way in which it intimates correspondence with Booth's *implied author*,¹⁹ *implied reader* has often been misunderstood and confused either with the function of the ideal reader, of the narratee, or, even worse, of the real reader. As a result, the full potential of this concept has not been fully explored. Let us consider, as an example, the definition given by Gerald Prince in his *Dictionary of Narratology*:

[I]mplied reader. The audience presupposed by a text; a real reader's second self (shaped in accordance with the implied author's values and cultural norms). The implied reader of a text must be distinguished from its real reader. In the first place, the same real reader can read texts presupposing different audiences (and let himself or herself be shaped in accordance with different implied authors' values and norms). In the second place, one text (having,

¹⁸ Thus Poulet described the aim of his three-volume work: 'L'histoire littéraire et l'histoire des idées s'occupent généralement d'œuvres déterminées. [...] Ne pouvons-nous pas tenter de faire l'inverse? [...] ne serait-il pas possible, non, bien entendu, de faire une histoire de la pensée indéterminée, mais au moins d'en faire apparaître dans les différents temps et les différents lieux les multiples variations? [...] Derrière les déterminations très apparentes qui occupent le premier rang dans toutes les œuvres ou presque, il y a presque toujours aussi, mais de façon bien plus discrète, l'expression d'une réalité toute différente, située nécessairement dans un profond retrait. C'est l'ensemble de pensées qui ont pour privilège ou désavantage de ne pouvoir être exprimées que de façon indirecte ou même négative.' Georges Poulet, *La pensée indéterminée*, 3 vols (Paris: Puf, 1985-1990), I (1985), 5. Also note that Poulet's 'Phenomenology of Reading' was a landmark for Iser's own phenomenology of reading.

¹⁹ Cf. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

like all texts, one implied reader) can have two or more real readers.²⁰

Far from being incorrect, this definition nonetheless fails to highlight the “textuality” of the implied reader, who is not only reactive to the implied author’s norms and values, but also *shaped* by the texts’ strategies. If we want to correct this kind of misappropriation, we need to return to Iser’s original definitions of *implied reader* and *indeterminacy*, wherein they represent appropriate internal and heuristic functions, whose study can offer valuable considerations on the stylistic, narrative and structural layout of a literary work. In the following sections I will clarify my own approach, how it differs from Wolfgang Iser’s and other theorists’ models, and how I am going to apply my original approach in order to analyse the five case studies of this research.

c. The Italian critical context

The change of paradigm in literary criticism and theory between the 1960s and the 1970s, and the new considerations of the role of the *reader* that it engendered, also affected the Italian panorama. The greatest contributions to this new perspective came from the pioneer, Umberto Eco who, with *Opera aperta* in 1962,²¹ and from an aesthetics approach, together with reference to information theory, theorised the open character of every work of art and specifically of contemporary works of art. In complementarity with Iser’s idea of indeterminacy, Eco’s conception of the open work took into account the ‘natural’ openness of works of art, as well as the possibility that authors deliberately design their works to be more open to the audience’s interpretation. Moving to semiotics (but giving account of pragmatic issues too) in the 1970s,²² Eco proposed the figure of the Model Reader and dealt with the problem of interpretation in

²⁰ Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, revised edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), *ad vocem*.

²¹ Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*.

²² Cf. Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milan: Bompiani, 1975), translated into English as *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Mcmillan, 1976); and *Lector in Fabula*.

the essay anthology, *I limiti dell'interpretazione*.²³ Eco's theory of the work of art's openness and of the Model Reader are similar to Iser's idea of indeterminacy in that Eco too conceives the literal meaning of the text as the first condition that makes communication between the text and the reader possible. In addition, like Iser, Eco posits the role of the reader as an essential and cooperative one: 'il testo è una macchina pigra che esige dal lettore un fiero lavoro cooperativo per riempire spazi di non-detto o di già-detto rimasti per così dire in bianco'.²⁴ Here, we find some similarities to the Iserian idea of textual *blanks* and to Ingarden's one of *spots of indeterminacy*. Likewise, Eco also speaks of textual strategies that facilitate the Model Reader to find his role in the text:

Per organizzare la propria strategia testuale un autore deve riferirsi a una serie di competenze [...] pertanto prevederà un Lettore Modello capace di cooperare all'attualizzazione testuale come egli, l'autore, pensava, e di muoversi interpretativamente così come egli si è mosso generativamente;²⁵

Per interpretazione si intende (nell'ambito di questo libro) la attualizzazione semantica di quanto il testo quale strategia vuole dire attraverso la cooperazione del proprio Lettore Modello.²⁶

In comparing the two theories by Iser and Eco we should bear in mind that, even if they produced similar results and originated from the same critical debate as well as from aesthetical premises, they arise from different theoretical grounds. Iser moves from phenomenology and hermeneutics while Eco deals with semiotics. Eco's works remain major milestones in the development of reader-oriented studies, and his semiotics approach gave rise to several practical applications (for example, the semiotic readings of Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*).²⁷

In the 1970s, Maria Corti, from the arena of the Italian structuralism, offered her account of the concepts of implied author and reader in *Principi della comunicazione letteraria* and in *Il viaggio*

²³ Umberto Eco, *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (Milan: Bompiani), translated in English by *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

²⁴ Eco, *Lector in fabula*, p.25.

²⁵ Eco, *Lector in fabula*, p. 55.

²⁶ Eco, *Lector in fabula*, p.179.

²⁷ *Leggere i Promessi Sposi*, ed. by Giovanni Manetti (Milan: Bompiani, 1989).

testuale.²⁸ Reflections about the role of the reader remained relatively lively in Italy throughout the 1980s, but were confined to the field of aesthetics and of reception theory. Two interesting publications, both of 1986, testify to this fact: the collective volume edited by Riccardo Ruschi, *Estetica tedesca oggi* (containing papers by Iser, Jauss and others),²⁹ and an issue of the journal *Immagine riflessa* entitled ‘Saggi sull’estetica della ricezione’ (where we have again articles by Jauss, Iser, Barthes, Leenhardt). In 1989, a single issue of the journal *VERSUS* directed by Umberto Eco, edited by Mauro Ferraresi and Paola Pugliatti,³⁰ and containing articles by, among others, Gerald Prince and Janós S. Petöfi, was entirely dedicated to a reflection on reader-oriented theories with the title ‘Il lettore: modelli, processi ed effetti dell’interpretazione’.³¹ These publications also show, however, that – despite interest and debate in the question of the reader in Italy – actual Italian contributions had been so far quite rare.

From the 1990s until now, critics have paid attention to the history of studies dealing with the reader in literary texts. In *La ricezione*,³² Alberto Cadioli wrote a brief introduction on the problem of reception both from a Jaussian and from an aesthetic point of view, and on the different theories that have arisen from these perspectives. Just two years earlier, a broader account of the problem of the reader in the twentieth century debates came from Federico Bertoni who, in *Il testo a quattro mani*,³³ provided a detailed retrospective on the subject whilst also suggesting some new points of reflection by proposing a ‘distinzione tra testi ridondanti e testi reticenti, gli estremi teorici di una linea sulla quale

²⁸ Maria Corti, *Principi della comunicazione letteraria* (Milan: Bompiani, 1976) and *Il viaggio testuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

²⁹ *Estetica tedesca oggi*, ed. by Riccardo Ruschi (Milan: Unicopli, 1986) and ‘Saggi sull’estetica della ricezione’, ed. by Carlo Arcuri, *L’immagine riflessa*, 1 (1986).

³⁰ In her 1985 work on the point of view, Paola Pugliatti also offers an overview on the relationship between the role of the reader and the focalisation of the point of view in different theories. Cf. Paola Pugliatti, *Lo sguardo nel racconto. Teoria e prassi del punto di vista* (Turin: Zanichelli, 1985).

³¹ Mauro Ferraresi and Paola Pugliatti, eds., ‘Il lettore: modelli, processi ed effetti dell’interpretazione’, «VERSUS», 52-53 (1989).

³² Alberto Cadioli, *La ricezione* (Rome: Laterza, 1998).

³³ Federico Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani*.

si potrebbero disporre tutti i testi letterari, collocati in punti diversi in base alla loro miscela specifica di detto e non-detto'.³⁴ Bertoni intimates that he accepts Ingarden and Iser's suggestions by maintaining also that

il testo letterario vive in un regime di incompletezza strutturale. Nessun delirio di scrittura potrebbe mai saturare ogni dettaglio, ogni circostanza implicata, ogni aspetto che viene rappresentato con un profilo necessariamente schematico.³⁵

Bertoni also hints at a possible further development of a literary history conceived on the basis of the distinction between *testi ridondanti* and *testi reticenti*, and by assuming that

[U]n discorso simile va fatto anche per gli sviluppi della storia letteraria. È certamente troppo sbrigativo tracciare un discrimine netto tra le epoche, dicendo che il romanzo "classico" è ridondante mentre la narrativa del Novecento si avvale di procedure più reticenti.³⁶

Significant is also the contribution of Vittorio Spinazzola, who with *L'esperienza della lettura* reflected on the two poles of the literary system (*production* and *fruition*) and their cooperation in the active experience of reading.³⁷ Finally, in 2009, Andrea Rondini dedicated a whole book to the theme of reading in Italian narrative, moving from Foscolo to contemporary literature.³⁸

This brief overview of Italian critical production regarding the role of the reader inside a narrative text aims to highlight how, apart from Eco's pioneering contributions, reader-oriented theorization has been relatively neglected. The same can be said for the actual implementation of the tools generated by reception, reader-oriented, and hermeneutical theories within textual analysis. There have been some isolated episodes: for example, in *I personaggi lettori nell'opera di Italo Calvino*,³⁹ Isotta

³⁴ Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani*, p.240.

³⁵ Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani*, p. 249.

³⁶ Federico Bertoni, *Il testo a quattro mani*, p. 242.

³⁷ Vittorio Spinazzola, *L'esperienza della lettura* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2010).

³⁸ Andrea Rondini, *Lettori. Forme della ricezione ed esperienze di lettura nella narrativa italiana da Foscolo al nuovo millennio* (Pisa and Rome: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2009).

³⁹ Isotta Piazza, *I personaggi lettori nell'opera di Italo Calvino* (Milan: Unicopli, 2009).

Piazza dedicates some pages to the *implied reader* in the works of Italo Calvino, or, in *Dalla centralità del testo alla centralità del lettore*,⁴⁰ Romano Luperini highlights how in the works of Boccaccio, Manzoni, Tozzi and Calvino, the figure of the reader was awarded greater significance than in other classic Italian novels. Most recently, Nicola Gardini, in *Lacuna*,⁴¹ charted the poetics of blanks, omissions, and gaps in ancient and modern literature. His erudite dissertation of this character of narration was pursued with several examples in which the *blank* is considered as the main feature of Western modern literature (the parallel with Auerbach's use of *realism* is clear in the structure of the book). Blanks and omissions can be linked to the collaboration that the text demands of the reader, but Gardini's book does not aim to provide an organic treatise of the manipulation of indeterminacy.⁴² Indeed, these analyses are not concerned with how the reader is encouraged to cooperate by the structure of the text itself.

In the following sections I will clarify my own methodology, how it differs from Wolfgang Iser's and other theorists' models, and how I am going to apply it in order to investigate indeterminacy in the five case studies of this research.

2. Methodological framework

In this section, I will discuss the models and approaches that influenced this research and I will clarify how my own research differs from these models.

Moreover, I will justify the choice of focusing on a specific literary genre (the novel) and on a specific context (the Italian one), and I will explain the selection of the novels here analysed. Before moving to presenting the results of this research, I will also provide clarification on

⁴⁰ Romano Luperini, *Dalla centralità del testo alla centralità del lettore* (Palermo: Palumbo, 2006).

⁴¹ Nicola Gardini, *Lacuna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014).

⁴² The theme of reticence, silence, gaps and ellipses in Italian literature has been very debated by the scholars recently, as demonstrated also by the latest work by Bice Mortara Garavelli, *Silenzi d'autore* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2015).

how I conducted the actual analyses of the selected corpus of novels, and also explain how I have selected and classified the specific textual strategies related to the manipulation of indeterminacy present in each novel.

a. Method of this research

As explained in the first section dedicated to the theoretical context, this research is largely based on Iser's aesthetic approach. In particular, it moves from the critical classic, *The Act of Reading* which contributed to the making of reader-response theories as a cornerstone in the field of literary theory, and which generated a most lively debate for the forty years that followed. My research is also informed with Iser's later critical and theoretical reflections, which opened new paths of research. In the second phase of his studies, Iser developed the idea of literature as an anthropological device, which is able to tell us something about our nature as human beings. Although he focused on this notion of literature as revelatory during the 1980s and 1990s, this conception was already present in his early work. Iser's main concern, in his anthropological approach to reading, was firstly and precisely in the interaction between the author, the text, and the reader, taking place within the act of reading. Indeed, Iser perceived a strong relationship between the formal features that constitute literary texts, and especially indeterminacy, and the possibility of interpreting the world and ourselves that they provide to us.⁴³ Despite the enormous success of Iser reader-response theory, his later works have proved less influential and have only recently started to attract critical attention. As anticipated, this later anthropological drive was not however disconnected from Iser's former aesthetic approach: the two paths of research in fact converge on the question they addressed: what is it in the literary interaction between text and reader that allows self-interpretation? Or, as Iser put it:

⁴³ See also Wolfgang Iser *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Prospecting*.

[A]esthetic response tries to ascertain why readers have images in their minds, while only perceiving letters, and how this imagery can be manipulated by textual strategies, and “literary anthropology” tries to ascertain why human beings stand in need of fictions in order to satisfy their inveterate urge to be simultaneously with themselves and outside themselves.⁴⁴

This is how Jürgen Schläeager summarised Iser’s theoretical effort:

The world is ultimately unknowable, many important things seem to be unsayable, but literature overcomes these “deficiencies” and offers its readers the chance to transcend their limitedness – on one condition only, however: that we are always conscious in the process of reading of the conditionality of everything that takes us beyond ourselves. This is what Iser tried to encapsulate.⁴⁵

In reality, Iser’s project was unable to give a complete account of the specificity of literature. However, his critical project had the merit of ‘establish[ing] an anthropology [...] that seeks to get beyond such tired binarisms as the fictive versus the real’,⁴⁶ i.e. of connecting aesthetic and anthropological research, as well as reminding us

that the work of art is never simply a clear pane of glass through which we see an extraaesthetic world. The statement of the text is created by dramatic, lyric, narrative modalities. The text is made, constructed in our reading.⁴⁷

Iser’s focus always considered both what happens *outside* the text and what happens *inside* it; or better, his interest lay in the liminal space that allows the interaction of the two.

Insofar as investigating indeterminacy means investigating the interaction between the text and the reader, it also means taking into account the potential that this interaction allows. In this research, I have focused on the aesthetic aspect of this interaction. However, this also entailed reflecting on what is at stake *in this interaction*. In particular, this

⁴⁴ Wolfgang Iser, ‘Do I write for an audience?’, *PMLA*, 115.3 (2000), 310-14 (p. 314).

⁴⁵ Jürgen Schläeager, ‘Wolfgang Iser: Legacies and Lessons’, *Comparative Critical Studies* 7.2-3 (2010), 311–24 (p. 320).

⁴⁶ Martin Swales, ‘The Acceptable Face of Theory? The Contribution of Wolfgang Iser’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 1.1–2 (2004), 45–51 (p. 45).

⁴⁷ Swales, ‘The Acceptable Face of Theory?’, p. 48.

led me to reflect on the ethical, hermeneutical, and gnoseological potential of the specific interactions analysed in the five case studies here proposed.

In addition to this double perspective, the method here applied was broadly influenced by Raphaël Baroni's rhetorical narratology,⁴⁸ Alain Rabatel's enunciative approach to the point of view,⁴⁹ Michael Riffaterre's theory of text's production and Umberto Eco's notions of the open work of art and the Model Reader (see above), as well as by the more recent enactivist approach of Marco Caracciolo to narrative, that investigates the relationship between the reader and the characters from an experiential point of view.

Although it is borne out of much-defined theoretical notions, the aim of this research was never to automatically apply a theory or to impose its application on a specific corpus of texts. In fact, my objective was to provide a consistent literary analysis based on a re-assessment of the tools produced by Iser, integrating them with the models provided by different theories and perspectives. Thus I have maintained a critical approach, evaluating, from time to time, both the strengths and the weaknesses that these models exhibit. The textual analyses that I am offering for the five case studies here considered arrived only after a thorough reflection about the role of the reader and of indeterminacy inside a fictional text. This is to say, all the notions I acquired from the theories above were used as specific tools for textual analysis and never as generic umbrella-concepts.

The main difference between this research and Iser's approach lies in the way in which I deal with the analysis of texts. Iser showed interest mainly for the structural aspect of the novel, focusing, for example, on: characterisation, narrative strategies, chapters' juxtaposition and order, narrative sequences and patterns, allusions and quotes from other texts or archetypes belonging to the literary canon, the reader's repertoire (see below for definition), point of view, and the narrative person. In doing so, he overlooked the rhetorical and linguistic aspect of the work. By contrast,

⁴⁸ Raphaël Baroni, *La tension narrative: suspense, curiosité et surprise* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006).

⁴⁹ Cf. Alain Rabatel, *Homo Narrans: pour une analyse énonciative et interactionnelle du récit* (Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2008).

I apply my analysis of indeterminacy and implied reader *inside* the text as a whole, thus examining rhetorical-linguistic strategies, structural techniques (concerning, for example, narrative techniques, chapters' division, the characters, the point of view), as well as the role of mediation that the reader has between text and reality, which – as I will consider in greater detail later – is concerned with the *reader's repertoire*.

b. The focus on the novel

The central idea of this research is that an analysis based on indeterminacy and on the implied reader can be applied to every literary genre (and to every literary text, of which indeterminacy is an unavoidable element). Nevertheless, I decided to solely dedicate my attention to the fictional novel. This choice was, at least at the beginning, a natural consequence of the fact that critical debate concerned with the reader in the text reserves interest for mostly this genre (even if, occasionally, there have been explorations in poetry and drama, for instance, by Iser, who applied reader-response theory both to Spenser's *Arcadia* and to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*).⁵⁰ My focus on the novel also reflects my sense of the unique interaction between the reader and the text that such a form makes possible.

For example, in the first place, from its very origins, the novel has been a genre that involves individual fruition.⁵¹ Unlike poetry and the epic that have an oral origin, and which were initially conceived to be read aloud or even to be sung (mostly in a collective situation), the novel, at least in its modern form, implicitly encourages a dialogue between the text itself and the reader. It is most often an individual activity between the two. The novel differs also from drama. The latter can of course be enjoyed just like a written work through reading, but its structural and performative nature influence and transform its written aspect. On the contrary, the

⁵⁰ See Iser, *Prospecting and The Implied Reader*.

⁵¹ I am referring to the modern conception of novel. For some brief but enlightening reflections on the relationship between readers and novels, cf. the classic Albert Thibaudet, *Le lecteur de romans* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925). See also Guido Mazzoni, *Teoria del romanzo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011).

fruition of a novel is fulfilled and completed during, or better, it *coincides with*, the very moment of reading. This aspect makes the choice of starting by examining indeterminacy – and its role in manipulating reader’s intervention – inside this genre primary and worthy.

I should point out, one could extend such an analysis to fictional prose as a whole, thus including, for example, short stories. And, indeed, most of the textual strategies I am going to examine are undoubtedly used in short stories (and, we should note, all the authors considered in the five case studies wrote short stories too). Nevertheless, I follow the premise that some aspects, characteristic to the short story genre (the shortness of a *short* story, for example) influence the role of the reader in the reading process and, therefore, overgeneralisation would be unhelpful. Besides, short stories often appear in collections, and require that they be read as such. The disposition of a collection – the order of the stories and their juxtaposition, for example – are all essential elements that, in my opinion, need a separate and specific evaluation. All this could, of course, lead to further research in the future.

c. The five case studies and the structure of this research

As I have suggested, the perspective and approach of this research could undoubtedly be applied to any corpus of novels in any language, and a comparative analysis could bear most valuable outcomes. Focusing on one body of literature (Italian) rather than others is, however, a means to limit the parameters of a potentially infinite study. This choice poses of course some context-specific questions. For example, to begin with, the novel appeared late in the Italian literature landscape and its appearance did not coincide with the beginning of modernity or with a social revolution, as it had happened in England or France, for instance. The dialogue that these authors have with previous literary traditions is thus informed by context-specific variables.

In a similar manner to the choice of one specific context, the selection of texts for my analysis may appear (and indeed *is* at least to some extent) arbitrary. I made this selection based on the common feature

that all the works share: that is, each has been attributed a sense of *openness, vagueness, ungraspability*, as well as other characteristics within the same semantic field. My initial hypothesis was whether this widespread trait could be explained by referring to the concept of *indeterminacy*. These five novels are works by canonical twentieth-century Italian authors; therefore, it is even more significant to understand how they challenged critical analyses and how their *ungraspable* nature is generated.

Nevertheless, this undoubtedly personal selection was made with an awareness that examples could be taken from different works and are potentially much more numerous. In presenting the works here analysed and the textual strategies through which their indeterminacy is maximised, I am also cautioning that the list could be, of course, longer and different, depending on the period and on the corpus considered. This research must be seen as open to further enrichment and perspectives, both within the Italian tradition and with a comparative perspective.

The five case studies will be presented in a chronological order based on single authors and works. As a further possible line of enquiry, it would be interesting to address some important historiographical matters. For example: can indeterminacy be considered as a textual element related to some extratextual, historical, sociological circumstances? Is there any historical trend or reason related to the amount of indeterminacy in a work or group of works? Nevertheless, my attention in this research will focus more on the detection of textual phenomena or groups of strategies used in the selected novels, rather than on detecting historical and sociological trends. By carefully setting the critical parameters of this research, I allow for greater attention on both the individual features of the works analysed and the similarities they share. In addition, a focus on this corpus in isolation enables us to point out the peculiarities of works usually examined in comparison to other texts of the same period or trend.

The case studies examined in this research were all written by different authors and belong to a relatively broad period (almost fifty years). Therefore, they belong to different historical and cultural moments. As I have stated, what they all share is their being described as

‘indeterminate’, ‘vague’, ‘ungraspable’, ‘different’, ‘eccentric’ or otherwise by readers and critics. I am certainly not suggesting that there is such thing as a mark of *ungraspability* or *eccentricity* that can be tracked in these works and that we can classify. However, as we will see in the following chapters, these novels do indeed challenge readers in some way, interestingly before postmodernist works like Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*⁵² made it a common practice. In analysing them, we will be able to perceive the different ways in which a more *indeterminate* character can be generated and, in this sense, our five novels will potentially provide us with a better understanding of the role of indeterminacy in literary works as well as the possibility of its manipulation.

Moreover, to the extent that they represent very different types of novel, we are able to draw broader conclusions as to the generation and role of indeterminacy. We can note their similarities (i.e., their shared characteristics of being particularly *indeterminate*) and their differences, (the diverse ways in which they seek the interaction with the reader, as well as their different literary modes such as realism, the fantastic, and literary nonsense). In considering Tozzi’s *Con gli occhi chiusi*, I will focus on how a kind of *vertigo effect* is created in the text; in Ladolfi’s *La pietra lunare*, I will observe how indeterminacy is generated in relation to the fantastic mode; I will then analyse the openness of *Conversazione in Sicilia* in its multiple senses; I will give account of the accumulative indeterminacy of *La cognizione del dolore* and reflect on its supposed anti-narrativity; finally, I will tackle how the hybrid form of Ortese’s *L’Iguana* constitutes its eccentricity.

The charts proposed below help to clarify the development of my research, and the way in which I conceive textual strategies with reference to indeterminacy in each literary text as well as the role of the reader within the texts. In Chart 1, I have listed the textual strategies that I will analyse in relation to indeterminacy in the five novels considered. In Chart

⁵² Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Claudio Milanini, Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), II.

2 I have divided them into five macro-groups, which correspond to the different levels of the text: linguistic and rhetorical, structural, metanarrative strategies, narrative and repertoire level. As it can be observed in Chart 2, some strategies belong to more than one macro-group (like, for example *ellipses*, *omissions*, *gaps* and *parody*). In the analyses of each novel I will emphasise their effect on the level most relevantly involved in the context of the specific novel analysed (for example in the case of Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, the use of omissions and gaps will be considered mainly at a structural level, while in Landolfi's *La pietra lunare* it will be considered mainly at the narrative level).

Chart 1: Textual strategies analysed in the novels

author/work(s)	relevant strategies
<p style="text-align: center;">Federigo Tozzi <i>Con gli occhi chiusi</i> (1919)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Structural level</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">topic/comment dynamics; time/space organisation; plot system; ellipses, omissions, gaps; characters; juxtaposition.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Linguistic- rhetorical level</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">syntax, punctuations; conjunctions and subjunctives; reticence.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Metanarrative level</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">meta-literary images.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Narrative level</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">use of verb tenses; use of digression techniques; gaps in the narration; use of descriptions; reticence; narrated monologue; use of point of view and focalization; juxtaposition; deixis.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Tommaso Landolfi <i>La pietra lunare</i> (1939)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Structural level</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">use of the fantastic mode; irruption of everyday life; characters; time/space organisation; ellipses, omissions, and gaps.</p>

	<p><u>Linguistic- rhetorical level</u></p> <p>semantic field of indeterminacy; nomination and antonomasia; neologisms and use of rare and obsolete words; linguistic creation; reticence.</p> <p><u>Metanarrative level</u></p> <p>use of mock paratext and appendices; reflection on literary medium.</p> <p><u>Narrative level</u></p> <p>hesitation; reticence; digression; irony; omniscient narrator; comments.</p> <p><u>Repertoire level</u></p> <p>intertextual references; parody; use of the fantastic mode.</p>
<p>Elio Vittorini <i>Conversazione in Sicilia</i> (1941)</p>	<p><u>Structural level</u></p> <p>implicitness; dialogic structures; characters; poliphony; lack of action; time/space organization.</p> <p><u>Linguistic- rhetorical level</u></p> <p>reticence; caesura; nominal devices (e.g. use of articles), repetitions; antonomasia; musicality; formulaic language.</p> <p><u>Metanarrative level</u></p> <p>use of paratext.</p> <p><u>Repertoire level</u></p> <p>symbolism; historical/extratextual references;</p>
<p>Carlo Emilio Gadda <i>La cognizione del dolore</i> (1963)</p>	<p><u>Structural level</u></p> <p>accumulation; lack of action; time/space organization; characters.</p> <p><u>Linguistic- rhetorical level</u></p> <p>syntax; lists; amplification devices</p>

	<p>(parentheses, digressions, asides, details); pastiche; deformation of language.</p> <p><u>Metanarrative level</u></p> <p>narrator's interventions.</p> <p><u>Narrative level</u></p> <p>descriptions; irony; comments; point of view and focalisation; narrated monologue.</p> <p><u>Repertoire level</u></p> <p>parody; pastiche.</p>
<p>Anna Maria Ortese <i>L'Iguana</i> (1965)</p>	<p><u>Structural level</u></p> <p>nonsense elements; use of narrative frame; characters; hybridism; time/space organisation; themes.</p> <p><u>Linguistic- rhetorical level</u></p> <p>baroque language; reticence.</p> <p><u>Metanarrative level</u></p> <p>reflection on realism and literature; the figural made literal; use of framing.</p> <p><u>Narrative level</u></p> <p>irony; appeals to the reader; comments.</p> <p><u>Repertoire level</u></p> <p>parody; intertextual references; use of literary nonsense elements.</p>

Chart 2: Macro-groups of textual strategies

Structural level	<p>gaps in the narration; story/plot manipulations; uses of dialogues; different narrative levels; intradiegetic allusions; paratext and mock paratext; use of narrative frames; manipulations of the point of view; digressions; extradiegetic allusions (literary, cultural, historical); parody; deixis; use of descriptions; juxtaposition; topic/comment dynamics; time/space organization; use of literary genres and modes; hybridism; characters; ellipses, gaps, and omissions; lack of action; themes.</p>
Linguistic-rhetorical level	<p>linguistic creation; use of rare/obsolete words; repetition techniques; enumeration, lists and catalogues; amplification devices; deformation of language; semantic field of indeterminacy; caesura; antonomasia; nominal devices; reticence; pastiche; parody; symbolism; conjunctions/subjunctions; punctuation; syntax; formulaic language; musicality.</p>
Metanarrative level	<p>playing with the elements of literary communication; the theme of interpretation; reader-character and author-character relationship; use of comments;</p>

	manipulations of the point of view; real and mock paratext; use of narrative frames; reference to literary norms; use of frames; the figural made literal; metaliterary images; narrator's interventions; appeals to the reader.
Narrative level	different types of narrator; narrated monologue; switch of the narrator; focalization; use of irony; digressions; chapter summaries; use of comment; manipulations of the point of view; use of descriptions; deixis; hesitation; juxtaposition; reticence; appeals to the reader; use of verb tenses; ellipses, omissions, and gaps.
Repertoire level	quotations; use of rare and obsolete words; pastiche; parody; extradiegetic allusions (literary/cultural/historical); reference to literary norms; intertextual references; use of literary genres and modes; symbolism.

The linguistic-rhetorical level deals with the stylistic layout of the novels. The structural and narrative levels both refer to the narrated content of the novels and its organisation, but while structural strategies control the organization of the narrative content, narrative strategies involve the reader's perception of the presence or absence of a narrative voice in the novel, and the interaction between the narrator and the reader. The metanarrative level deals instead with the crossing of the boundaries of

literary communication. Further explanation is required for the last macro-group: the repertoire strategies. *Repertoire* is another key concept in Iser's act of reading. It defines all that which is inside the text that is familiar to the reader:

The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or the whole culture from which the text has emerged – in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called “extratextual reality”.⁵³

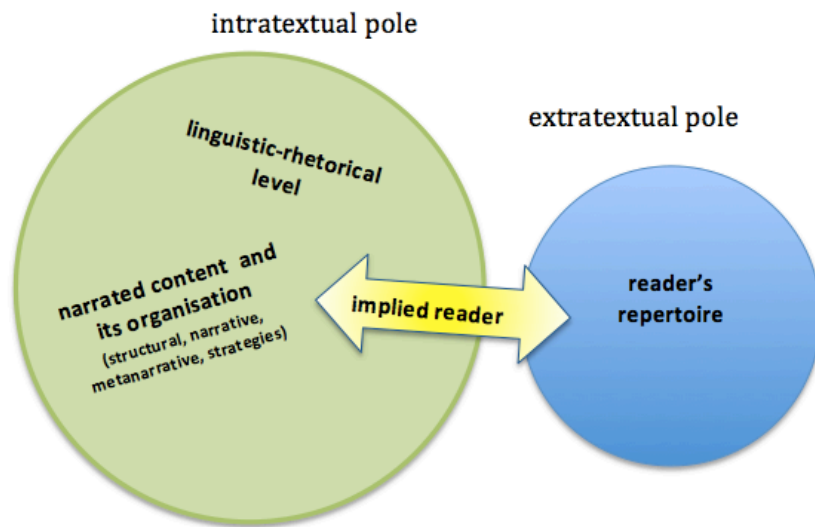
As Iser also maintains,⁵⁴ these familiar elements inside the text should strengthen its determinacy rate. However, since they are put in a new context (namely, the fictional one), the effect that repertoire strategies bring about is different: ‘the familiar territory is interesting not because it *is* familiar, but because it is to lead in an unfamiliar direction’.⁵⁵ As we are going to see in the chapters that follow, this transformation of the reader's repertoire into a different, unfamiliar context is particularly relevant as the question of realism – bound to the problem of referentiality – is a crucial point of reflection in the poetics of all the authors we are dealing with.

A last schematization is offered in Chart 3 where we can see how all the strategies can be attributed to two poles: the textual pole (containing the linguistic-rhetorical strategies and the three categories of narration strategies) and the extratextual pole (that consists of the repertoire). The communication between the two poles is possible by means of the *implied reader* that belongs to a liminal space and at the same time is *inside* the text but also trespasses outside it.

⁵³ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 69.

⁵⁴ ‘The determinacy of the repertoire supplies a meeting point between text and reader, but as communication always entails conveying something new, obviously this meeting point cannot consist entirely of familiar territory.’ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 69.

⁵⁵ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 70.

Chart 3: The two poles

The division of the strategies into charts is merely functional. They do not attempt in any way to be definitive. Indeed, their usefulness lies in the fact that they highlight some of the research questions I intend to investigate, such as:

1. Can analysing ‘indeterminacy’ allow us to understand the openness, ungraspability, difficulty of a novel?
2. How do different strategies convey indeterminacy?
3. How do the different textual levels interact?
4. Is there a group of strategies that can be defined as properly “indeterminacy generators”?
5. How do the two poles (intratextual and extratextual) interact?

Furthermore, these charts also offer a visual representation of this multi-perspectival research that interweaves theoretical and textual methods of analysis. To divide and organise the different strategies detected, I referred to some critical studies previously carried out. For the designation of the linguistic and rhetorical macro-group, I took inspiration from Wayne Booth, Michel Charles, Alain Rabatel and Raphael Baroni. The narration pole is largely influenced by Iser, but I also referred to some important

narratological analyses such as Prince's and Monika Fludernik's.⁵⁶ For the narrator and narratorial voice macro-groups, meanwhile, I referred to the milestone studies by Gerard Genette,⁵⁷ Franz K. Stanzel,⁵⁸ and Dorrit Cohn.⁵⁹ Finally, in the definition of the repertoire strategies, I followed Iser's reflections (as above).

In chapters II-VI, I will be presenting the five case studies of this research. Each case study will highlight a specific manifestation of indeterminacy. The hope is, by the end, that we will have accounted for a range of ways in which indeterminacy can be maximised in a novel. Chapter II deals with how the manipulation of indeterminacy in Federigo Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi* goes in the direction of the author's poetics of the 'pessimo lettore,' and how it contributes to the generation of a kind of 'vertigo effect' for the reader. Chapter III analyses the interaction between indeterminacy and a specific literary mode, the fantastic. In particular, it is concerned with how Tommaso Landolfi in *La pietra lunare* plays with the reader, both using the fantastic elements and overcoming them. Chapter IV considers how, in Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*, openness is generated in a constant dialogue with the reader through the use of different textual strategies that encourage his intervention. By contrast, in Chapter V's analysis of Carlo Emilio Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*, we will see an example of how indeterminacy can also be emphasised by means of accumulation and cumulative devices which are at work at different textual levels in this novel. The final case study, Chapter VI, discusses Anna Maria Ortese's *L'Iguana*. Similarly to Chapter II, this chapter is concerned with the relationship between indeterminacy and hybridism of genres. Here, in particular, indeterminacy is manipulated by the use of a group of strategies that are very close to literary nonsense.

⁵⁶ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. from German by Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁷ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ Franz K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. by Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵⁹ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

In the last chapter, I will finally draw the conclusions of this research as to the analysis of indeterminacy as a feature of literary texts, and the way in which indeterminacy can be manipulated by means of different textual strategies. This will lead me, first of all, to provide some comparative remarks with regards to the five different novels considered. I will emphasise how indeterminacy can be produced in a variety of different ways at the same time as highlighting how the novels share similarities in the way in which they manipulate indeterminacy as well as in the effects that the latter generates.

Finally, I will conclude by reflecting on how analysing the manipulation of indeterminacy in these five novels allows us to better understand their so-called *extravagant* character – namely, their having been described as eccentric works that defy comprehension and which cannot be conclusively labelled. That is to say, I will reflect on what the data collected can tell us about the poetics of the authors here considered.

II. The vertigo effect in *Con gli occhi chiusi* by Federigo Tozzi

1. Introduction¹

The image of vertigo is recurrent in the narrative works of Federigo Tozzi, which often deal with a sense of dizziness and numbness that his protagonists feel towards reality and human relationships. Not only is vertigo a central image in the novel analysed in this chapter, *Con gli occhi chiusi*, in particular, but vertigo is also a *leitmotiv* in Tozzi's private writing where it is often associated with the practices of reading and writing. We can see this, for example, in the following passages where the Tuscan author describes his own experiences of reading in some letters to his wife, Emma:²

A volte devo interrompermi e gettarmi sul letto, perché mi prende *come uno sbalordimento doloroso*. (12 marzo 1907)³ [my emphasis]

Ho pensato a certi cipressi che ho intraveduti in una poesia del Carducci, ho ripensato ad un cielo d'arancio, a un cielo che mi pare d'aver visto, poi a certe croci nere e gigantesche, a una donna del D'Annunzio, che si è fusa in una statua bianca, che è divenuta il corpo nudo della mia adorata Mimì, poi ho sentito il rumore di un sospiro. Mi sono alzato dalla sedia dov'ero seduto da sì gran tempo, sono uscito di camera guardandomi come fossi inseguito./ *Ed ora ho come una vertigine*. (3 febbraio 1903)⁴ [my emphasis]

This image is indeed related to a *quid* that is always perceptible in Tozzi's works, namely 'il senso e il destino di una letteratura naturalmente

¹Unless differently signalled, all the quotations from Tozzi's works are from Federigo Tozzi, *Opere*, ed. by Marco Marchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1987).

²For some insightful remarks on these passages from Tozzi's letters and their connections with his readings and reading habits see Pietro Benzoni, 'Le biblioteche di Federigo Tozzi' in Anna Dolfi, *Biblioteche reali e immaginarie* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2015), pp. 307-23.

³Federigo Tozzi, *Novale*, ed. by Glauco Tozzi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1984), p. 82.

⁴Tozzi, *Novale*, p. 57.

“difficile”⁵. This sense of difficulty became a *topos* among the critics.⁶ It originates from the style and the structure of Tozzi’s works and consists in a discomfort generated by a clash between the texts and the reader, for whom a certain effort is required in order to fully grasp the text’s meaning. As we will see in this chapter – and as was anticipated by the passages from Tozzi’s letters above – there is a correspondence between how the author conceived reading and writing as dizzying and painful processes, and the effect he tried to stimulate in his reader, which we can call a vertigo effect. This effect is particularly perceptible in *Con gli occhi chiusi*.

One could call the image of vertigo an expressionistic one insofar as it alludes to the violent effects and processes of deformation it poses for the characters and the reader. However, *expressionism* is just one of the many partially effective labels that the critics have tried unsuccessfully, through the years, to attach to Tozzi’s style and poetic intentions.⁷ The classification of his works has always proven uncomfortable. Many of the first early critics (Baldini, among others) tended to pigeonhole Tozzi’s works according to the phenomenon of *frammentismo* and to label his works as a symptom of the crisis of the naturalistic novel and of the uncertainty of boundaries between poetry, lyricism and prose typical of the period. Borgese was the first to highlight Tozzi’s struggle to escape that crisis by using new tools for representation, although he diminished the overall aim of the author by positioning his work in the context of a *ritorno all’ordine*.⁸ De Michelis’ position similarly projected how Tozzi

⁵ Stefano Giovanardi, ‘L’espressionismo’, in *Storia della narrativa italiana del Novecento*, ed. by Giovanna De Angelis and Stefano Giovanardi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2004), pp. 150-83 (p. 157).

⁶ See for example recently Turchetta: ‘La controversa fortuna di Tozzi certo dipende in buona misura dal fatto che i suoi testi sono, per così dire, piuttosto inospitali nei confronti del lettore, al quale non concedono nessuna facile lusinga: né il piacere dell’intreccio, né la catarsi dell’immedesimazione, né alcuna forma di consolazione.’ Gianni Turchetta, ‘Lo sguardo offuscato: come si vede “con gli occhi chiusi”’ *Interval(le)s* 6.6 (2012), 1-20 (p. 7).

⁷ See Riccardo Castellana, *Parole cose persone. Il realismo modernista* (Pisa and Rome: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2009). In this book Castellana not only discusses Tozzi’s realism and expressionism, but also provides a review of the most recent critical approaches to Tozzi’s works in the chapter entitled ‘Il punto su Tozzi (1990-2000)’, pp. 123-41.

⁸ See Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, ‘Federigo Tozzi’, in *Tempo di edificare* (Milan: Treves, 1923), pp. 23-63.

had become, through the years, an author who represented the paradoxical need and difficulty in finding new solutions for the twentieth century novel.⁹ Since the 1960s, when Tozzi's affinity to *Naturalismo* was discarded, and Debenedetti reevaluated the author's work,¹⁰ much has been said about its "modernity". Thus many of the phenomena attributed to the twentieth-century novel's poetics have been pinpointed in his works and especially in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. For example, critics have plotted the generic contamination between the novel and the short story, attention to – and isolation of – tiny insignificant events, and a sense of vagueness and ungraspability that is concretized in the 'scomporsi della temporalità, l'intersecarsi dei piani di azione, il moltiplicarsi dei punti di vista'.¹¹

Tozzi's so-called "modernity" was linked to its vertigo effect and to the effort it demands from the reader. On the shared idea of Tozzi's modernity, however, in 1971, Maxia called for some caution, inviting a comparison between Tozzi's works and the ones produced in the same period by European modernism. He suggested that such a comparative approach would recalibrate the modernity of *Con gli occhi chiusi*. In Maxia's view, Tozzi's operation cannot be defined as revolutionary because, both in *Con gli occhi chiusi* and in all his other narrative works, the main narrative structures *do* in fact resist. Maxia proposes to look instead at the literary work as an eversion from the inside, achieved through the manipulation of syntax and through the selection of the "narratable" material. Despite the rudimentary nature of Tozzi's narrative tools, they proved effective, and Maxia recognizes that the author worked with a certain degree of intention to break with traditional standards: 'con intento evidentemente aggressivo nei confronti dei modelli narrativi

⁹ See Eurialo De Michelis, *Dal frammento al romanzo. Saggio su Tozzi* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1936). See also Luigi Reina: 'A questo punto una cosa era assodata: bisognava far bene i conti con Tozzi se si voleva veramente chiarire tutto il problema della narrativa italiana contemporanea, per le implicazioni culturali che ad essa erano sottese, per l'originalità dell'elaborazione, per la diversità dell'esposizione, per l'organizzazione inedita della materia, per l'eccezionalità dello stile'. Luigi Reina, *Invito alla lettura di Tozzi* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), p. 121.

¹⁰ Giacomo Debenedetti, *Il personaggio uomo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1970) and *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Milan: Garzanti, 1971).

¹¹ Annamaria Cavalli Pasini, *Il mistero retorico della scrittura. Saggi su Tozzi narratore* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1984), p. 50.

consacrati dalla tradizione (sebbene non sia chiaro fino a che punto l'autore abbia valutato la portata di questa aggressione)'.¹² Whatever awareness Tozzi had of the final outcomes of his aggression, he chose his tools deliberately as 'veri e propri granelli di sabbia gettati proditoriamente dentro il meccanismo del romanzo'.¹³

Debenedetti also cautioned against attributing to Tozzi a revolutionary intention of dismantling and renovating the form of the novel. But more recent criticism has overwhelmingly sought to chart Tozzi's relationship with the European culture of his time; it presents a portrait of the author as less naïve and provincial, as we can read in the words of Castellana when he writes, 'il suo istinto di scrittore e di artista lo porta a convergere nei risultati – per una sorta di generazione spontanea [...] con i grandi modernisti europei suoi contemporanei'.¹⁴ It is indeed Castellana who used the definition of 'realismo modernista' for the works of Pirandello, Tozzi and Svevo.¹⁵ According to Castellana, Tozzi developed,

parallelamente [alle avanguardie storiche] un'idea di letteratura, e del romanzo in particolare, molto diversa, che non ha comportato nessuna vera rottura con la tradizione del realismo ottocentesco, ma ha semmai instaurato con esso [...] una dialettica e persino paradossale, fatta è vero di contrasti ma anche di significative permanenze.¹⁶

For Castellana, this is the feature that defines European modernism (consistent with Auerbach's definition). With the European modernists, Tozzi shares an interest in the genre of the novel and the short story; an inward-looking perspective directed toward spiritual life and innermost feelings (and, as such, an interest in psychology); the deployment of epiphanies in the narrative; and the use of free indirect speech. Another

¹² Sandro Maxia, *Uomini e bestie nella narrativa di Tozzi* (Padua: Liviana, 1972), p. 15.

¹³ Maxia, p. 16.

¹⁴ Riccardo Castellana, 'Introduzione', in *Federigo Tozzi in Europa* (Rome: Carocci, 2017), ed. by Riccardo Castellana and Ilaria de Seta, pp. 11-17 (p. 12). See also in the same book Valeria Taddei, 'Generazione spontanea. La poetica alto-modernista di Tozzi', pp. 79-90.

¹⁵ Castellana, *Parole cose persone*.

¹⁶ Castellana, *Parole cose persone*, p. 13.

important trait of modernist realism present in Tozzi is a kind of constructivist and positive approach to the genre of the novel, considered as a way that ‘consente allo scrittore modernista di alludere alla possibilità di una interpretazione del reale’¹⁷ and that comes from a ‘rinnovata esigenza di concepire la letteratura come mediazione’.¹⁸ To suggest that an interpretation of the real through the novel is possible, however, does not mean to assume that it is a straightforward task. Modernism might believe in the possibility of mediation but this mediation is only available through the *subject* and not just through *objects*. The novel and the literary work can offer mediation, but mediation implies that there is more than one subject involved: it is not just about the author but also about the reader.¹⁹

Despite recent critical agreement on Tozzi’s modernism, there remain characters of ungraspability and some difficulties in classifying his poetics. Indeed, we might agree with Federico Boccaccini when he argues in a similar vein to Georges Poulet that

la storia letteraria e quella delle idee si occupano principalmente di opere e di pensieri determinati [...]. Quando questo elemento non è presente ci si trova in imbarazzo e non si sa bene come classificare uno scrittore. Forse si dovrebbe accettare l’idea che accanto a pensatori e scrittori con espressioni determinate ve ne sono altri la cui difficoltà di determinazione fa poetica a parte [...]. Tozzi è fra questi ultimi, i quali mantengono un rapporto costantemente indefinito con il proprio oggetto, che resta dietro le immagini e le epifanie.²⁰

Fragmentation, discontinuity, and vagueness are all stylistic features present in Tozzi’s works; they are the thematic and poetic drives of a novel like *Con gli occhi chiusi*. The protagonist of the novel is the young *inetto*, Pietro. He is the son of Domenico, landlord of a trattoria and of some lands in the countryside of Siena. The relationship between the boy and the father is problematic. Moreover, during Pietro’s passage from adolescence

¹⁷ Castellana, *Parole cose persone*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Castellana, *Parole cose persone*, p. 15.

¹⁹ On the still unresolved debate on the existence of an Italian modernism see *Sul modernismo italiano*, ed. by Romano Luperini and Massimiliano Tortora (Naples: Liguori, 2013).

²⁰ Federico Boccaccini, ‘Uno scetticismo triste. Tozzi e la cultura psicologica del primo Novecento’, in *Federigo Tozzi in Europa*, pp. 135-48 (p. 147). Cf. Georges Poulet, *Le pensée indéterminée*.

and adulthood, he alternates between periods of deep enamourment and of repulsion for Ghisola, the niece of some farmers who work on his father's lands. For the duration of this fluctuating relationship, Pietro does not realise that the woman is making a fool of him, nor does he understand the miserable condition in which she lives once she has left the land and has moved to the city. The story ends when Pietro finally opens his eyes and becomes aware of this fallacy; the focus of the novel is mainly on the inner life and consciousness of the protagonist:

Quante volte non s'era considerato perduto, mentre le immagini esteriori lo invadevano senza tregua! Ora gli pareva di avere la propria anima; ora diminuiva; mentre questi movimenti gli davano un malessere *come quello delle vertigini*. (p. 20) [my emphasis]

Una mattina, in casa, ricopiando un brutto ritratto a stampa, Pietro si chiese perchè provasse *quell'indefinitezza* per Ghisola. (p. 54) [my emphasis]

Pietro, senza provar niente, all'infuori di una vaga inquietudine, si appoggiò ai guanciali e cercò di piangere: dentro di sé chiedevasi se anche gli altri sentissero così poco e provò *una consolazione indefinibile* quando il padre fu allontanato [...]. (p. 63) [my emphasis]

Quel che provava davanti alle cose rimaneva *troppo indefinibile*, ed egli ne soffriva. (p. 71) [my emphasis]

It is thus interesting but unsurprising that in Celati's preface to the 1994 re-issue of the novel for the publishing house, Feltrinelli, he chose to use, alongside other words expressing a similar meaning (for example, 'indefinitezza'), the word 'indeterminatezza' seven times to describe *Con gli occhi chiusi*. Moreover, he used the word 'determinatezza' preceded by a negation five times. Here are just a couple of examples:

Il perno di questa nuova forma narrativa è la perpetua incertezza tra il percepire e il credere di aver percepito: una *indeterminatezza* da cui nasce il fantastico, e che è un sollievo della visione interna rispetto alla *chiusa determinatezza* del mondo.²¹ [my emphases]

²¹ Gianni Celati, 'Prefazione', in Federigo Tozzi, *Con gli occhi chiusi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), pp. vii-xxiv (p. x).

La visione può rendere qualsiasi cosa interessante, proprio perché tutta la nostra familiarità col mondo esterno poggia sul terreno dell'*indeterminatezza*.²²

[I]l punto cruciale in questa storia d'un amore andato a male è il recupero d'una visione con cui si smette di guardare meccanicamente al mondo, e si comincia a muoversi a tentoni sul terreno dell'*indeterminatezza*, verso la vertigine decisiva con cui si conclude il libro.²³

It is unclear whether Celati used the word, indeterminacy, either consciously or in the technical sense. But his reflections in the preface certainly allude to the way in which the reader struggles to transfer reality and its determined aspect *directly* into fiction. His preface emphasises the difference between how reality is *perceived* and it is *represented*, and, further, it foregrounds what is lost and what is gained in the process of mediation, mentioned above. Moreover, the reader cannot but sense how the act of writing and literary communication are the result of an author who 'è semplicemente colui che assiste a un fenomeno di cui ignora le leggi,' thus a further intervention – that of the reader –, is required.²⁴

In short, Celati's remarks are not dissimilar to establishing indeterminacy as the main feature of the literary object, in view of its incomplete graspability. This is not to say Celati based his evaluation on the phenomenological concept of indeterminacy, nor that his ideas directly overlap with phenomenologies of reading. Rather, reading Celati's preface in this way serves to highlight that the mediation of the novel does not involve its reader in a passive mode of "consumption". Celati indicates how Tozzi's narrative style requires a certain amount of effort on the part of the reader which cannot be resolved through a passive, straightforward reading. His narrative presents: 'L'allusività subdola della scrittura che

²² Celati, p. xvii.

²³ Celati, p. xvii. Similarly: 'Nel nostro libro non c'è la *determinatezza* realistica delle cose' (p. x); 'La visione aggiunge valore tonale alle cose, sottraendole all'opprimente *determinatezza* del mondo umano' (p. xii); '*indeterminatezza* temporale' (p. xv and p. xxiii); 'tutto questo processo viene portato sul terreno dell'*indeterminatezza*, dello stordimento e dell'inerzia' (p. xvii), 'si comincia a muoversi a tentoni sul terreno dell'*indeterminatezza*' (p. xvii); 'è una tendenza che pervade tutto il nostro libro: una continua voglia di alzare gli occhi verso il punto più lontano, e perdersi con lo sguardo nell'*indeterminatezza*' (p. xxii). [my emphases]

²⁴ Luigi Baldacci, *Tozzi moderno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 8.

non si scopre mai alla prima, che nella sua progressione sintagmatica apre trabocchetti molteplici all'interprete'.²⁵

These reflections lead us to ask ourselves by means of which formal features of the texts does this indeterminacy happen. As should now be clear, indeterminacy – both in its stylistic and thematic manifestations – is at the root of the sense of difficulty and discomfort that critics and readers have experienced reading *Con gli occhi chiusi*. With regards to the demanding participation of the reader in Tozzi's texts, Romano Luperini writes:

Tozzi richiede una notevole fatica di lettura, perché il suo modo di scrivere è rivolto a spiazzare il lettore. La sua capacità di creare vertigine nel lettore ne rende difficile la lettura. La scrittura di Tozzi lascia ampi vuoti [...]. Il lettore è costretto di continuo a rileggere per cercare di capire cosa tenga insieme una frase e la precedente. Questa è la grande capacità spaesante di Tozzi: è uno scrittore che getta consapevolmente nella vertigine il lettore.²⁶

For Luperini, Tozzi seeks to invoke this sense of dizziness in the reader by leaving gaps that we might describe as spots of indeterminacy, as discussed by Ingarden and Iser (see above I.1.a). In this chapter I will therefore focus my analysis on how indeterminacy is achieved by Tozzi by using specific textual strategies. I will start by considering Tozzi's poetics as stated in his famous short essay *Come leggo io* (section 2), in which we find the profile of Tozzi's ideal reader and more reflections on his reading praxis. In section 3, I will move to analyse how the vertigo effect is created stylistically by the combination of different linguistic choices and textual strategies that operate at different textual levels. On the one hand, and on the rhetorical-linguistic side, we can observe Tozzi's use of syntax and punctuation that results in a fragmentation of the discourse; furthermore, we can plot an unusual employment of word order, dialogue, conjunctions, and verb tenses, each of which also contributes to this on-going discontinuity. In addition to this complex linguistic pattern, and on the other hand, we have strategies operating at the level of the novels' structure. This is usually episodic and descriptive rather than plainly

²⁵ Cavalli Pasini, *Il mistero retorico della scrittura*, p.11.

²⁶ Romano Luperini, *Dalla centralità del testo alla centralità del lettore*, p. 126.

narrative; it is rich in story gaps and narrative ellipses, and it presents a confused (and confusing) temporal partition. This aspect is furthermore emphasised by internal focalisation and figural narrative situation²⁷ as well as a specific use of the free indirect style that affects the rendering of the points of view. All these phenomena, as we are going to see, fragment the act of reading, compel the reader to abandon the usual flow of the plot, and encourage him to interrupt the reading in order to move back and forth through the novel in order to grasp and combine the different inputs and parts: '[i]l lettore modello di Tozzi interrompe la lettura, torna indietro'.²⁸

Finally, in section 4, I will propose some comparative analyses with two other Tozzi novels, *Tre croci* and *Ricordi di un impiegato*. Although these three novels present very similar stylistic features to each other, still the involvement they require of the reader turns out to be different. This comparative approach will help clarify how the way in which the text calls for the reader's intervention depends not only on the presence or absence of specific strategies, but also and primarily on their combination and their interplay at the different textual levels.

2. "A terrible reader"

Aprò il libro a caso; ma, piuttosto, verso la fine. Prima di leggere (prego credere che non c'è da ridere troppo) socchiudo gli occhi, per una specie d'istinto guardingo, come fanno i mercanti quando vogliono rendersi conto bene di quel che stanno per comprare. Finalmente, assicuratomi che non sono in uno stato d'animo suscettibile a lasciarsi ingannare, mi decido a leggere un periodo: dalla maiuscola fino al punto. Da com'è fatto questo periodo,

²⁷ For a distinction between authorial and figural narrative situation, see Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*. In particular, Stanzel distinguishes three main *narrative situations*, which work as 'rough descriptions of basic possibilities of rendering the mediacy of narration.' (p. 4) These are the *first-person narrative situation*, whose mediacy 'belongs totally to the fictional realm of the characters of the novel: the mediator, that is the first-person narrator, is a character of this world just like the other characters are' (p. 4); the *authorial narrative situation*, in which 'the narrator is outside the world of the characters' and 'the process of transmission originates from an external perspective' (p. 5); and 'the *figural narrative situation*', in which 'the mediating narrator is replaced by a reflector: a character in the novel who thinks, feels and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator' (p. 5).

²⁸ Luperini, *Dalla centralità*, p. 141.

giudico se ne debbo leggere un altro. [...] Come si vede, io sono un “pessimo” lettore; e quel che è peggio, me ne vanto.²⁹

This is how Tozzi described his own unorthodox habit in reading novels in the most famous 1919 short essay ‘Come leggo io’. He defined himself as ‘a terrible reader’, moving back and forth through the pages, reading sentences at random, and never surrendering to the structure of the text itself. He reveals his intention to subvert the text’s instructions and rebel against the asymmetric text-reader relationship. Bearing in mind Tozzi’s reflections about reading narratives, the following questions arise: how did he conceive his model, or implied reader? Should we open *Con gli occhi chiusi* and just pick some paragraphs at random in order to ‘gustare qualche particolare, qualche spunto, qualche descrizione, dialogo, ecc.’³⁰ or has the author already charted for us a course through which we can come to some understanding of his suggestive writing? Whatever the answer, my position is that Tozzi’s attitude is fully reflected in all of his works, not least *Con gli occhi chiusi*.

We can rearticulate what Tozzi describes as the back and forth movement throughout the narrative structure as what Iser called the ‘theme and horizon’³¹ dynamics. These dynamics attempt to account for the way in which the aesthetic object – i.e., the meaning of the text – does not exist prior to the act of reading. It is only the latter, (the reader’s) horizon, which allows the reader to assemble and combine the different perspectives offered by the text. The horizon, in turn, provides the reader with an internal network of references that ‘prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader’³² by means of textual strategies. The ‘nongiven reality of the aesthetic object’ is brought to life through four different perspectives contained in the text: that of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the one marked out for the reader.

²⁹ Federigo Tozzi, ‘Come leggo io’, in *Opere*, pp. 1325-27.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 1324.

³¹ Iser drew these terms from Gadamer and Schütz: ‘The horizon is that which includes and embraces everything that is visible from one point’. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960), p. 286, quoted in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 96.

³² Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 96.

These perspectives are neither separate nor parallel, but rather *interwoven* and ‘offer a constantly shifting constellation of views’.³³ It is precisely because of this interweaving that the perspectives cannot be appreciated at the same time. Nevertheless, the reader’s operations can be divided into moments or segments defined by the view he is involved with in a particular moment and that can be called a “theme”. Each new view brings on a new theme that ‘stands before the “horizon” of the perspective segments in which he had previously been situated’,³⁴ while the horizon is progressively constituted by all the themes brought about by previous phases of reading.

A metaphor describing progression³⁵ is not then the most effective to explain how literary meaning is constituted. Quite the contrary, the way in which the theme and horizon dynamics organise the relationship between text and reader requires in fact his continual shifting in the different perspectives that repeatedly ‘throws new light on all positions linguistically manifested in the text’.³⁶ Based on accumulation,³⁷ each new theme exerts an influence both on the past themes (now constituting the horizon) and the subsequent ones, thus producing clarifications, revisions or corrections and usually – but not necessarily (as in the case of highly undetermined works) – conveying a more determinate substance to the aesthetic object.

As essential components for the comprehension of the literary text, these theme and horizon dynamics between text and reader lie behind every act of reading. But, in Tozzi’s *Con gli occhi chiusi*, such dynamics are exploited and emphasised in such a way as to confuse the reader. The distribution of themes, the organisation of the plot, and the text’s (and the

³³ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 96.

³⁴ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 96.

³⁵ See Iser: ‘reading does not merely flow forward, but [...] recalled segments also have a retroactive effect, with the present transforming the past’ and ‘[t]his two-way influence is a basic structure in the time-flow of the reading process, for this is what brings about the reader’s position in the text’; *The Act of Reading*, pp. 114-15.

³⁶ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 98.

³⁷ As we will see in our analysis of Gadda’s *La cognizione del dolore* (see chapter V) accumulation, in its different forms, is a key strategy in indeterminacy production.

reader's) continuous revisions and corrections each complicate the reading process, as we will see in the next sections. The dynamics of theme and horizon movements are the processes that allow for the construction of meaning; they guide the reader throughout his task. However, the use of juxtapositions, the episodic organization of the story, the inclusion of parts and characters that are apparently disconnected from the story, and the many techniques that create discontinuity each manipulate the relationship between theme and horizon, and, more specifically, text and reader. The effect is such that the literary work produces a sense of dizziness and vertigo, deriving from the elusive nature of the meaning – namely, from the work's indeterminacy.

The sensation of vertigo is the only possible result, particularly if we agree with Pietro Benzoni who describes Tozzi's universe as an 'universo integralmente tragico' which comprises only 'quadri frammentari e malcerti, solo frantumi, solo schegge,' and which 'si traduce in una scrittura traumatica: tutta sbalzi e spezzature, che senza sosta sovverte i più ravvicinati orizzonti d'attesa'.³⁸ Tozzi wrote in 'Come leggo io':

Io dichiaro d'ignorare le "trame" di qualsiasi romanzo; perchè, a conoscerle, avrei perso tempo e basta. La mia soddisfazione è di poter trovare qualche "pezzo" dove sul serio lo scrittore sia riuscito a indicarmi una qualunque parvenza della nostra fuggitiva realtà.³⁹

This reading modality, which proceeds by fragments and moments, is not just a temporary whim on the part of Tozzi then. Rather, it is the consequence of an existential attitude and the experience of literary communication as a painful and impatient practice. As we shall see shortly, this is mirrored also in the author's writing modality.

Whether Tozzi's works must be linked to the coeval phenomenon of the *poetics of the fragment* is another long debated and partially unresolved *topos* in Tozzi's criticism. The affinity to the stylistic choices of the writers of *La Voce* is generally identified in Tozzi's short stories and in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. This originated from the insistence on the

³⁸ Benzoni 'Le biblioteche di Federico Tozzi', p. 323.

³⁹ Tozzi, 'Come leggo io', p. 1325.

autobiographical theme, from a certain decadent atmosphere and from an inclination towards lyricism that the author manifested throughout his works. However, a more productive alternative could be to consider these features of Tozzi's work in relation to other contemporary Italian literary trends (for example, the affinities of the *realismo modernista* with Svevo, Pirandello) as well as European literary trends at large. Nevertheless, taking note of certain affinities and echoes – as well as choosing one label or another – neither resolves nor explains specifically that sense of difficulty and confusion generated in Tozzi's writing. Labelling *Con gli occhi chiusi* as *frammentista*, *espressionista*, *modernista* or *anti-naturalista* (but at the same time, in the debt of *Naturalismo*) helps us to understand neither why the act of reading the text puts the reader in an uncomfortable position, nor why we experience uncertainty and vagueness. Interruption and fragmentation are not created in the novel as “pretexts” but are necessary and important. The reader of *Con gli occhi chiusi* is led precisely through this modality of reading and we should therefore focus instead on how it works. In the next section, I will analyse how this modality is generated by means of a combination of different strategies that penetrate all the layers of the text, both at a micro-context and at a macro-context level.

3. The manipulation of indeterminacy in *Con gli occhi chiusi*

Many of the strategies I will examine, insofar as they are generally typical of Tozzi's style, have already been noticed and studied by scholars. Nevertheless, rather than giving account of how they should be interpreted in the context of Tozzi's style and broader poetics, as others have done, I focus instead on how textual strategies increase indeterminacy as well as how specific textual strategies call upon the participation of the reader. On the latter, I follow the premise that strategies that produce indeterminacy recruit the reader in the active production of the work's meaning to the extent that they continually frustrate his expectations and force him to correct and revise his horizon in order to grasp the text's meaning.

In this section I will therefore analyse how indeterminacy is manipulated in *Con gli occhi chiusi* at a. the structural level, b. the linguistic-rhetorical level, and c. the narrative level.

a. The structural level

Indeterminacy in *Con gli occhi chiusi* is firstly patent on a structural level, characterised by ellipses and omissions. As Luperini tells us: ‘il destinatario è indotto di continuo a collaborare alla costruzione di senso. Deve ricostruire i vuoti di scrittura, deve riempirli lui perchè l’autore non li riempie’.⁴⁰ These voids or blanks are evident, to begin with, in the formal composition of the novel’s narrative. The novel can be divided into two parts. The first one spans two-thirds of the book and is characterised by an episodic progression (first third) and a suspended dreamlike atmosphere (second third). In the second part (the final third of the novel as a whole), we have a smoother advancement of the plot and a slight shifting to a more authorial narration. In this latter third, the narrator seems to be directing more thoroughly the narrative development, and the narrative pace is faster.⁴¹

These differences in the various parts of the novel are the first challenge to the theme/horizon process with which the reader has to cope. The very last sentence of the novel ‘Quando si riebbe dalla vertigine violenta che l’aveva abbattuto ai piedi di Ghisola, egli non l’amava più’ (p. 158) concludes the love affair between the protagonist Pietro and Ghisola and provides a resolving theme to interpret the horizon the reader has already assembled. All the apparently irrelevant isolated episodes described in the

⁴⁰ Luperini, *Dalla centralità*, p. 141.

⁴¹ In particular Elena Binni speaks of a ‘divergenza nello snodarsi del procedere temporale all’interno del romanzo’ in which ‘è possibile percepire come il ritmo della narrazione vada, in modo generale, “stringendo”, fino alla conclusione; sia perché il lettore partecipa della fame di desiderio di Pietro, al suo desiderio di sposare Ghisola, sia perché, al contrario o allo stesso tempo, è impaziente a che l’inganno posto da quest’ultima inesorabilmente emerga alla vista tanto offuscata del protagonista’ (Elena Binni, ‘Diffrazione della sensualità e discontinuità dei tempi nella narrazione in *Con gli occhi chiusi*’, *Interval(le)s* 6.6 (2012), 122-75, (p. 129). On the topic of the novel’s different parts and on its temporal partition see also Debenedetti, *Il romanzo del Novecento*; Baldacci, *Tozzi moderno*; Luperini, *Federigo Tozzi*.

first part must now be interpreted as the symptoms, describing a temporary and violent dizziness, a dream, or better, a nightmare:

Con gli occhi chiusi è appunto un libro fatto così: destrutturato al massimo grado, anche se l'ultimo terzo [...] introduce un ritmo diverso. Era nato opera aperta e diventa romanzo, o almeno cronologia. Ma in quanto opera aperta, potremmo anche provare a leggere i primi due terzi come un esempio di narrazione *simultanea*, in cui la linea portante sia costantemente spezzata e contraddetta da elementi accidentali.⁴²

It is particularly interesting to notice how Baldacci called *Con gli occhi chiusi* an *opera aperta* (and we will return to this concept in chapter IV for our analysis of Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*). Indeed, Tozzi originally intended for *Con gli occhi chiusi* to end in an open way. The novel finished without the current last sentence, which Tozzi wrote only when 'su questa scelta intervenne Borgese, che lo invitò a correggere la conturbante ambiguità di un'ellissi tanto drastica, che certo al critico siciliano appariva troppo avanguardistica'.⁴³ He discarded two other alternative endings, which, as Turchetta puts it, 'conferma la sua relativa indifferenza verso la dimensione propriamente causale della dinamica narrativa'.⁴⁴ Thus we can perceive the author's preference for omissions and ellipsis, as well as his intolerance for causal connections. Nevertheless, the novel is presented in its final version to the reader with *this* ending that provides guidance for the interpretation of:

una lettura che [è] ricezione non acquiescente ma dialettica, attuata in un processo continuo e accumulativo, i cui risultati si manifestano pienamente soltanto alla fine, allorché significati e significanti, connotatori semantici e iconici si svelano in una loro *significanza* nuova e complessa.⁴⁵

In one sense, we could read the final sentence also as the appearance of a metaphor or a meta-narrative signal to the reader that encourages him to regain consciousness after the vertigo that both he and the character have

⁴² Baldacci, p. 37.

⁴³ Turchetta, p. 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁵ Cavalli Pasini, p.43.

experienced – the same vertigo that the flesh-and-blood reader Tozzi experienced himself in reading⁴⁶ and applied to his writing practice.

Despite the changes in the setting, temporal context and narrative rhythm according to the novel's two parts, the work is not divided into chapters but, rather, into forty-eight sequences separated by a typographical space. Within these sequences, the development of the plot continually switches between descriptions, isolated episodes (involving both main and minor characters), and a few intratextual events that are crucial to the progression of the story (for example, Pietro's mother, Anna's death, Ghisola's return to Radda, and Pietro's move to Florence). The latter events are usually given little emphasis in the body of narration; they are often just inserted among episodes and descriptions, interrupting into the narrative as sudden flashes that interrupt the reading process. The reader has to collect these rare signals and assemble them. This is what Baldacci called Tozzi's 'tecnica aggregazionale', which works 'per montaggio di spezzoni, senza modulazioni di passaggio'.⁴⁷

Whilst the plot is chronological and linear (we have just one functional, temporary flashback when Ghisola returns to Radda), that is not to say there is actual continuity. The reader must face many gaps in the narration and make sense of the inclusion of episodes and descriptive sequences that are not connected with the development of the story. Sequence three, referred to as 'la notte degli usignoli' later in the novel, for example, is situated at the same chronological level as the previous sequences, as stated by sequence two, where we have a time annotation: 'Per tutto un inverno Pietro non rivide Poggio a' Meli' (p. 12). At this point, sequence one is temporarily suspended in its descriptive structure. During 'la notte degli usignoli' Ghisola pan-fries some nightingales during an episode that is intense and significant but irrelevant for the story's progression since it has no consequential connections to the previous and following sequences. The scene gains relevance mainly from the fact that

⁴⁶ And to quote Baldacci, we could add that this vertigo is the effect – we could say *the symptom* – of the fact that 'Tozzi non racconta una storia, ma racconta una malattia; la quale consiste nell'impossibilità di capire, di prendere contatto con il mondo esterno'. Baldacci, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Baldacci, p.13

it is a narrative one among descriptive sequences but, more interestingly, it also hints at the necessity of the reader's interpretation. After the dinner,

Ghìsola si mise alla finestra; tirando sputi, di quando in quando, sopra qualcosa che per l'oscurità non riusciva a distinguere. [...] Una cicala fece uno strido da un pesco, i cui fiori erano mollicci e resinosi: come se avesse sognato. (p. 17)

This passage links the episode to two similar passages referring to Pietro in the previous sequence:

Pietro ascoltava, ma gli pareva che le persone intorno a lui agissero come nei sogni

And

Udì un usignolo [...] a cui rispondeva un'usignola di lontano. Allora li ascoltò ambedue, e non avrebbe voluto; e pensò che Ghìsola fosse fuori per prenderli. Ma si chiese perchè le cose e le persone intorno a lui non gli potessero sembrare altro che un incubo oscillante e pesante. (p. 15)

The nightingale episode, then, acquires its importance from the metaphorical connection it creates between the inner lives of the two characters. But, in terms of story development, it provides no momentum and, as such, the reader is called to intervene and provide an interpretation of, or develop a meaning for, this type of passage.

The next chronological annotation arrives relatively soon after, in sequence seven (just a couple of pages away):

Era un anno dalla notte degli usignoli, un anno come tutti gli altri: la trattoria e gli avventori, Poggio a' Meli e gli assalariati. (p. 20)

Here the narrative voice suggests the exemplary nature of the previous sequences at the same time as it refuses to provide a description of the past year, encouraging the reader to infer it by himself. Again, just a few pages later on, we are offered another temporal marker:

Un altro anno; e s'era alla fine di marzo, il giorno di San Giuseppe. (p. 29)

The elliptical nature of the plot system is also evident in some dialogues where events or situations are only hinted at without being made explicit:

[Masa] chiese a Pietro per distrarlo; credendo che soffrisse di qualche rimbrotto:

“Ha visto Ghisola oggi? ”

Rispose egli sbadatamente:

“Non è qui?”

“È voluta andare alla messa a Siena.”

Disse Giacco con l’aria di chi ripiglia un battibecco. Ma Masa la difese:

“Ha fatto bene. Qui a Poggio a’ Meli non si vede mai nessuno.”

E a Pietro soggiunse:

“Credevo che l’avesse incontrata!”

I due vecchi divennero penserosi, guardandosi con occhiate che Pietro non comprendeva. Masa esclamò sospirando:

“Sarà quel che Dio vuole!”

“Di che cosa?” chiese Pietro “Ditemelo”.

Un’acre curiosità lo invase:

“Ma dov’è? Tornerà tra poco?”

Si sentì sbigottito; e si vide subito dai suoi occhi azzurri, sempre così buoni, che tutti lo sapevano [...]. (p. 31)

The reader is made to occupy the same position of ignorance as Pietro: the protagonist and the reader alike have the feeling that something has been going on, but they are excluded from it. There is something he and the reader are not being told and the questions they each ask may not be answered. This notion of hidden meanings is revealing of the story’s economy; the reader senses that he cannot rely on the narrator’s selection of the facts that are told. For all the time of reading, he cannot help wondering how many important details have been hidden from him, but this seems to be ultimately the triggering of a dialogue, to put it in Binni’s words: ‘Ciò che lo snodare dei fatti non esplicita è portato su dal dialogo forzato cui è sottoposto il lettore nella decifrazione del simbolo’.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Elena Binni, p. 168. Paradoxically, for Turchetta, the centrality of omissions and ellipses in the novel has as a consequence that eventually the reader is compelled to accept the structural ambiguity of the book as it is: ‘Anche mettendo momentaneamente da parte la consequenzialità della causalità narrativa, è chiaro che nella costruzione narrativa di Tozzi hanno una straordinaria importanza le ellissi: ci sono moltissimi fatti narrativamente decisivi che non vengono rappresentati affatto, oltre a non essere per nulla spiegati. A suo modo, da questa prospettiva il testo tozziano dà istruzioni chiarissime, per niente equivoche: il lettore, infatti, finisce per non essere neanche spinto a chiedersi spiegazioni, proprio perché viene in fin dei conti obbligato a obbedire alle leggi di un mondo dove i fatti restano non spiegabili.’ Turchetta, p. 19.

These phenomena of *caesura* and the gaps in the plot have a quite dramatic impact also for Maxia, in whose opinion: ‘Che cosa è capitato in questi intervalli non lo sappiamo o se è avvenuto qualche fatto importante ne veniamo informati in due righe, come se la cosa non avesse peso narrativo’.⁴⁹

The main structure – in which isolated episodes and descriptions are juxtaposed and show little apparent consequential relationship to each other – encourages the reader to infer his correlations, and subsequent meaning, alone:

Una volta sottratta l’illusione dell’unità e della certezza di quanto è visto e affermato, si offre al lettore di intervenire con soluzioni proprie. Il ‘come-se’ [...] rifrange il testo per vie molteplici, rompendo gli schemi ed eludendo le attese.⁵⁰

This is of course a typical phenomenon of the twentieth-century novel, not only with reference to Tozzi’s works, but also more generally speaking:

Nell’Ottocento la massima ambizione era stata quella di passare dal racconto al romanzo o, per così dire, dal dettaglio al tutto. Nel Novecento è invece il racconto ad agire sul romanzo. [...] La crisi delle macrostrutture naturalistiche ha portato nel Novecento alla costruzione di strutture narrative che non sono più orientate verso l’unità e la coerenza del racconto.⁵¹

Besides these general considerations, however we need to focus on the consequences this fact has in this specific case: if a unity is neither provided by the structure of the text nor (as we will shortly see) by the narrator’s intervention, then the reader must supply unity or he will not be able to infer the meaning of the novel. Though he is given linear chronological details, throughout the first part of the novel, the actually “narrated” lapse of time lies in a kind of dilation and is much less conspicuous than the omitted one. This increases the sense of confusion on the reader who has the feeling that the narration is, *de facto*, going nowhere. This happens not only with regards to the main structure of the

⁴⁹ Maxia, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Cavalli Pasini, p. 11.

⁵¹ Guido Guglielmi, *La prosa italiana del Novecento 2* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), p. 3.

novel, but also within each single sequence where descriptions and episodes themselves are often conveyed by means of juxtaposed images, separated by dense punctuation:

Pietro, il primo giorno, ebbe un'agitazione che gli toglieva la coscienza; e gli dolevano le glandole ancora gonfie dietro gli orecchi.

Sbarbava con una stratta tutte le piante che gli capitavano sotto mano, strappava i tralci alle viti; o con un palo batteva un albero finché si fosse sbucciato. Staccava le zampe e le ali ai grilli, e poi li infilzava con uno spillo. Stava attento quando una nuvola era sopra di lui; e, quand'era trascorsa, ne aspettava un'altra quasi per farsi vedere.

Alla fine piovve, senza tuonare, con uno sgocciolio che non finiva più sotto alle docce. (p. 12)

As soon as the reader acclimatises himself to such description, in the second part of the novel, the reported events become chronologically closer and consequentially more bound to each other, so that the narrative rhythm accelerates:

Ghisola viveva più volentieri così, quando Pietro, venuto il tempo degli esami, andò a trovarla. (p. 108)

And the same night:

[Pietro] tornò a casa molto tardi; cambiò di posto ai libri portati da Siena, tolse dalla valigia tutta la biancheria. (p. 114)

And a few days later:

Ghisola, lusingata perchè aveva capito subito quanto Pietro l'amava, invece di rispondergli con un'altra lettera, andò lei stessa a trovarlo. (p. 117)

This fragmentation and discontinuity of the story/plot structure forces the reader to wonder about the meaning of this shifting and about how he should put together the different parts of the novel in order to provide them with an overall meaning.

b. The linguistic-rhetorical level

After having analysed the general structure of the novel, in this part, I move to consider its linguistic-rhetorical level, continuing to focus on those strategies that emphasise the text's indeterminacy. Therefore, in the following I will analyse the use of punctuation in combination with conjunctions, interrogative sentences, the topic and comment dynamics, and the use of verb tenses.

Critics have tended to dedicate attention to Tozzi's dense paratactic style and to his peculiar use of punctuation that has the inevitable effect of rendering the reading more difficult.⁵² Luigi Matt signals a hypertrophic use of punctuation: 'adoperata ogni qualvolta sia possibile, col risultato di isolare ciascun singolo sintagma' and, in particular, Matt foregrounds the unusual way in which Tozzi handles the semicolon: 'per lo più utilizzato per separare l'elemento frastico dal resto, indipendentemente dai rapporti logico-sintattici'.⁵³ The strong, yet non-definitive pause implied by a semicolon breaks the hierarchy between the main and the subordinate clauses, thus acquiring, in Luperini's opinion, an ideological perspective:

significa che si vive in un mondo privo di gerarchie [...]. Questi punti e virgola anomali costringono il lettore a pensare, non gli permettono di adagiarsi nella differenza tra una principale che dice la verità e una subordinata che comunica una informazione marginale. No, la subordinata può essere importante come e più della principale.⁵⁴

If the main function of these semicolons is to create confusion about the importance of what is written, once again the reader must infer relationships and meanings by himself. But this is not the only application and outcome of the usage of the semicolon in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. It also represents the syntactical counterpart of the juxtapositions of episodes and

⁵² See in particular Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Appunti linguistici e formali sulle novelle in Tozzi: la scrittura crudele', in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, ed. by Maria Antonietta Grignani (Siena, 24-26 ottobre 2002), then in *Moderna*, 4.2 (2002), 33-45.

⁵³ Luigi Matt, *La narrativa del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), p. 89.

⁵⁴ Romano Luperini, *Dalla centralità*, p. 141.

of descriptions that we have seen at the structural level. Just like the sequences of the story in the macro-context, in the micro-context, rather than being connected and related, clauses are juxtaposed and isolated by means of the semicolon, thus creating a paratactic effect that evokes a sense of fragmentation. Not only does the story need to be reconstructed by bringing together all the various hints and pieces the reader has collected before, but the descriptions, too, cannot be consumed in a continuous, monological way. Instead, they are constituted in the juxtaposed presentation and accumulation of information and perspectives: ‘Più la frammentazione mediante il punto e virgola è spinta, più la legatura sintattica è affidata all’attività inferenziale del lettore’.⁵⁵ In the descriptions of Siena or of the countryside, for example, commas, semicolons and full stops often disrupt and fragment the time-flow of reading. Errant punctuation makes the reader stop at one single detail before he goes on with adding details, resulting in an accumulation:

La strada da Siena, dopo essere discesa giù fino ad un torrentello dov’è un mulino, sale in mezzo a linee contorte e raggomitolate di colli che s’assomigliano e della stessa dolcezza, con i filari delle viti tra i muriccioli a secco, di sassi, con le fattorie dietro i cipressi, con qualche campanile così lontano che dopo una voltata non si vede più. E di mano in mano che la strada s’aggira, quasi tormentandosi della sua lunghezza, impaziente, si fa sempre più silenziosa; e le campagne più aride e solitarie. [...]

Boschi di querci, ma radi; e tra il fogliame, si vedono prominente e insenature di altre colline, scoscendimenti ripidi e a un tratto pianeggianti, con tre o quattro facce che si attaccano a ondulazioni di prati, a ripiani di terra rossastra, a balze. (p. 105)

As Tonani suggests, ‘il segno di interpunzione – specie se marcato come il punto e virgola, che normalmente divide frasi e non componenti intrafrastiche – obbliga a riformulare il discorso e a recuperare il predicato precedentemente espresso e ora implicito’.⁵⁶ It is again a back-and-forth movement that is required of the reader, which affects once more the theme/horizon dynamics. This is observable also in another syntax

⁵⁵ Elisa Tonani, ‘Discontinuità visibile: interpunzione e spazi nella narrativa di Tozzi’, *Interva(le)s*, 6.6. (2012) 48-70 (p. 49).

⁵⁶ Tonani, p. 50.

phenomenon in *Con gli occhi chiusi* as, typically in Tozzi's style, the semicolon is often followed by a coordinative ("e") or adversative ("ma") conjunction. The sentence before the semicolon represents the new theme, then we have a pause with the semicolon, and finally the statement that will replace the previous theme. Horizon and theme appear then here divided by the semicolon, with the theme adding information, or more often revising and correcting the given horizon. We can see this contradiction, pivoting on the semi-colon, at work here:

Qualche volta, alla trattoria, capitava Ghisola zitta accanto alla zia Rebecca; ed egli la guardava senza andarle vicino. Ma gli faceva meno piacere; e sembrava che non si fossero parlati mai. (p. 12)

A similar effect is also obtained through the use of the full stop, with "e" and "ma" starting a new period, and the resultant theme/horizon dynamics taking place between the two periods.

Sometimes the roles of adversative and coordinative conjunctions seem to overlap:

Entrando in casa, trovava la padrona a cucire con altre donne; alle quali non parlava mai.
Ma, intanto, cominciarono ad affittirsi i giorni, in cui sentiva stanchezza della scuola; una stanchezza che gli faceva lo stesso effetto di una colpa inspiegabile. (p. 95)

What does "ma" stand for? What is to be opposed or corrected? Would not "e" have suited better or just "intanto"? This "ma" – that we can certainly consider also as miming oral traits and therefore as a trait of Pietro's free indirect speech – introduces uncertainty as to what is being referred to. It contributes to the generation of the literary work's overall sense of indeterminacy. In addition to this, the adversative conjunction often comes after a direct speech question to which no response is given:

Fece un gesto di furbizia; e riprese, come se avesse parlato di una cosa che la mettesse di buon umore:
"Crede ch'io non sia informata di lei?"
Ma Pietro, per la contentezza, era incapace di parlare. (p. 110)

Sometimes, questions are answered but the narrator does not record the reply:

Allo stesso tempo, però, il narratore si guarda bene dall'intervenire fino al punto di esplicitare e chiarire senza incertezze possibili la propria prospettiva, lasciando così non solo i personaggi, ma anche il lettore nel dubbio.⁵⁷

On the contrary, we frequently have a correction or explanation of the feelings of the person who asked it. This means that the answer is not relevant; the reader can supply it or deduce it, the importance lies somewhere else:

“Perché preferisci stare lontano da me, che sono tuo padre? Dio ti deve toccare il cuore. Non te ne accorgi?”
Ma, visto che né meno ora poteva farsi obbedire, lo lasciò di più; sicuro che il tempo lo avrebbe aiutato. (p. 96)

Corrective or semi-corrective segments have the effect of making the reader uncertain about what he has been told and about which one is the correct alternative. Here is another example:

Anche la sorella più grande parlò poco, *anzi* non disse niente. (p. 105)
[my emphasis]

If the narrator corrects his own statements, how can the reader be sure about what he understood in his own terms? Sometimes a correction is used to show the actual feelings of the character, usually in opposition to what he/she said or did:

Tenendo le mani insieme dinanzi, [Ghisola] chiese:
“È fidanzato?”
“No.”
Ma ebbe voglia, chi sa perchè, di dirle una bugia. (p. 110)

⁵⁷ Turchetta, p. 15.

Pietro aprì lo sportello della carrozza, su la quale era dipinto lo stemma postale. Ghisola salì, a capo basso. Poi fece comprendere che voleva essere baciata: e Pietro la baciò; ma le avrebbe detto: “Non sta bene qui!”. (p. 109)

To summarise, in observing Tozzi's use of syntax, punctuation and conjunctions we could quote Dardano's evaluations, for whom this way of fragmenting the text and of creating unusual syntactical connections characterizes the effect of his prose: ‘Il ritmo della sua prosa è imprevedibile e talvolta appare in disaccordo con la qualità dei contenuti: prevale, per così dire, una sorta di principio di indeterminazione’.⁵⁸ This changeability of the prose rhythm is partly induced by the fact that rarely are two consecutive sequences dedicated to the description or to the action of the same character. In fact, even inside each single sequence or period, the focus moves from one character to the other, thus once again suspending and interrupting the thread of the novel, but also creating an unusual topic or comment dialectics. In the first sequence of the book, many characters are mentioned, then left, and then resumed with a recurrent pattern that is typical of the whole novel: sequence about character 1 → character 2 mentioned in or at the end of the sequence → next sequence dedicated to character 2 and usually beginning with his/her name.

Ora avevano un figliolo che ormai terminava tredici anni, *Pietro*; prima di quello n'erano nati sette altri, morti l'uno dopo l'altro a pena tolti da balia. *Pietro*, molto tardi per riguardo alla sua salute, lo mandavano al seminario, ch'era la scuola più vicina; [...] Il penultimo parto aveva lasciato le convulsioni ad *Anna*; che, del resto, era sempre stata soggetta a qualche sintomo isterico: una malattia che faceva ridere *Domenico*, una specie di facezia ch'egli non capiva. E se ne irritava come se l'offendesse, quando il ridere non portava nessun rimedio; e c'era alla farmacia il conto da pagare. *Anna*, remissiva e fanatica per lui, accortasi, alla fine, che la tradiva, aveva creduto più di una volta che le tirassero giù il cuore con tutte e due le mani; [...]. (p. 6) [my emphases]

This technique initially confronts the reader with empty names (lacking in specification), whose accumulation has a dizzying effect since the

⁵⁸ Maurizio Dardano, *Leggere i romanzi* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), p. 160.

technique is continually repeated during the whole novel. Every time a new character is mentioned they enter: ‘nell’orbita visiva del lettore solo di striscio, per un accenno.’⁵⁹ Thus the reader gleans more information about the characters (usually only a scarce amount, and seemingly irrelevant for the story’s progression), but he has to collect and bring together the different pieces dispersed across the sequences to build his own jigsaw. As a result, the reader is left with the impression that he has missed pieces of this puzzle, while being left with some useless ones, since

il romanzo è costellato da una presenza abnorme di scene sostanzialmente prive di comprensibili ragioni narrative, a cui si accosta una folla di gesti ed eventi che restano inspiegati, o quasi: come poco spiegata e poco spiegabile resta la dinamica del reale per il protagonista, per gli altri personaggi, e forse non solo per loro.⁶⁰

Finally, the last linguistic-rhetorical phenomenon we need to consider is Tozzi’s unconventional use of past verb tenses. The novel starts with an apparent *in medias res* overture that is, in fact, the description of a typical night of Domenico, Pietro’s father, in his own *trattoria*:

Usciti dalla trattoria i cuochi e i camerieri, Domenico Rosi, il padrone, rimase a contare in fretta, al lume di una candela che sgocciolava fitto, il denaro della giornata. Gli si strinsero le dita toccando due biglietti da cinquanta lire; e, prima di metterli nel portafoglio di cuoio giallo, li guardò un’altra volta, piegati; e soffiò sulla fiammella avvinandocisi con la bocca. Se la candela non si fosse consumata troppo, avrebbe contato anche l’altro denaro nella cassetta della moglie; ma chiuse la porta, dandoci una ginocchiata forte per essere sicuro che aveva girato bene la chiave. (p. 58)

⁵⁹ Cavalli Pasini, p. 46. Or, as Elena Binni puts it: ‘alcuni personaggi sono “buttati nella mischia della narrazione”’ (p. 159).

⁶⁰ Turchetta, p. 18. Once again, Cavalli Pasini’s analysis is illuminating to understand the reader’s involvement in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. With regards to the paratactic and nominal devices, she describes them as ‘stilemi e lessemi che convogliano in maniera vincolante l’attenzione del destinatario sulla loro struttura sintagmatica e verbale’, that have a centripetal direction opposed to ‘la forza centrifuga che scompone l’economia strutturale del romanzo’, thus providing an axiological structure to the novel and directing the reader in it. Cavalli Pasini, p. 75.

The *in media res* effect is created by the use of the past historic tense. The reader later realises that this is a descriptive passage as opposed to an event. He arrives at this understanding only by advancing in the reading, and by assimilating the description of the *trattoria* to the following ones of Anna (Pietro's mother), their farm *Poggio a' Meli*, and two of their salaried workers Giacco and Masa. These characters and the farm are all described in the same sequence using the imperfect tense, as the focalisation moves from one character to another by means of the free indirect style technique (see II.4). The passage from the past historic of the overture to the later switching to the imperfect frustrates the reader's expectations and requires him to re-interpret the previous part. Indeed, the reader's expectations rely on the stylistic context he himself has contributed to constructing: 'le contexte commence là où le lecteur perçoit l'existence d'un pattern continu quelconque',⁶¹ and it is only in this context that a system of predictability is created, and via which unpredictability acts as a contrast:

dans une chaîne verbale le stimulus de l'effet de style (contraste) repose sur des éléments de basse prévisibilité encodés dans un ou plusieurs constituants immédiates, les autres constituants dont le pattern rend le contraste possible forment le contexte.⁶²

This is why, when the narrator tells us – just one line later – that the events of the passage follow a typical routine, and are simply what happen every day, a tension is created between the verb tenses, since this unusual description of a routine situation mingles together past and the time of the story:

Ormai erano trent'anni di questa vita; ma ricordava sempre i primi guadagni, e gli piaceva alla fine di ogni giorno sentire in fondo all'animo la carezza del passato. (p. 58)

As I have already noted, in the first two thirds of the novel, most of the sequences have a descriptive nature, which, therefore, justifies a widespread use of the imperfect tense. However, the ambiguous switching

⁶¹ Michael Riffaterre, *Essais de stylistique structurale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), p. 82.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.149.

from the past historic to the imperfect tense is constant throughout the novel, and it cannot be explained in the usual dynamics of background and foreground usually generated by the interaction of these two tenses. The past historic and imperfect tenses seem to be deployed at random with the effect that the reader can never be completely sure of his interpretation of the function of each specific tense. As Gianni Celati wrote in his preface, ‘Tozzi adopera spesso l’imperfetto dove normalmente tutti userebbero il passato remoto’⁶³ and, we could add, *vice versa*.

Many of the descriptions at the beginning of the novel depict, for example, routine days in Domenico’s *trattoria* or at the farm by means of the imperfect tense. During these background passages, the past historic suddenly interrupts and subverts the reader’s expectations. These very first pages of the novel, in which Tozzi exerts a tension between the imperfect and perfect tense, between the background and the foreground, are ‘un lungo avvio dove sembra di perdersi in una “indefinitezza profonda e persistente”’, such that ‘l’uso estensivo dell’imperfetto dà l’impressione d’una durata non interrotta da vicende di rilievo. Così a volte c’è quel senso che si ha da giovani, quando sembra di vivere in un presente illimitato e sospeso’.⁶⁴

In the next, short example, confusion about the nature of the scene is created again by a puzzling use of tenses. The reader is made to question: is this a single event? Is this a habit? How many times did it take place?

Ammirò un fiore quando gli venne voglia di coglierlo per lei; e non arrischiandosi, lo buttava via. (p. 19)

Tozzi’s switching from the imperfect and the past historic – once again used to subvert hierarchies and consequentiality, just like his use of punctuation –⁶⁵ is crucial in the comparison of the first and the second part of the novel, where the balance in the use of the tenses is reversed. I

⁶³ Celati, p. xv.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.xv.

⁶⁵ For Baldacci these ‘distrazioni narrative dell’autore’ in the use of past tenses are due to the fact that ‘[i]n *Con gli occhi chiusi* non esistono movimenti privilegiati ai fini delle conseguenze narrative. Ogni momento della realtà ha lo stesso diritto di cittadinanza. È una visione dell’economia narrativa che è tutta l’opposto dell’economia naturalistica’, p. 9.

suggest that it is not by chance that the very last – and revealing – sentence of the book ('Quando si riebbe dalla vertigine violenta che l'aveva abbattuto ai piedi di Ghisola, egli non l'amava più', p. 158) contains this very tension between the past tenses. Indeed, as to the intentionality of the final sentence, we should remember that, in the original project of the author, the end of the novel concluded with the previous sentence: 'Allora, egli, voltandosi a lei con uno sguardo di pietà e di affetto, vide il suo ventre',⁶⁶ thus closing the book with an eloquent past historic tense and without any further explanation. Thus the final version's movement between the two tenses is likely deliberate and significant.

c. The narrative level

With regards to narration, the first element of uncertainty and ungraspability that we encounter in *Con gli occhi chiusi* arises from the difference between how the narration is led in the first two thirds of the novel, and how it is led in the last third. In both cases we have a figural narrative situation⁶⁷ with a hetero-diegetic narrator and an internal focalisation, but some differences occur. In the first two thirds, although the narrator evinces, from time to time, an estranged identification with Pietro,⁶⁸ focalisation continuously shifts among the consciousness of the different characters, by means of the technique generally known as "free indirect speech", and that Dorrit Cohn called 'narrated monologue'. Free indirect speech, or narrated monologue is 'the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration'.⁶⁹ As Cohn points out, of all the techniques used to render characters' consciousness in fictional narratives, the narrated monologue produces the most ambiguity and 'indeterminateness', to the extent that it generates a suspension 'between

⁶⁶ Baldacci, p. 158.

⁶⁷ Cf. above Stanzel's definition (from Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 4-5).

⁶⁸ Cf. Cavalli Pasini, p. 44.

⁶⁹ Cohn, p. 100. Cohn compares in this book the different techniques to represent characters' consciousness both in third- and first-person fictional narratives.

the immediacy of quotation and the mediacy of narration'.⁷⁰ The use of narrated monologue is therefore in itself a choice that increases indeterminacy, but the use of the narrated monologue to move from the perspective of many characters – including minor ones – extensively emphasises 'indeterminateness' since the suspension that Cohn discusses is multiplied. In addition, in combination with the technique of juxtaposing sequences in a seemingly random fashion (see II.3.a), at least for the first part of the novel, we can agree with Luperini's critical position in his comparison of *Con gli occhi chiusi* and Verga's *I Malavoglia*: '[è] la fine del narratore che pilota la narrazione dall'alto e la narrazione sembra fatta a caso'.⁷¹ The randomness of narration in the first part becomes more evident, by contrast, in the last third of the novel in which there recurs internal focalisation but this is restricted to the two protagonists, Pietro and Ghisola. In addition, in this final third, the narrator intervenes much more often, providing comments on and accounts of actions and events, thus leading the narration more forcefully and consequentially which, as a result, requires less effort on the part of the reader.⁷²

The narration's choices regarding the point of view are, moreover, affected by linguistic phenomena such as the tension between the past tenses (discussed above); the movement between tenses affects the point of view system. Andrea Bonomi provides useful insight into the correlative

⁷⁰ Cohn, p. 106.

⁷¹ Luperini, *Dalla centralità*, p. 127.

⁷² Another way to analyse and interpret the complex interaction between narrator and point of view in *Con gli occhi chiusi* is the way in which Iser, in opposition to the classical point of view theories, sets the reader and not the character as the source of the point of view within the text. According to Iser's conceptualization, the implied reader is manipulated by textual strategies to take a standpoint in the novel but this is not stable and exclusive, instead this is characterised in terms of a *wandering*, since the reader has to shift through the various viewpoints and then interpret them. Here is Iser's definition of the 'moving' or 'wandering viewpoint': 'The lack of availability of the whole work during the act of the comprehension, which is brought about by means of the "moving viewpoint", is the condition that necessitates consistency-building on the part of the reader' (Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 16). This phenomenological conception of the point of view is closely related to the theme/horizon dynamics we have discussed in section 3.a: 'The segment on which the viewpoint focuses at each particular moment becomes the theme. The theme of one moment becomes the horizon against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on. Whenever a segment becomes a theme, the previous one must lose its thematic relevance' (Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 198).

relationship between a play of viewpoints and an alternation between imperfect and perfect past tense verb forms. As he explains:

Avendo per oggetto un *singolo* evento nella specificità della sua occorrenza, il perfettivo del passato semplice favorisce un avvicinamento alla prospettiva locale. Quella che viene infatti esibita è la singola occorrenza di un evento, circoscritta nel tempo e nello spazio, legato al punto di vista del soggetto d'esperienza che ha vissuto quell'evento. Viceversa l'uso dell'imperfettivo [...] comporta la sintesi di una *pluralità* di punti di vista locali...⁷³

Tozzi's use of the imperfect tense, insofar as it intimates concern with plurality, therefore maps directly onto the plurality of the points of view represented. And *vice versa*: Tozzi's representation of many points of view through narrated monologue increases the diversity of expression associated with the movement between tenses, and thereby adds to the indeterminacy of the text and to the confusion experienced by the reader.

The way in which the narrator (or better, the reader) moves from one point of view to the other must be connected also to the usage of the narrated monologue. Although we have seen that the internal focalisation centres on the various characters, we have also observed that focalisation is largely reserved for Pietro's viewpoint. Thus it is not by accident that, in a passage describing Pietro's feelings and inner troubles – all of a sudden – a first-person statement interrupts the narrated monologue. This is followed by a lengthy description of the Tuscan countryside at springtime which, by means of some deictic references (e.g., *questi*) and the switching to the present tense, brings the reader's standpoint *inside* the novel – both spatially and chronologically speaking. The passage is then abruptly interrupted by the past historic and by a return to the third-person narration, not focusing on Pietro any more, but on Domenico:

A Pietro era venuta un'allegria insolita, un'allegria simile ad un benessere troppo forte, che lo faceva più nervoso.
Vorrei parlare di *questi* indefinibili turbamenti del marzo, a cui è unita quasi sempre una sottile voluttà, un desiderio di qualche bellezza.

⁷³ Andrea Bonomi, *Lo spirito della narrazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 1994), p. 153.

Questi soli ambigui, questi cinguettii ancora nascosti e che si dimenticano presto, queste nuvole biancheggianti che sono venute prima del tempo![...]

Domenico *andò* nel campo, seguito dai suoi assaliarati, per combinare le faccende dell'indomani. (p. 29) [my emphases]

It is relatively important, at this point, to discern whether the first person should be attributed to Pietro – in what could be a temporary switching to the quoted inner monologue technique (the one typically used in stream of consciousness novels) – or, if we have to consider the sudden direct intervention as belonging to the narrator himself. More relevant to our argument is the fact that this is the *only* presence of an unquoted, first-person statement in the whole novel. Even if – and, indeed, because, the identity of the voice cannot be sufficiently determined, the overall effect of its interruption is, for the reader, one of confusion and ambiguity. Due to the uniqueness of this event, it comes to acquire greater significance in the eyes of the reader, who, as a result, is left unsure about the nature of the narrative voice and stance. The point of view's continuous shifting from one character to the others does not allow the reader to 'adagiarsi in una lettura tranquilla, sviluppabile linearmente e comunque esterna'.⁷⁴ Rather, he himself is (re)placed in the same position of non-surety as the characters; the reader becomes a participant in the action, in as much as he adopts a wandering attitude.

The way in which the narrator presents the dialogue between the characters is also quite unusual. As Cavalli Pasini notices, they often take the form of an *abruption* since one or two lines of dialogue are forcefully inserted into the context without an introducing *verbum dicendi*, and without being associated with a specific character. Once again, the effect is the decomposition of the narration: 'non è neppure necessario sapere qual è il personaggio che interviene, l'importante è che la sua voce si levi all'improvviso a spezzare il ritmo narrativo'.⁷⁵ We can see an abruption of dialogue in the following passage:

⁷⁴ Cavalli Pasini, p. 63.

⁷⁵ Cavalli Pasini, p. 73.

Pietro evitava sempre di farle [to his mother Anna] sentire che le voleva bene, per paura di doventare troppo obbediente; ed ella si disperava troppo e senza ragione di qualche sua scappata. E perciò Pietro temeva quando gli aveva tante cure. Mentre ella, non avvendogliele potute fare cercava un'altra volta di imporgliele.

“Tu non rispetti la mamma!”

Egli, allora, si esasperava; svignandosela senza né meno ascoltarla.
(p. 44)

Here, an abruption opens a sequence:

“Vestiti!”

Trovatala in camera con le braccia nude, voleva che si affrettasse a rimettersi il giacchetto color rosa; e aspettando per baciarla. (p. 137)

Confusion is then the ultimate aim of the narrative choices that we have seen in this section, if as Turchetta sums up:

Tutto il libro è infatti costruito in modo da farci vedere dall'interno una condizione di inettitudine morbosa, dove ‘gli occhi chiusi’ sono un modo di negare la realtà tutta: ma il paradosso della visione attraverso la non-visione assume *ipso facto* una polisemia carica di implicazioni meta-letterarie, in cui lo stesso costituirsi di una realtà rivelata per via di *percezioni confuse, impedito o mancanti del tutto* [my emphasis] mette in causa i fondamenti stessi sia del soggetto *tout court*, sia, più specificatamente, della conoscenza letteraria.⁷⁶

Indeed, it is not by accident that the critic opens his article by reproducing a famous quotation from Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: ‘Many stories require confusion in the reader and the most effective way to achieve it is to use an observer who is himself confused’.⁷⁷

4. Some comparative remarks with *Tre croci* and *Ricordi di un impiegato*

Although written after *Con gli occhi chiusi*, *Tre croci* has been considered by critics as a return to more traditional narrative patterns (similar reflections are usually also made about *Il Podere*).⁷⁸ We cannot here

⁷⁶ Turchetta, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Turchetta, p. 3. Quotation from Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 284.

⁷⁸ Among others, cf. Maxia, *Uomini e bestie*.

consider how this fact should be interpreted in relation to the whole poetics of the author; in any case, other critics have done so, interpreting *Tre croci* as an act of refusal toward the modalities of *Con gli occhi chiusi*, as a regression, or as a phase of an authorial evolution interrupted by Tozzi's death. The fact that *Tre croci* was inspired by some news reports on an event which occurred at the time in Siena could certainly have influenced the formal aspect of this novel. Nonetheless, in comparing it to *Con gli occhi chiusi*, we will see that the fact that *Tre croci* appears more traditional does not depend so much on the use of the individual textual strategies (often similar, as we will see, to the ones used in *Con gli occhi chiusi*), but, rather, on their combination, the role of the reader they inspire, and the manipulation of indeterminacy that is generated through them.

Although the style of *Tre croci* is not too distant from the one of *Con gli occhi chiusi*, what is absent in the novel is a sense of vertigo or dizziness: the narration flows much more smoothly and the reader is not required to make much of an effort in order to participate in the text's meaning. But, if not in the strategies themselves, where, then, does the difference lie in *Con gli occhi chiusi*? Beginning with the text's structure, it is immediately evident that, formally, *Tre croci* is quite different. The novel is divided into traditional chapters. Nevertheless, just like in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, the story begins *in medias res* and with the use of the past historic. What is different here is that the first scene explicitly depicts an event (with one of the three protagonist brothers, Giulio, signing a false commissary note) that leads to all the other events of the novel. The past historic is here used with an actual *perfective* meaning, and all the story's development starts from this event with the whole story taking place over the course of a few weeks.

The chapters are each linked to each other by a consequential and clear chronological bond. Many descriptive passages and digressions (introduced by the imperfect tense) are present, but their use is justified since they are needed to convey the characters' perspectives. They are typically functional to the development of the plot and – after each digression – the narration of events and facts is resumed and continued:

Enrico era stato uno di quei ragazzi impertinenti [...]. Egli aveva la convinzione che i fratelli parlassero male di lui anche con gli altri; e perciò si vantava d'essere sempre diffidente.

Ora che s'avvicinava la scadenza di un'altra cambiale piuttosto grossa, anch'egli sapeva com'era difficile trovare il denaro per scontarla, o almeno, com'erano soliti, per scemarla d'un quinto. Egli disse [...]. (*Tre croci*, p. 205)

Despite these essential differences, many of the typical features of Tozzi's writing are still present; for example, *Tre croci* maintains the use of the parataxis and punctuation, the switching from one viewpoint to another and the use of free indirect speech, the abrupt technique in dialogues, and the use of conjunctions. The narrator, too, seems very similar to *Con gli occhi chiusi*'s own narrator, to the extent that we are greeted again by a third-person figural narrative situation that shifts in focalisation and makes use of narrated monologue. All these strategies are, however, used in a less insistent manner (for parataxis and punctuation this can be noticed by observing just one page) and there are some differences that are worth highlighting in terms of the narration. Whilst *Tre croci* and *Con gli occhi chiusi* share typically a figural narrative context, nevertheless, in some parts of *Tre croci*, the narration becomes more authorial. The absence of the narrator's commentary in *Con gli occhi chiusi* was noticed and emphasised by several critics (for example, Cavalli Pasini and Maxia), but an interesting phenomenon is present in the systematic formula used to close many of the chapters in *Tre croci*. We can observe two types of closure, both appearing as annotation: 1. Semicolon + "e" + past historic; 2. Period + "e" + past historic. Observing such a systematic operation is interesting in itself, since it is used in half of the fifteen chapters of the book. But this use of punctuation is especially significant if we consider that: first, in both the case of the period and of the semicolon, the "comment" comes after a more or less strong pause that attracts the reader's attention and puts a certain amount of emphasis on the annotations; and, second, that these annotations often shed new light on the chapter they are closing, thus signaling to the reader that he must take notice of such brief comments in order to interpret correctly the chapter he

has just read (in this sense, this technique is working on the theme/horizon device). Insofar as such comments attempt to determine for the reader the meaning of each chapter, I suggest that they should be considered as a kind of narratorial commentary:

[Niccolò] finse di ridere tanto, come fosse sul punto di soffocare. Giulio, con il cappello su gli occhi, come senza avvedersene si metteva sempre tornando dalla banca, entrò serio.
 “Di che ti esalti?”
 Niccolò smise istantaneamente; *e s'avventò alla porta come se fuggisse perché non valeva la pena di rispondergli.* (*Tre croci*, p.166)
 [my emphasis]

[...] Niccolò si mise a singhiozzare.
 “E, ora, perchè piangi?”
 “Non ne posso più!”
 Allora anche Giulio, che lo guardava, in piedi, da dietro la scrivania, sentì gli occhi empirsi di lacrime bollenti, che lo accecavano.
E non ebbero il coraggio di guardarsi ancora. (*Tre croci*, p. 178)
 [my emphasis]

I earlier argued that the use of techniques, noted as typical of Tozzi, is “moderate” in *Tre croci*. This begs the question: is indeterminacy then a matter of “quantity”? It is certainly not; rather than ‘how many’ strategies are used and ‘how often’, we should better ask ‘how are they combined?’ It is not the simple presence of these strategies that creates or fails to create a sense of dizziness but, rather, it is the way in which they intertwine and the way in which their combination produces the stylistic pattern – namely, the context of the reader’s expectations to be confirmed or frustrated. It is this process that allows the text to guide the reader through its comprehension. The systematic way in which annotations are offered at the end of half of the chapters is a good example of the less confused – dare we say, “more determined” – way in which the reader’s understanding is conducted through the interpretation of chapters and of the lower degree of freedom he experiences in this work. The practically unavoidable fate of the three brothers of *Tre croci* is not only stated in the title, but is also confirmed by the way in which the death of Niccolò (the second one to die) is announced with a statement that resembles the one that described Giulio’s death, both in the structure and in the content:

Allora, spense la luce. E, al buio, senza rendersi conto che s'ammazzava, mise la testa dentro il laccio. Sentendosi stringere, avrebbe voluto gridare; ma non gli riuscì. (*Tre croci*, p. 240)

[...] Finché la voce venne sempre di più a mancargli. Allora, gli cominciò il rantolo, che pareva una risata repressa; gorgogliante nel sangue diacciato dall'apoplezia reumatica. (*Tre croci*, p. 246)

The conjunction “allora” – which, in Tozzi’s works, and especially in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, completely loses its consequential meaning and signals, rather, the irruption of an epiphanic moment –⁷⁹ is here used with its meaning of consequentiality intact. Alongside the title of the novel, “allora” produces a certain amount of expectations in the reader, which are eventually met. This effect is also strengthened by the fact that the use of such a consequential bond is not typical in the style of Tozzi, who usually avoids explicit connections and prefers juxtapositions.

Similarly, *Il podere* does not come across as a more determined novel because it contains *more traditional literary strategies*. On the contrary, it is not at the level of individual strategies that indeterminacy is manipulated. This explains why it is difficult to classify specific indeterminacy strategies. It is fair to say that some techniques with which authors experimented – in the context of the crisis of the novel in the twentieth century, and in the context of modernism – are likely intended to disrupt and even demolish traditional forms. Indeed, this is the case for many of the structural strategies that we have so far encountered. The elliptical structure of *Con gli occhi chiusi* is principally responsible for creating the sense of ungraspability that the reader experiences, yet it would still be “sustainable” if the reader were not engaged in other textual layers too. Instead, the reader has to constantly interrupt his reading, face the continuous shifting between the characters’ points of view as well as their unbalanced characterisation, and make sense of Tozzi’s non-standard use of verb tenses. Indeterminacy is then connected to the style of a work as a whole at each of its different levels.

⁷⁹ See Matteo Palumbo, ‘Le epifanie di Tozzi’, in *Federigo Tozzi in Europa*, ed. by Castellana and de Seta, pp. 25-38.

Much could be said on, and many more studies ought to be dedicated to Tozzi's return to more traditional narrative patterns. It is useful to note here that critics' judgements have tended to be divided between those who consider the *rappel à l'ordre* of *Tre croci* and *Il podere* as the final resolution of Tozzi's stylistic struggle (thus they perceive these works as more valuable than *Con gli occhi chiusi*), and those who see, in the poetics of indeterminacy of the latter, his best work: 'Meglio la forma aperta di *Con gli occhi chiusi*, che non risolve ma sospende e rinvia. Anche per questo, quel romanzo, rimane la sua opera migliore'.⁸⁰

Written for the first time in 1910 and later extended, but only posthumously published, *Ricordi di un impiegato* also presents some of Tozzi's typical stylistic phenomena. The most evident is the paratactic structure and the juxtaposition of images, descriptions, and lyric moments. Such a combination of textual strategies might lead to a similar vagueness as that produced in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, but *Ricordi di un impiegato* has one fundamental difference: its diaristic style. A fragmenting movement is constantly present in this work too, and such fragmentation is emphasised by the use of the present tense that suspends everything in a rarely diachronic progression. However, the diaristic structure has consequences on the effect of *indeterminacy* techniques, which, as a result, have a much weaker effect. Even if the diaristic-narrator does not state the nature of his narration in the opening of the novel, the reader easily recognizes it as a diary.⁸¹ The very first fragment – like all the others proceeding – has a date

⁸⁰ Reina, p. 82.

⁸¹The implied reader of the text owns in his repertoire the literary norms necessary to recognise this form (cf. the notion of "repertoire" above in chapter I and in Iser, *The Act of Reading*). Furthermore, it will be worth mentioning here Jean-Louis Dufays' study on literary reception. In Dufays' theory the reader approaches the text bringing inside it "preconceptions" and "stereotypes" that work for him as the first track to understand the text. When he starts reading, indeed, the only thing the reader can do is to stick to words and to the meanings he can attribute to them on the basis of their extra-referential values and of the previous knowledge he possesses. In the first moments of the act of reading, the construction of meaning has therefore a purely hypothetical justification and needs to be confirmed. It is only in a second moment that the reader can hold the mimetic nature of the text off and finally catch the semantic structure of the work as a whole: 'cette structure est d'une grande fragilité, car tant que la lecture n'est pas achevée, elle reste hypothétique, et donc provisoire, susceptible de maintes transformations. [...] Dans toute lecture, le lecteur est amené à délaisser à

at its beginning, and this identification is not going to be negated in the course of the reading. Thus a pattern, or a context, is created for the reader. Even if he has to deal with disconnected images, fragmented syntax, dense punctuation and a high-rate of impressions, rather than feeling abandoned in a maze-like narration, he is led to attribute this selection of the “narratable” and its arbitrariness to the very model of the diaristic novel. This fact helps us to evaluate how the implied reader reaction can be manipulated by the combination of unusual textual strategies alongside the potentiality of a specific literary genre. The power of the single strategies is not affected, but can be weakened or emphasised by the referral to the specific genre of the text.

Some critics perceived this episode in Tozzi’s writing as an insistence on autobiographical depiction and attributed it to the *memoir* trend promoted by writers in *La Voce*’s circle, such as Scipio Slataper and Giovanni Boine. A fertile suggestion on how to interpret this work comes once more from Cavalli Pasini, who refuses to attribute this choice to an inclination towards autobiographism and justifies it as such:

Lo schermo [...] del diario gli serve piuttosto come tramite di passaggio per rendere meno avvertito, meno dirompente rispetto alle attese del pubblico un primo radicale mutamento di prospettiva nella selezione del narrabile.⁸²

Cavalli Pasini’s statement offers a fascinating interpretation of *Ricordi di un impiegato* as an experiment and a transitional passage that takes into consideration the reaction of the audience (even if her thesis on the text has yet to be proved and compared with the actual author’s intention and awareness).⁸³ What happens in the dialectics between text and reader is that, because of the text’s instructional, diary-esque annotations, the reader

diverses reprises une signification pour une autre jugée plus adéquate’. Jean-Louis Dufays, *Stéréotype et lecture. Essai sur la réception littéraire*, new edn (Brusselles: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 143.

⁸² Cavalli Pasini, p. 26. Cf. also ‘Nel sistema del diario Tozzi sperimenta e progressivamente affina la rottura dei tradizionali reticoli temporali del racconto’, Cavalli Pasini, p. 40.

⁸³ See also Giovanardi: ‘La struttura diaristica dei *Ricordi di un impiegato*, con la casualità delle annotazioni giornaliere e la frammentazione del filo narrativo che esse comportano, si attaglia perfettamente a una poetica che Tozzi esprimerà

si vede costretto a immettersi nell'ottica mnestica e frammentaria del diarista, a compiere la medesima operazione di sondaggio di quel recondito principio di attrazione che si istituisce tra il veduto e il supposto, tra realtà e sogno, tra razionale e fantasmagorico...⁸⁴

This is because the diaristic structure implies, and contains in itself, the justification for everything that remains unintelligible; it reserves the right to neither explicate itself nor be explicated. In terms of indeterminacy, the narrated content of the novel presents many gaps and blanks that the reader has to fill and leaves open many connections that he has to infer.

However, Luperini even came to question the diaristic effectiveness of this work, which does not record actual facts and certainly does not register effectively the inner feelings of the narrator/protagonist: 'la vera storia di *Ricordi di un impiegato* è quella che non è raccontata ma si può intuire'.⁸⁵ Once again, the text calls for the reader's intervention but, what is missing here, is that tension between the search for meaning and the advancing rhythm of the narration that is negated by the choice of the diaristic genre.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have focused on the different textual strategies through which indeterminacy is manipulated in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. Firstly, we have considered the image of vertigo, which is used by Tozzi not only in the novel but also in his private correspondence. Here, it is usually associated with the act of reading. Secondly, we have examined how Tozzi conceived his ideal reader, as expressed in the essay *Come leggo io*, and we compared his ideal to the role designed for the reader in *Con gli occhi chiusi*. In particular, we analysed how the reader's cooperation is solicited by textual strategies operating at different textual levels and we

compiutamente solo nel 1919 nel breve saggio *Come leggo io*'. Stefano Giovanardi, 'L'espressionismo', p. 170.

⁸⁴ Giovanardi, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Romano Luperini, *Frammentazione espressionista e ricostruzione romanzesca* (Modena: Mucchi, 1993), p. 17.

have found that, whether at a structural, linguistic-rhetorical, or narrative level, such strategies all pursue and evoke confusion in the reader by means of omissions, discontinuity, and fragmentation. Finally, we compared the style of *Con gli occhi chiusi* to the two other novels of the same author, *Tre croci* and *Ricordi di un impiegato*. The comparison allowed us to highlight how in *Con gli occhi chiusi* the vertigo effect is generated by the combination of the textual strategies at different textual levels.

The varying critical approaches adopted to label *Con gli occhi chiusi*, and the generally reductionist criticism of Tozzi's work at large, are symptomatic of the simplistic ways with which we continue to define a much more complex phenomenon. Fragmentation, expressionism, juxtaposition, and the like, are indeed some of the techniques used by Tozzi, but they are part of a wider attempt to manipulate the novel's traditional models, and to engage the reader in the construction of meaning by triggering a centrifugal force from the narrative paradigm of the nineteenth-century novel. This is why I here propose to describe Tozzi's stylistic choices as a *poetics of indeterminacy* that, in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, takes the form of a vertigo effect and of dizziness. Even if Tozzi might not have been completely aware of the full range of the possible outcomes he was to obtain, this definition at least accurately expresses the mechanism of the reader's active engagement that he tried to trigger in *Con gli occhi chiusi*.

III. Indeterminacy beyond the fantastic in *La pietra lunare* by Tommaso Landolfi

1. Introduction

Many factors contributed to the overall unpopularity of Tommaso Landolfi, like, for example, his isolation both from the public sphere and from the *republic of letters*, his detachment from any form of social or political commitment, and his not unabashed polemic against it.¹ Moreover, although Landolfi's works have remained consistently and undisputably in the canon of the Italian fantastic since this canon was established,² Landolfi's reception was certainly also influenced by the mutable perceptions of distinguished critics. Contini, for example, despite including Landolfi's works in his canonical anthology, *Italie magique* (1946), and despite confirming this inclusion in the 1988 Italian edition *Italia magica*, labelled the author as 'un ottocentista eccentrico in ritardo'³ and ultimately defined Landolfi as a 'continuatore di se stesso in modalità poco variate', whose latest publications 'non costituiscono una serie evolutiva, ma una somma di addendi similari'.⁴ Finally, Landolfi's style was considered too elitist, refined and gloatingly backwards⁵ and his poetic intention was viewed as ungraspable.⁶

¹ Compare for example a novel like *Racconto d'autunno* (1947), which begins with the premises (i.e. the setting, the theme and the tone) of a neorealist novel about the Resistance, but then turns into a *storia di fantasmi*, not without a playful and ironic attitude both of the author and of the narrator.

² For an introduction to the critical debate on the fantastic in Italy and on the definition and canon of the *fantastico italiano*, see Stefano Lazzarin, 'Trentacinque anni di teoria e critica del fantastico italiano (dal 1980 a oggi)', in *Il fantastico italiano*, ed. by Stefano Lazzarin and others (Florence: Le Monnier Università/Mondadori Education, 2016), pp. 1-58.

³ Gianfranco Contini, *Letteratura dell'Italia unita. 1861-1968* (Florence: Sansoni, 1994), p. 931.

⁴ Gianfranco Contini, *Italia magica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), p. 249.

⁵ Maurizio Dardano pins down three major reasons for the overall diffidence of the critics towards Landolfi: 'Il culto della forma [...], il disimpegno politico e il distacco aristocratico.' Maurizio Dardano, 'Sulla lingua di Tommaso Landolfi', in *Cent'anni di Landolfi. Atti del convegno (Roma, 7-8 maggio 2008)*, ed. by Silvana Cirillo (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), pp. 43-71 (p. 44).

⁶ In particular Zublena signals a surprising lack of interest regarding Landolfi shown by historical linguistics, despite the richness and peculiarity of Landolfi's

Without dwelling too much on details that concern the definition of and the debate on *il fantastico italiano*, it is nevertheless necessary to highlight how Contini's and Calvino's contributions established an Italian fantastic canon that is *espressivamente valido*⁷ and of an *intellectual* type. Lazzarin highlights how these two aspects are unusual requirements for fantastic works:

Più spesso, la lingua degli scrittori fantastici risulta, se non prevalentemente denotativa, meno impegnata sul versante stilistico, per ragioni legate alla poetica stessa del racconto fantastico: una narrazione il cui problema originario – e a lungo – principale – è quello di convincere il lettore della verità di ciò che viene raccontato, non mira all'alterazione del rapporto significante/significato, né all'opacizzazione del discorso narrativo; in caso contrario, la decifrazione del testo finirebbe per impegnare in maniera decisiva l'attenzione del lettore; la funzione linguistica prevarrebbe su quella narrativa, l'illusione referenziale si dissolverebbe. Le necessità del 'verosimile fantastico' – per usare la formulazione di Bonifazi – sono all'origine di una costante nella storia della letteratura fantastica, non solo italiana: l'adozione di una scrittura lineare; in questo senso, i campioni scelti da Contini costituiscono altrettante eccezioni. (pp. 17-18)

Lazzarin demonstrates how Calvino fostered the idea that 'il fantastico più moderno sarebbe quello in cui la componente spettacolare cede il passo a quella mentale: il fantastico "intellettuale" [...] che Calvino ritroverà – e prediligerà – nel Novecento italiano'.⁸ Alongside the anthology edited by Calvino *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento*,⁹ Lazzarin cites some of his crucial critical passages: 'Nel fantastico contemporaneo è esplicita la scommessa dell'immaginazione, dell'invenzione formale e concettuale; il problema del "crederci o non crederci" ormai non si potrebbe più

language: 'Probabilmente le ragioni di questo *vacuum* vanno ricercate nel rapporto tutt'altro che perspicuo che l'aspetto linguistico della scrittura landolfiana intrattiene con le più intime scaturigini tematiche, psichiche e ideologiche della sua maniera.' Paolo Zublena, *La lingua-pelle di Tommaso Landolfi* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2013), p. 19.

⁷ Contini, in presenting his anthology, speaks of texts, which are 'non meno piacevolmente leggibili che espressivamente validi'. Contini, 'Prefazione', in *Italia magica*, unnumbered page.

⁸ Lazzarin, p. 26.

⁹ *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento*, ed. by Italo Calvino (Milan: Mondadori, 1983).

nemmeno porre'.¹⁰ Further, Lazzarin highlights how Calvino's attitude comes from a reflection not only on the Italian fantastic tradition but also on the very meaning of the word *fantastico* in Italian:

Nel linguaggio letterario francese attuale il termine *fantastico* è usato soprattutto per le storie di spavento che implicano un rapporto col lettore alla maniera ottocentesca: il lettore (se vuole partecipare al gioco, almeno con una parte di se stesso) deve credere a ciò che legge, accettare di essere colto da un'emozione quasi fisiologica (solitamente di terrore o d'angoscia) e cercarne una spiegazione, come per un'esperienza vissuta. In italiano [...] i termini *fantasia* e *fantastico* non implicano affatto questo tuffo del lettore nella corrente emozionale del testo; implicano al contrario una presa di distanza, una levitazione, l'accettazione d'un'altra logica che porta [*scil.* 'verte'] su altri oggetti e altri nessi da quelli dell'esperienza quotidiana (o dalle convenzioni letterarie dominanti).¹¹

Both the elements “required” by Contini and Calvino – a certain expressive quality and an intellectual approach – are certainly present in Landolfi's stories and novels. With this analysis of *La pietra lunare*,¹² I aim to reflect on how these two elements are both employed to enhance the novel's indeterminacy.

On the one hand, and insofar as ‘uno strumento linguistico come quello landolfiano si incontra di rado fra i narratori fantastici (bisognerebbe dire: si incontra di rado *tout court*)’,¹³ I will consider how Landolfi's apparently backward-looking stylistic patina is the result of a linguistic and stylistic manipulation operated by Landolfi on the genre of the novel, in order to achieve a complex narrative modality. I follow the assumption that the effects produced, ‘dalla tensione tra una letterarietà di stampo tradizionale e una modernità del tutto personale’ that springs from

¹⁰ Italo Calvino, ‘Un'antologia di racconti “neri”’, in *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I, 1690-92.

¹¹ Italo Calvino, ‘Definizioni di territori: il fantastico’, in *Saggi 1945-1985*, I, 266-68 (p. 266). In Lazzarin, p. 24.

¹² Tommaso Landolfi, *La pietra lunare* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1939). All the quotations from the novel are from the 1995 Adelphi edition (Milan: Adelphi, 1995).

¹³ Lazzarin, p. 17.

‘il culto della lingua letteraria e la ricerca espressionistica’,¹⁴ map onto Landolfi’s authorial intention. As the author insists:

dovevo rifarmi da ancor più lontano, ossia inventare in primo luogo un paese, un popolo, una sua storia e così via, la lingua essendo il supremo fiore anzi frutto d’una civiltà; empîi fogli e fogli, che ogni tanto ritrovo. E forse questo mi si configurò nel capo come la ricerca di un’altra cosa.¹⁵

In this chapter, I will therefore firstly focus on how this relationship between literary premises or textual strategies and the author’s personal pursuit coincide with a poetics of indeterminacy and a drive to experimentalism that seem to liken Landolfi to the European modernists. As Marcello Carlino suggests: ‘La narrazione di Landolfi si pone sulla linea del grande sperimentalismo e, se si vuole trovarle accoppiamenti giudiziosi al di qua delle Alpi, appare tangente in alcuni punti all’esperienza coeva di Gadda’.¹⁶ This is perhaps most visible in the author’s concern with exploring the relationship between words and reality, and in his reflection on the gnoseological value of language and literature. Maria Antonietta Grignani is of a similar view in maintaining that the paradox deriving from the *dyscrasia* ‘tra lo splendore quasi manieristico, ottocentesco, o addirittura arcaizzante della scrittura e i tagli compositivi arditi, “fantastici” e irrequieti’ is the specific trait that betrays Landolfi as an ‘autore ben novecentesco’,¹⁷ and thus it demands further investigation.

Secondly, I will also consider how the *intellectually* fantastic elements of the novel contribute to its increased indeterminacy, and thereby influence the reader’s interaction with the work. Fantastic elements, if in different quantities, are a common feature both of Landolfi’s short stories and his novels (which are indeed all quite short too). However, the author incorporates these elements in a way that unsettles both readers and critics; the indeterminacy of his novels therefore undoubtedly relies on the unsettling effect induced by the fantastic mode,

¹⁴ Dardano, ‘Sulla lingua di Tommaso Landolfi’, p. 49.

¹⁵ Tommaso Landolfi, *Des mois* (1967) (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 3.

¹⁶ Marcello Carlino, *Landolfi e il fantastico* (Rome: Lithos, 1998), p. 61.

¹⁷ Maria Antonietta Grignani, *Novecento plurale* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2007), p.93.

but it also arises from more typical strategies that evoke indeterminacy in literary texts. Unquestionably, it is these fantastic traits that in the last decades have attracted most critical attention to Landolfi's works. Instead of focusing on either why these traits fall into the fantastic mode, or on how they find a place within Landolfi's poetics, in this chapter I rather aim to consider how indeterminacy is generated in Landolfi's *La pietra lunare* through the use of different textual strategies, some of which are related to the fantastic but which, nevertheless, transcend straightforward genre categorisation. It is my suggestion that the use of various textual strategies demonstrates perfectly the way in which indeterminacy can be maximised, even if, as we are going to see, Landolfi uses a range of tools provided by the fantastic in a way that plays with different genres and modalities and which produces an ambiguous, ungraspable, and undetermined result. In order to discuss the relationship between both standard textual strategies and fantastic elements, and indeterminacy, I reserve analytic focus for *La pietra lunare* (1939), in view of the fact that, at least at a first glance, this novel appears to be the most conventionally fantastic work of Landolfi's – 'da tutti considerata il do di petto, la marcia trionfale del fantastico [...] landolfiano'.¹⁸ This remains the case even if it is not simply the author's uses of fantastic elements that drive the production of indeterminacy in the work.

I will begin my analysis by considering how Landolfi uses fantastic elements in *La pietra lunare* (section 2). In section 2, I will also reflect on how some of the (ambiguously) fantastic elements of *La pietra lunare* contribute to the novel's thematising, and also how they foreground the problem of the representation of reality in literature and its relationship to indeterminacy (in a way which goes *beyond* the fantastic). In section 3, I will then move to consider how indeterminacy in *La pietra lunare* corresponds also to a reflection on the power (or, in fact, on the powerlessness) of literary language as a medium of representation. In section 4, I will move focus to the use of irony – especially in the narratorial context – which, I propose, is itself a way of producing

¹⁸ Carlino, p. 109.

ambiguity and duplicity. Finally, in section five, I will move to analyse a set of strategies at work in the novel, each in the area of the unsayable – such as litotes, hesitation, and reticence. Here I develop a sense of how such strategies of the unsayable contribute to the manipulation of the novel's indeterminacy.

2. The trivial and the strange – notes on *La pietra lunare* as an ambiguous (fantastic) novel

La pietra lunare is Landolfi's first novel. It tells the story of Giovancarlo Scarabozzo, a university student and aspiring poet who returns to his provincial hometown for the summer holidays. Once there, he experiences an initiation both to erotic life and to *another* parallel world – magical and disturbing – in contrast to his own provincial one. The catalyst is Gurù, a charming young woman, who is soon revealed to be a *weregoat*. She embodies these two opposing realities while accompanying Giovancarlo through a journey in a supernatural parallel reality.

From a purely structural point of view, as Cecchini sums up, the novel is

[u]n perfetto repertorio di ingredienti fantastici: l'esitazione del protagonista (che più volte si trova a formulare il classico dilemma sogno o son desto); l'ambiguità della narrazione; le figure della metamorfosi; gli esseri notturni e sovrannaturali; i fantasmi e le leggende paesane; il viaggio notturno verso l'ignoto.¹⁹

Nonetheless, these fantastic elements are not only intended to generate the fantastic atmosphere of the novel, but also to go beyond it. Taking the form of different techniques (linguistic-rhetorical, narrative, and thematic), they show, also at a first superficial observation, kinship with indeterminacy; to the extent that they belong to a realm where suspension, implicitness, ineffability and instability are easily found. As we will see, the fantastic elements in *La pietra lunare* contribute therefore to creating a double level of ambiguity. On the one hand, they serve to initiate the

¹⁹ Leonardo Cecchini, *Parlare per le notti. Il fantastico nell'opera di Tommaso Landolfi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tuscolanum Press, 2001), p. 79

fantastic narrative situation (in which the hesitation of the reader is a mandatory requirement)²⁰ on the other hand, Landolfi builds on them a narratorial situation that manipulates the literary communication and plays with the reader's involvement in the novel.

The unreal nature of the facts of the story cannot, however, be doubted. Indeed, as Sandrini notices, in this work, we can find both Landolfi's tendency for wit and paradox, as well as a genuine abandonment to this supernatural and mythical initiation:

è certo presente anche la sulfurea volontà di gioco e di paradosso che caratterizza molti dei suoi racconti ma se la mente può vivere di artificio, il cuore no: altrimenti non si spiegherebbe, in un narratore tanto amante dell'ironia e della finzione, la vera e propria iniziazione mitica vissuta dal protagonista.²¹

Despite this abandonment however, we can observe how the three main fantastic elements of the novels undergo a manipulation that makes them the pivots around which a deeper ambiguity is generated. This manipulation of the fantastic comes to acquire a meta-literary intention, and takes the conventionally fantastic elements beyond the boundaries of the fantastic mode.²² These three elements are: the main setting of the

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, in his famous structuralist definition of the fantastic, prescribes: 'The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work – in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. These three requirements do not have equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled.' Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 33.

²¹ Giuseppe Sandrini, *Le avventure della luna. Leopardi, Calvino e il fantastico italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014), p. 123

²² For some preliminary reflections on the fantastic mode, see for example, Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*; Irene Bessière, *Le récit fantastique. La poétique de l'incertain* (Paris: Larousse, 1974); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981); *The Poetic Fantastic. Studies in an Evolving Genre*, ed. by Patrick D. Murphy and Vernon Hyles (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1989); Remo Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996) and 'The boundaries of the Fantastic' in *The Italian*

novel in *the trivial everyday world*; *the hesitation* experienced both by the reader and by the protagonist; and the centrality of *language* in *building the fantastic situation* in which the uncanny events take place.

Let us first consider the trivial setting of an everyday world. *La pietra lunare* is set in a small town *di provincia* (as the subheading – *Scene della vita di provincia* – anticipates) in which the inhabitants, including the relatives of the protagonist, seem to lead their lives in the banality, or even numbness, of small businesses. This provides the *familiar* background to which the apparition of the fantastic contrasts; indeed, this contrast is triggered when Gurù makes her first appearance at Giovancarlo's uncle's house. Nevertheless, it is immediately clear that this everyday context is more familiar to Gurù herself than it is to the young man, who is rather somewhat estranged from such a routine and to whom the town's everyday businesses look almost as bewildering as the uncanny events in which he is eventually involved. On the other hand, Gurù seems to enjoy fully the banality of provincial life:

Giovancarlo, ancora più divertito che seccato, rifletteva alla strana avversione di quei provinciali per un'innocente fantesca che solo badava a vestire un po' più pulita delle altre. (p. 17)

[Giovancarlo] cercava di capire chi mai potesse essere questa Gurù capitata in modo strano, e in così buoni rapporti, a ciò che pareva, colla famiglia. (p. 22)

[A]ppostata dietro un'altra finestra [...] [Gurù] correva con gioia fanciullesca dal suo luogo di osservazione a lui, annunciando i passanti. Giovancarlo non conosceva quasi nessuno al paese, data la sua vita; al contrario di lei che, senza parere, conosceva tutti. (p. 67)

Gurù's familiarity with provincial life represents therefore the embedding of the fantastic element in the familiar context, as it is Giovancarlo who is instead estranged from such an everyday context. This creates a paradoxical situation of overturning of the usual pattern of the fantastic mode, since instead of the uncanny abrupting in the trivial life, we have the uncanny element of the story behaving in the everyday setting more comfortably than the protagonist himself.

Hesitation is a key element of the fantastic mode and it plays an important role (even if this is ambiguous) in *La pietra lunare*. Indeed, even after a rational explanation of the events is eventually provided at the end of the novel, the reader is ultimately left with a feeling of uncertainty. In considering this aspect we should remember that critical scholarship, following Todorov, has tended to indicate hesitation as the most relevant feature of the fantastic mode, since the effectiveness of the fantastic strategies is based upon the interpretative hesitation they create in the reader (cf. above). In section four, I will show how Landolfi, in manipulating this typical fantastic element, accentuates ambiguity and reticence. This is enacted, in the first place, by deferring to an extradiegetic third-person narrator – unusual for fantastic stories, where we more typically have a first-person narrator –²³ whose voice is characterised by an insistent use of irony. The latter generates, as a consequence, an extra layer of uncertainty and ambiguity (see section 4) but, more specifically, it prevents the immersive phenomenon of a kind of mirroring/identification between the reader and the protagonist. This kind of identification is, rather, usually generated by a more conventional intradiegetic – often first-person – narrator of a typical fantastic story. The use of a third-person narrator in *La pietra lunare* is a feature that increases the hesitation effect.

Finally, the ontological ambiguity of the events and the objects with which the fantastic deals, poses some questions about the possibility to represent them – specifically the possibility of representing the reality of events and objects in a determined way. Typically not supported by an experienceable counterpart in the real world, the object of representation of the fantastic usually relies on language for its existence. Language therefore acquires a more important role than usual in as much as it becomes the material from which the author can build a new world from scratch. This is consistent with Zangrandi's view that:

²³ Thus Todorov: 'In stories of the fantastic, the narrator habitually says "I"' (p. 82) because 'the first-person narrator most readily permits the reader to identify with the character (*The Fantastic*, p. 84).

La letteratura fantastica gioca col linguaggio, creando, manipolando e associando immagini, punta sulle sue facoltà creative in quanto solo le parole possono creare una nuova e diversa realtà [...] ricca di contraddizioni e incontri degli opposti.²⁴

Accordingly, indeterminacy is not only the unavoidable result of this phenomenon, but it is also the most appropriate modality to emphasise the ungraspable counterpart of reality (which, admittedly, is not wholly graspable itself) that the fantastic generates. This can only be done through ‘[l’]adozione consapevole e [il] dispiegamento consapevole, dentro l’organismo del racconto, di enzimi attivi di contraddizione’.²⁵ In *La pietra lunare*, this specific relationship between the *unreal* reality of the novel and language is particularly exploited and, at the same time, revealed. As Zangrandi reflects on the fantastic at large:

Dal momento che l’oggetto che determina il fantastico non può essere rivelato nella sua totalità, è necessario che lo si intraveda appena; occorre perciò ricorrere a giochi linguistici, analogie, comparazioni in modo da renderlo un oggetto esclusivamente verbale.²⁶

The novel contains therefore a parallel meta-literary and metalinguistic discourse that, on the one hand, states the *poietical* power of language whilst, on the other one, refuses to consider it as a reliable tool with which to depict reality. It foregrounds language’s limits and deceptions. We will focus on this element in section 3 of this chapter.

As it already appears from this brief account of the use and manipulation of the fantastic mode in *La pietra lunare*, ambiguity and duplicity, created through hesitation with an ironic undertone, are the very essence of this novel. As I have suggested, in *La pietra lunare* – as is in fact true of all Landolfi’s works – the fantastic element is the pivot around which a multi-layered reflection on the conflict between reality and literary language takes place. This is one of the most important aspects to consider in Landolfi’s poetics and it involves all our five macro-groups of strategies (linguistic-rhetorical, repertoire, narrator, structural and metanarrative

²⁴ Silvia Zangrandi, *Cose dell’altro mondo. Percorsi nella letteratura fantastica italiana del Novecento* (Bologna: Archetipolibri, 2011), p. 12.

²⁵ Carlino, p. 59.

²⁶ Zangrandi, p. 12.

strategies). Landolfi plays considerably with literary language and literary tradition (compare for example the meta-literary appendix to the novel *Dal giudizio del signor Giacomo Leopardi sulla presente opera*, see section 5), and he produces a complex, dense and rich style. Nevertheless, he shows diffidence for literary communication by using litotes, hesitation, and reticence, which are, as we have anticipated, powerful strategies in the manipulation of indeterminacy. The complete freedom with which Landolfi plays with the fantastic elements is unsurprising: the fantastic as a formal mode has appeared in many forms of narrative, and often in hybrid ones, throughout the twentieth century. This is especially true of the Italian context: ‘Nel nostro paese, diversamente dai paesi d’oltralpe, è nel XX secolo che si assiste a un’autentica fioritura di opere legate a questo modo letterario e la specificità del fantastico italiano va cercata proprio nel Novecento’.²⁷ In order to explain this literary phenomenon, we might consider how this period’s urge for providing a better distinction between those two realms coincided with a paradigm shift that made it even more impossible: ‘La percezione del reale viene messa in crisi, gli stessi progressi della scienza anziché restringere il campo dell’ignoto, lo allargano, cancellando il confine tra reale e impossibile.’²⁸ In this context, therefore, the fantastic acts like: ‘a mode of writing which forces the reader to question the boundaries of the twentieth-century western gnoseology and epistemology and to come to terms with their ultimately discursive nature’.²⁹ Thus, we ought not to overlook the gnoseological effect that the fantastic provokes on its readers, and we should bear in mind that the fantastic ‘exists at the inside, or underside, of realism’.³⁰ Unlike the realistic mode that seems to dwell confidently on that boundary, the fantastic one makes explicit the problems of ‘establishing “reality” and “meaning” in a literary text’,³¹ therefore introducing itself as – in Tzvetan

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁹ Daniela La Penna, ‘An Inquiry into modality and genre: Reconsidering *L’Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese’, in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, ed. by Billiani and Sulis, pp. 160-87 (p. 162).

³⁰ Jackson, p. 25.

³¹ Jackson, p. 37.

Todorov's words – the most literary of all the literary forms, in a way like 'the quintessence of literature'.³²

With the presence of some fantastic elements, and especially with the manipulation that they undergo, *La pietra lunare* is therefore a genuinely ambiguous and ungraspable text. Many of the strategies of the fantastic mode are used in the novel in order to create ambiguity. Ambiguity is one of the central tenets of the fantastic mode, and, unsurprisingly, like another crucial component (that of hesitation), the term belongs to the semantic field of "indeterminacy". Interestingly, 'limbo' – whose semantic area cannot but suggest to us again vagueness, uncertainty, and underdetermination – is the word that Francesca Billiani uses to describe the interpretative ambiguity that the fantastic provokes in its readers. The fantastic makes us face an epistemological problem and partake in hermeneutical reflection since it 'plays with the pleasure provoked in each of its readers by the feeling of being left in a limbo'.³³ Transferring the fantastic world onto the page seems more challenging than coping with the reflection of the real one: '[its] world is neither entirely "real" [...] or "unreal" [...], but is located somewhere else indeterminately between the two',³⁴ therefore 'The fantastic cannot exist independently of that "real" world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite'.³⁵ If the relationship between words and objects is always a difficult one, the one between words and *unreal* objects looks is somewhat tenser, thus the fantastic 'pushes towards an area of nonsignification'. Interpretation, likewise, becomes a very challenging task to the extent that 'the gap between signifier and signified dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning, or absolute "reality"'.³⁶ With this in mind, an analysis of a novel that contains fantastic elements like *La pietra lunare* offers us the chance to go to the heart of problems such as the pursuit of mimetic intentions in literature, the role of the reader and the role of

³² Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 168.

³³ Francesca Billiani, 'The Italian Gothic and the Fantastic: An Enquiry into the Notions of Literary and Cultural Traditions (1869-1997)', *The Italian Gothic and the Fantastic*, ed. by Billiani and Sulis, pp. 15-31 (p. 18).

³⁴ Jackson, p. 19.

³⁵ Jackson, p. 22.

³⁶ Jackson, p. 42.

indeterminacy. This is consistent with Angelo Mangini's view that we should consider fantastic literature as 'una forma di *anamorfosi letteraria*' since 'come l'anamorfose, il fantastico approfitta infatti delle tecniche del realismo per revocare in dubbio la tenuta del confine fra realtà e finzione'.³⁷

The anamorphosing aspect of *La pietra lunare* is the result of the process of manipulation that the fantastic elements undergo and in which even more indeterminacy is generated. Manipulation also plays with the stratification and the interaction of these elements themselves. For example, as we have seen, the first element of ambiguity arises from the typically fantastic contrast between everyday life in *provincia* and the development of strange, inexplicable – in a word *unworldly* – phenomena. These are presented by the narrator not without a considerable amount of irony that is also triggered by the *bozzettismo* (used to depict everyday life's scenes and within which the fantastic events take place):

Sospinto dal padrone di casa, Giovancarło entrò nella cucina, che era il luogo abituale di trattenimento della famiglia. Attorno alla larga tavola di legno senza tappeto stavano in posizioni innaturali le seggiole, così come erano state abbandonate un momento prima dagli occupanti; a lui ne toccò una caldissima, davanti a una scatola rotonda di tabacco, a una di zolfanelli, una gazzetta e un paio di occhiali. Nell'aria c'era odore pesante d'avanzi di lavatura di piatti e d'insetti domestici. (pp. 11-12)

The irruption of the fantastic into this context is personified in the character of Gurù. We should consider Gurù as an ambiguous device in herself insofar as, on the one hand, she belongs (more than the protagonist) to the life in *provincial* (see *supra*) yet, on the other hand, and at the same time, her first appearance initiates the entry of all the fantastic content of the novel – namely her being a kind of *capra mannara*. And she mediates the entry of the fantastic in a simple and apparently innocent, banal manner. We discover the semi-beastly nature of the girl through the glance of the protagonist Giovancarło, who acts, here, as our internal focaliser.

³⁷ Angelo Mangini, *Letteratura come anamorfosi. Teoria e prassi del fantastico nell'Italia del primo Novecento* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2007), p.10.

Gurù arrives abruptly at Giovancarlo's uncle's house and now the young man studies her figure carefully:

Ella s'era seduta sull'orlo della seggiola senza abbandonare all'indietro il corpo snello ed elegante, che anzi restava nervosamente rattratto, quasi preparandosi a uno slancio; una veste bianca e leggera la ricopriva, di foggia alquanto inusitata, corta di maniche e di scollo largo [...]. Il giovane seguì con viva soddisfazione la linea delle cosce affusolate, cui la stoffa aderiva strettamente, lasciò scivolare lo sguardo sul tornito ginocchio, e s'aspettava ora di scoprire una caviglia esile, un piccolo piede. Invece...[...] in luogo della caviglia sottile e del leggiadro piede, dalla gonna si vedevano sbucare due piedi forcuti di capra [...]. (pp. 22-23)

Interestingly, despite Giovancarlo's bewilderment, the phenomenon appears to him almost natural and he decides not to do or say anything:

E il curioso era che queste zampe, a guardarci bene, parevano la *logica continuazione* di quelle cosce affusolate; né alcuni lunghi ciuffi di pelame ruvido bastavano a stabilire un'ideale soluzione tra l'agile corpo e le sue mostruose appendici. (p. 23) [my emphasis]

And again:

Di più, pareva anzi a Giovancarlo di scoprire che un corpo femminile in generale potesse indifferentemente e *logicamente* conchiudersi con appendici caprine o femminili; altrimenti detto che quel corpo *dovesse* essere così [...]; insomma il giovane era specialmente spaventato dal fatto che tutto gli apparisse così naturale. (p. 93) [my emphases]

In this passage we can also appreciate how another *topos* of the fantastic genre – i.e. the rational, logical and *enlightened* attitude of the sceptical protagonist – is completely overturned by Landolfi, while the reader is left puzzled:

Tuttavia questa soluzione è del tutto inverosimile e non può essere non sentita come tale dal lettore. Il testo gioca ambigualmente tra sogno-allucinazione e realtà, instaurando così una “zona franca” tra reale e fantastico in cui viene sospesa la validità delle categorie del pensiero razionale.³⁸

This overturning is continuously confirmed over the course of the novel:

³⁸ Cecchini, p. 78.

[Giovancarlo] se cercava di ragionare doveva ammettere d'esser preda d'un bizzarro sortilegio, d'un'allucinazione mostruosa. D'altra parte il suo più profondo istinto si rifiutava a questa spiegazione; intimamente gli sembrava d'essere di tutt'altro parere. (p. 28)

We ought to compare this with a later passage, when a brigand discourages Giovancarlo from attacking him by appealing to the brigands' ambiguous, ghost-like nature:

“[M]a pensa un po': tu sei quello che ci avrebbe tutto da perdere, noi forse non siamo morti? Ad ogni modo a noi non ci fai niente”. Argomento ineccepibile, pensò Giovancarlo molto confuso [...]. (p. 114)

At the beginning of the story, the supernatural element is so thoroughly embedded within the everyday setting that Gurù's ambiguity can fully unfold. Gurù's duplicity does not lie only in her *weregoat* nature but also in her 'doppia appartenenza alla luce e all'oscuro, all'umano e all'animale, all'intimità e all'estraneità', which 'allo stesso tempo sospinge verso un dolce smarrimento nell'oltre e induce il turbamento proprio dell'inafferrabile, e dell'inesplicabile'.³⁹ But the novel's ambiguity cannot be ascribed only to this factual, almost thematic aspect. The character of Gurù also presents a unique and exclusive relationship with language that we need to connect to the specific role that *words* and *language* have for Landolfi, and that contributes to the overall ambiguity of the novel.

In the next section, I will take into account specifically how the fantastic elements we have here discussed are rendered through a complex series of linguistic choices that produce, alongside the novel's overall vagueness, uncertainty and other elements that contribute to its general ambiguity. One of the main points I want to stress is that, similarly to Gadda's works, and as we will see, also to Ortese's, Landolfi's literary works draw our attention to the indeterminacy of reality itself and the necessity of creating a sort of alternative world, whose linguistic representation, with its complex linguistic patina, rather than providing a higher degree of accuracy, in fact has an estranging effect that triggers ambiguity.

³⁹ Antonio Prete, 'Cosmografie landolfiane', *Chroniques Italiennes*, 81-82 (2008), 111-18 (p. 114).

3. The power(lessness) of language

In tackling the linguistic aspect of this novel – which has much to do also with the structural one – we are concerned with how Landolfi considers the literary language paradoxically as a very powerful and, at the same time, not fully effective tool. Landolfi's *ottocentesco* and extremely polished language has perhaps attracted most critical attention (see Dardano and Zublena, among others).⁴⁰ Many critics have paid particular attention to his preference for rare, literary, and archaic forms as well as to the tendency to linguistic invention and to hapax forms. This, of course, adds a layer of difficulty to his works. Moreover, in the specific case of *La pietra lunare*, I suggest that these choices are used to intensify the effect of irony (compare section 4) as well as to create a magical atmosphere (compare Zangrandi). Furthermore, I argue that this type of language also contrasts with both the banality of the trivial provincial context that is the main setting of the novel, as well as the untidy organisation of Gurù's speeches, who embodies the fantastic element of the book. Although these facts need to be registered, however, I will avoid lingering here on a purely linguistic analysis of the novel, which, as I have just said, has already been the object of many studies. Nevertheless, there are two important aspects with which we should deal in this section: the (im)potence of language in *La pietra lunare* and Gurù's privileged relationship with language.

As more than one critic has already pointed out, in his first works the *word* has for Landolfi a completely positive value as it is 'un segno di potenza nel tentativo di fissare la realtà nei suoi contorni sfuggenti, oppure di costruirsi un sopramondo fantastico', whereas in his later production 'da *Cancroregina* in poi, tenderà a rivelare la sua intrinseca fragilità, a diventare essa stessa "insufficiente"'.⁴¹ Whilst I hold this critical *topos* as generally true, it is my contention that these two perspectives in Landolfi's

⁴⁰ Maurizio Dardano, 'Sulla lingua di Tommaso Landolfi'; Zublena, *La lingua pelle di Tommaso Landolfi*.

⁴¹ Graziella Bernabò Secchi, *Invito alla lettura di Tommaso Landolfi* (Milan: Mursia, 1977), p. 30.

poetics can only proceed together. More precisely, *La pietra lunare* represents an in-between situation; I argue that here the author's stance towards literary language is exactly in between those two poles. Although a special value is attached to the linguistic behaviours of Gurù and Giovancarlo, we also must notice how, in *La pietra lunare*, the narrator often expresses an interest in describing the different characters' approaches to language as well as their linguistic competences. Let us see, for example, how at the very beginning of the novel the narrator introduces – with great irony – Giovancarlo's family, attaching to each member's description a corresponding specific literacy:

l'unica obiezione che gli si sarebbe potuto muovere [al cugino] avrebbe riguardato una sua cocciuta confusione dei condizionali cogli imperfetti soggiuntivi. Laddove suo padre non confondeva che fra loro, del soggiuntivo, i vari tempi; le confusioni delle due donne vertevano invece di preferenza sui generi dei nomi; quanto al fratello della zia non parlava, ovvero barbugliava in modo del tutto incomprensibile. (p. 13)

And later, in the description of one of the brigands with which Gurù usually spends moonlit nights:

Era uno di quegli uomini che credono d'essere sempre fiabescamente allusivi e riescono così a una perfetta incomprensibilità. Certo doveva anche strizzare gli occhi, tante volte, risparmiandosi addirittura la pena di parlare [...]. (p. 108)

As I have anticipated above, however, it is in the ambiguous character of Gurù that all the language's "uncertain" power is exploited. She embodies the hesitant mightiness of language and has a magical sense of *words*. As such, she seems to be the only possible custodian 'di quella che per l'autore ossessionato dalla parola è l'unica possibile e autentica realtà'.⁴² The questions underpinning this are whether there is any possibility of connecting the world to a superimposed reality,⁴³ and whether there is any possibility of accessing reality at all. Whatever the case, the mediation to these two spheres can only take place within language and in its

⁴² Ibid., p. 39.

⁴³ Compare Alessandro Ceni, *La sopra-realtà di Tommaso Landolfi* (Florence: Cesati, 1986).

ambiguous and unreliable nature: ‘Gurù ha un rapporto privilegiato con le fonti del linguaggio e con la poesia. I suoi discorsi privi di punteggiatura hanno la tendenza a diventare irrequieti monologhi e nenie cantilenanti e incomprensibili che rinviano all’indicibile’.⁴⁴ Such speeches sometimes only take the form of a magical grunt or of a dirge. Significantly, they are described with words such as *volubilità*, *capricciosamente*, *leziosaggine* in order to highlight how her speeches or linguistic outbursts are deliberate and usually disconnected both from the context and from the interlocutor, thus appearing as almost completely *unreferential*, as well as remaining completely incomprehensible and undetermined. It is true that, typically, Gurù starts her speeches from the observation of natural elements or observable phenomena, but everything is then transported by means of the *magicality* of language in a different dimension. In a passage when Giovancarlo and Gurù are walking in the woods and in which she is listing all the name of plants and herbs that they see, we can observe how she senses the magical nature of words themselves:

[...] distingueva assai bene, come al solito, le più minute erbe e ne dava notizia; parlava anche d’altro, fanciullesca e, a vero dire, alquanto sconnessamente. [...] “Ecco là il piccolo erino, più in là il galanto, e il colchico, il colchico! [...] Ti piacciono questi nomi?”. Pareva che andasse farneticando per conto suo. (p. 83)

In this passage, it is as if Gurù only spoke to free the pure magic of those names, almost pure signs with no referential function. Their only referential character is that the objects they refer to are made available to the senses and thus make possible that magical *nomination*.

Similarly, it is not without surprise that both the reader and Giovancarlo learn from the brigands that Gurù’s name was given by a process of *antonomasia*. The passage in which this process of naming is detailed only increases the character’s ambiguity. It represents, at the same time, a metalinguistic reflection on the conventional – therefore unstable – character of language and of nomination, once again hinting at their unavoidable indeterminacy:

⁴⁴ Cecchini, p. 79.

“Scommetto che [gli altri] stanno perdendo il tempo” esclamò più rossamente Bernardo di Spenna “per la montagna con le altre guru”. [...]

“Loro le chiamano gurù come i bambini chiamano maronci tutti i gatti” spiegò Antonio lo Sportaro con grigia familiarità, accortosi della sorpresa del giovane all’uscita di Bernardo (il bandito riteneva evidentemente che “Maronci” fosse un nome di gatto molto comune). “Ma in realtà si chiamano veranie, veranie amico mio. Però Gurù è il maronci... cioè la verania delle veranie, ossia la gurù delle gurù. Hai bell’e capito”.

“Le altre gurù!” esclamò a se stesso il giovane. [...] “E... come sono?...”

“Oh bella! sono come Gurù...È chiaro?”

Non era chiaro affatto, ma il giovane allibito rinunciò ad altre domande [...]. (p. 107)

It is not a coincidence that a privileged relationship with language is ascribed to a female character,⁴⁵ who, with her half-beastly and half-human nature, is the embodiment of a conflict – in turn only possible because generated through language – as her goat’s feet symbolise. This is in fact a recurrent theme in Landolfi’s production, where

[i] personaggi femminili trovano la loro vera identità nel linguaggio, sono cioè il linguaggio che parlano o che tacciono: e che sempre appare (anche *in absentia* attraverso il silenzio) infinitamente più prensile e suggestivo, acuto e ricco, capace di espressività e di conoscenza...⁴⁶

The male protagonist, Giovancarlo, by contrast, is stunned by language and suffers from a kind of linguistic impotence:

[I]l giovane si perdette in discorsi del tutto fuor di proposito e goffi oltremisura; balbettava né aveva la precisa coscienza di ciò che andava dicendo. (p. 30)

La posizione del giovane era piuttosto critica, né egli riusciva a spicciar parola. (p. 87)

Significantly, Giovancarlo’s linguistic impotence finds its counterpart in an impotence of action as well:

⁴⁵ We will see in chapter VII another example of femininity connected to indeterminacy, in the character of Iguana in Ortese’s *L’Iguana* (whose nature is half beastly and half human, just like Gurù’s).

⁴⁶ Carlino, p. 104.

Il giovane sentiva bene che avrebbe dovuto fare qualche cosa [...], ma non ne aveva assolutamente alcuna voglia, e seguiva la compagnia con poca coscienza di sé e della propria condizione. (p. 99)

It is only eventually, at the end of the unworldly night that they have spent together, with corrupt brigands and goat-like women, – or better, after Giovancarło has eventually met the *Mothers*, the least determined of the supernatural creatures of the book – that the last *nenia* of Gurù takes a neater form and that Giovancarło can grasp it:

Rompendo il sortilegio del silenzio ma senza parlare, Gurù [...] strinse al giovane la mano in segno di partenza. [...] Giovancarło si trovò solo nella notte con la sua compagna [...]; Gurù imprese allora una delle sue nenie. Era delle esaltate, questa, e *per la prima volta il giovane ne intese le parole*. (p. 139) [my emphasis]

For Cecchini the arcane and almost mystical figures of *le Madri*, with their unexplained and ineffable nature and identity,

rappresentano la meta finale del viaggio, [...] verso il luogo originario e primigenio dove essere e non essere, reale e irreal, parola e silenzio coincidono e dove non esiste differenza tra potenza e atto. Il luogo della totalità e dell'*undifferentiation*. [...] Solo ora, solo dopo l'incontro con le Madri, la parola [...] è percepita oltre il proprio apparente e opaco significato. Solo ora Giovancarło può finalmente comprendere per la prima volta le parole delle nenie incomprensibili di Gurù (e i materiali che Landolfi utilizza per dare forma al suo canto sono un elegante intarsio pascoliano e d'annunziano).⁴⁷

This is the only point of coincidence of the two worlds – possibly triggered by the mediation of poetry, sprung from Gurù's words like from a spell – but it also marks the end of the night, and the end of Giovancarło's fantastic journey:

Poi forse fu, per Giovancarło, il vero sonno. [...] si svegliò che il sole era già alto (pp. 143-45)

Another feature that has been noted of Landolfi's style, and which is present in *La pietra lunare*, is his abiding monolingualism, that consists in the fact that he seems to use 'lo stesso tessuto stilistico [sia] per la

⁴⁷ Cecchi, pp. 80-81.

dimensione “fantastica” sia per la dimensione reale’.⁴⁸ The contrast between ordinary and extraordinary is not a matter of selection of contents; it is in fact perceivable at a different, intra-layers level (namely, in the ordinary unfolding of the stylistic pattern). The extraordinary potential is meanwhile exploited in the lexical choices⁴⁹ or, as Dardano suggests, in an opposition between Landolfi’s “‘aggressività” lessicale’ and his “‘pacatezza” sintattica’, which must be considered as a strategy too.⁵⁰ Compare, for example, the following passage in which Landolfi plays in a ‘compiacimento goloso’⁵¹ with noun juxtaposition in the description of the metamorphosis of the *veranie* and of the *sodali*:

E grugni rostri grifi becchi proboscidi zoccoli zampe velli zanne
insieme a membra umane, bianche più aduste pelose, a poppe di
donna, a nerbuti sessi maschili. (p. 129)

The use of obsolete and rare words seems to acquire, in Landolfi’s novel, the strength of a performative act that, on the one hand, gives existence to the non-existent yet, on the other hand, ‘proclama la distanza incolmabile tra linguaggio e il suo oggetto’ resulting in

un testo in-coerente che trasmette un unico possibile messaggio:
l’inesauribile discontinuità del reale e l’illusioietà di qualunque
rappresentazione organica e coerente di ciò che è intimamente
disorganico e discontinuo.⁵²

The technique of juxtaposition in the passage above emphasises this contradiction; indeed, it is made visible throughout the novel. The list of quotations, in the first place, overwhelms the reader, providing too many diverse details. In addition, the juxtaposition of these details prevents the creation of a graspable, coherent image, leaving the description of these creatures in the most complete indeterminacy. This mechanism is very similar to the one we shall observe in chapter V for the use of accumulative techniques in Gadda’s *La cognizione del dolore*.

⁴⁸ Ceni (p. 78) is quoting here Leone Piccioni, *Maestri e amici* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1969), p. 47.

⁴⁹ Ceni, p. 98.

⁵⁰ Dardano, ‘Sulla lingua di Tommaso Landolfi’, p. 49.

⁵¹ Grignani, p. 102.

⁵² Emanuela Scarano, ‘I modi dell’autenticazione’, in *La narrazione fantastica*, ed. by Remo Ceserani and others (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983), pp. 355-96 (p. 396).

Landolfi's *patina ottocentesca* is then not simply the gloatingly nostalgic symptom of a pessimistic view of literature, as a precise 'strumento cospicuo di un processo di insularizzazione dell'atto narrativo-linguistico dal suo referente',⁵³ but his ultimate product is nevertheless an estrangement which generates and requires the reader's intervention. This is rendered by means of a series of strategies that operate at the same time both at the structural and at the linguistic level and that I am going to analyse in the next two sections.

4. Irony and the mutually exclusive

In analysing the overall ambiguity of *La pietra lunare* we have concerned ourselves with the unusual balance of the trivial and the strange, as well as the crucial role of language and reflections on its use.

Now, we need to consider irony that, as Ceni reminds us, has its principle exactly in its duplicity, namely in the 'coabitazione paradossale di un termine e il suo opposto'.⁵⁴ Irony's duplicity generates a terrain where mutually exclusive realities can coexist. This is possible precisely because of the suspension that irony can generate in the reader's interpretation of statements and situations. Put in a different way, irony generates a kind of suspension that both represents the reflection on the hermeneutical stance the reader needs to take, and questions the reliability of literature as a means to represent reality effectively. Landolfi creates irony in *La pietra lunare* through the use of two main techniques: the choice of the narratorial context, and some specific lexical choices.

Unlike in his two later "fantastic" novels, *Racconto d'autunno* and *Cancroregina*, in *La pietra lunare*, Landolfi discards the first-person narrator and opts for a third-person, extra-diegetic narrator whose character plays with irony and is unreliable and deceptive. Whatever the choice of the narrator (homodiegetic/heterodiegetic, first/third-person), the presence of the author and the character of *alter ego* that is given to the

⁵³ Simone Castaldi, 'Il linguaggio come funzione del fantastico nella narrativa di Landolfi', *Forum Italicum*, 44.2. (2010), 359-73 (p. 364).

⁵⁴ Ceni, pp. 58-59.

narrator are very strong in the dynamics of this novel, such that the narrative context that we are observing can be defined as an authorial one.⁵⁵ Let us see how, at the beginning of chapter VII, the intervention of the narrator suspends the magical atmosphere that was created at the end of chapter VI with the use of a simile. This simile not only has a completely different tone from the one of the previous part but also – as is eventually clear – it is inappropriate if not wrong. It is not to Giovancarło that Gurù is going to give herself; she is in fact getting ready for a kind of mating intercourse with a goat:

A tutti è certo venuto di condurre una donna lungamente desiderata in una locanda di campagna, mettiamo sui laghi. La stanzetta dove è apprestata la colazione odora di spigonardo ed è piena di luce; servito a tavola, l'oste si ritira discretamente e l'audace amante resta solo colla sua donna. Questa allora, visto che non c'è più nulla da fare [...] imprende da se medesima a spogliarsi. (p. 89)

The same ironic narratorial approach is present throughout the novel in digressions, descriptive parts and comments. Compare the following passages:

[Giovancarło] era – come è del resto apparso chiaro dal suo comportamento con Gurù quella sera – un giovane molto timido. [...] L'ingenuo non aveva ancora stabilito che proprio di quelli che sono fatti per loro le donne non vogliono sapere. [...] Ma lasciamo andare. (pp. 41-42).

Per riassumere con un'immagine comprensiva e aperta a tutti, la fanciulla portava le sue appendici caprine come le sirene la loro coda; non ci si rimette di coscienza con questa immagine, né si nuoce alla precisione, giacché non si dà chi volendo, non abbia visto una sirena [...]. (p. 93)

The irony present in the passages above is furthermore reinforced by the use of rare words (e.g. *spigonardo*, *imprende*), the choice of which has not a purely pedantic intention but, rather, 'una carica pirotecnica e umoristica, del tutto assente nei cultori dell'arcaismo'.⁵⁶ According to Grignani, passages of this type act like

⁵⁵ See Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 3-4. See also above, II.2.

⁵⁶ Dardano, 'Sulla lingua di Tommaso Landolfi', p. 51. A *carica* which once more reminds us of Gadda's style (see below, chapter V).

zone che scompongono l'assetto levigato, luoghi in cui il respiro della storia narrata si blocca in interruzioni repentine, in digressioni, in macchie di metadiscorsività e, insomma, in manipolazioni che interrompono il tradizionale patto di credibilità tra autore e lettore.⁵⁷

These *zone* are characterised by the presence of irony, and work to stress the relationship between the narrator's voice and the authorial one.

The fact that Landolfi is always present both inside and outside (or behind) his works means, as a result, that there is never a 'soluzione aperta all'arbitrio delle interpretazioni',⁵⁸ and that, therefore, a sort of paradox in the ambiguity of the book is generated. Although the possibility of a range of interpretations is presented, it is nevertheless, at the same time, denied to us. Or, to quote Citati: '[s]ebbene si travesta in tutti i modi, e si abbandoni a tutti i giochi possibili, la sua arte ci appare sempre tutta d'un pezzo, ha un significato solo, ed è priva di vera ambiguità e di leggerezza'.⁵⁹ Irony suspends interpretations but only in an illusory and deceptive way because, in fact, there is no apparent freedom left to the reader's personal interpretation. This is similar to what Ceni argues when he states that 'non c'è spazio per l'ambiguità [...]; l'autore non regala niente all'ipotetico lettore e non cerca di essere frainteso, di essere disponibile, se vogliamo, all'inserimento di chi legge',⁶⁰ and indeed Landolfi always provides an implicit key or a guideline to interpret the text. Nevertheless, what Ceni calls a 'senso di inafferabilità' is induced in the reader, all the same. The narrator's effort to provide a solution to the reader's bewilderment is insincere, and the solution provided is no less ambiguous than the rest. The narrator never provides an *explicit* explanation for the events in due course; instead, he avoids any details by saying that no one, perhaps not even Giovancarolo, really knows what happened. In this way, the narrator acts in a dual way: on the one hand, he undermines his own reliability; whilst, on the other hand, he continuously confirms his strong presence by commenting or by presenting dubious phenomena as facts:

⁵⁷ Grignani, p. 98.

⁵⁸ Ceni, p. 61.

⁵⁹ Pietro Citati, 'Landolfi sogna di scrivere in falso persiano', *Il Giorno*, 22 August 1968.

⁶⁰ Ceni, p. 66.

[C]ome quei due passassero il resto della notte è sempre rimasto un mistero per tutti, forse per Giovancarlo stesso. (p. 31)

Bisogna dire che già da qualche tempo Giovancarlo non era più sicuro di ciò che vedeva o sentiva, né dunque lo fu poi, ricordando d'aver visto. (p. 126)

Attraversata la Fossa del Monaco e la piccola valle Capaccione (il quale vi fu ucciso nei tempi dei tempi e vi appare spesso a mezzogiorno), la traccia raggiunge ora la Rova [...]. (p. 79)

A solution is apparently provided at the end, when Giovancarlo wakes up from his dream and Gurù is no longer next to him, implying that everything had happened only in the young man's oneiric activity. The solution is only illusory, however. The very catalyst of the novel's ambiguity (Gurù) appears again briefly in the epilogue, though nothing about her is actually explained (although nothing about the fantastic events "lived" by the two is mentioned either). Even in the end, the narrator does not eliminate the uncertainties regarding the events, and a strong sense of ungraspability is instead left with the reader, despite the fact that Landolfi's *lector in fabula*

ha segni caratteristici di riconoscimento: gli occhi ben aperti, non la beve facilmente ed è anzi pronto a vestire gli abiti del critico, per cogliere e considerare nelle sue inferenze l'autocritica della letteratura, la quale, appunto per questo, è fatta presentare come vistosa finzione, da non meritare la sospensione dell'incredulità.⁶¹

Whatever game he plays with language and whatever the amount of ambiguity throughout the novel, Landolfi's manipulation is therefore too complex and subtle to be dismissed easily. This final result is achieved because irony is intertwined with other strategies in order to manipulate the indeterminacy of the novel. These strategies significantly all deal with the problem of the *unsayable*, i.e. with what cannot be expressed with words fully or at all, and is therefore bound to remain implicit or undetermined. On this note, I find particularly relevant this comment of the narrator about Giovancarlo's impossibility to report in detail his supernatural night in the mountains:

⁶¹ Carlino, p. 86.

Ma, se i ricordi erano precisi, difficile è dirli a parole. (p. 134)

Here, the narrator is, again in an ironic vein, playing with a metanarrative reflection and, at the same time, avoiding describing the events with a reticent attitude that is spread throughout the book (as we will see in the next and final section).

5. The language of the unsayable: litotes, hesitation, and reticence

Alongside a reflection on the (im)potence of language, in *La pietra lunare*, we also have parts that appear to be more vague and more reliant on a lexicon connected to indeterminacy, often – but not always – in connection with the fantastic content of the novel. This is more evident in the very core of the story's development, i.e. in the part in which Giovancarlo and Gurù spend a night in the mountains with the brigands, and wherein Giovancarlo is the spectator of many disturbing supernatural phenomena (chapters VI-X).

Once the action is transferred, first, into the woods and, then, into the mountains, the first phenomenon that undergoes a process of *undetermination* is the temporal aspect of the episode ('Ma era eterna quella notte?', p. 132). This undetermination is complemented by the way in which everything in the dark brigands' den becomes undistinguishable; the brigands themselves are reduced to voices whilst the night is now only describable in reference to *altre bizzarre cose* and *strane creature* (p. 134) that inhabit it. This *physical* transfiguration of the world of the novel, suddenly undetermined, is increasingly accompanied by an important aspect of Landolfi's style, his tendency toward the use of the litote. According to Ceni, this tendency 'appare come un metodo gnoseologico fondantesi sul rifiuto – e imprescindibilmente sulla compromissione involontaria – di ciò che è oggetto di conoscenza, indagine, comprensione'.⁶² Just like hyperbole, irony and preterition, the litote 'attua una riduzione, un ridimensionamento, un abbassamento del significato

⁶² Ceni, p. 86.

icastico del mondo'.⁶³ As such, it contributes to the generation of a 'perifrastico movimento' that highlights 'una condizione di impotenza assoluta, rinunciando ad intervenire se non per circonlocuzione',⁶⁴ which returns us to the impotence of literary language (discussed in section 4).

Grignani compares this approach to a 'dilemma molto novecentesco',⁶⁵ namely the conflict in the mind of the writer described by Italo Calvino in 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto':

La mente dello scrittore è ossessionata dalle contrastanti posizioni di due correnti filosofiche. La prima dice: il mondo non esiste; esiste solo il linguaggio. La seconda dice: il linguaggio comune non ha senso; il mondo è ineffabile.⁶⁶

Alongside frequent examples of litotes and euphemisms (e.g. *con malmentito disprezzo*, p. 13; *non era sfornita*, p. 14; *non senza una punta di paterna libidine*, p. 26; *una "cosa buona" non sono di certo, Quell'Amico* i.e. the devil, *lunare* i.e. sterile, p. 51) this can be observed mainly in the form of hesitation or reticence that is rendered especially in Landolfi's use of direct speech. Required by Giovancarlo to give information about Gurù, one of the town's somewhat bigoted women, is stubbornly sluggish in her response:

"Hm hm" modulò ella cadenzatamente, scuotendo la testa; e si fermò. Sollecitazioni del giovane.
 "Hm hm, per buona è una buona ragazza, ma però...". Nuovo arresto e nuove sollecitazioni. [...] "E poi..." ella concluse infatti, e si fermò per la terza volta
 "E poi?..."
 "Eh, poi, poi!" soggiunse alzando le spalle; quindi con improvvisa risoluzione, protendendo le mani [...]: "Eppoi ci sono le capre!" (p. 50)

This tendency to reticence must be connected, first, to the hesitation that the fantastic pattern sets on the work's development, but also to the centrality that the *word* acquires in the novel's dynamics: 'una serie di movimenti narrativi, di tempi strategici, precedono e seguono il punto

⁶³ Ibid., p. 87.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

⁶⁵ Grignani, *Novecento plurale*, p. 95.

⁶⁶ Italo Calvino, 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, II, 1867.

cruciale del *pronunciare la parola* (quella parola), è come se non si volesse nominare la cosa – che *coincide* con la parola⁶⁷ and we have a ‘dimensione di incertezza epistemica della sfera del nominare’.⁶⁸ This can be observed in the way in which Giovancarlo hesitates in admitting to himself that Gurù is indeed a *weregoat*, a *piedicapra*:

Tutti [...] rimasero un momento a guardare, non già le zampe di capra rimaste allo scoperto, ma piuttosto lui stesso a bocca aperta e non senza inquietudine, come si guarda un pazzo; quindi lo zio si chinò e, tributando paterni buffetti sulle zampe della fanciulla [...] all’attacco dello zoccolo, “eh eh,” ripeté non senza una punta di paterna libidine, “eh eh queste belle gambine ...” e intanto [...] egli batteva sul collo di quelle zampe giusto come usa in certi casi battere su una tornita caviglia femminile, vale a dire il suo atteggiamento era del tutto inequivocabile, giacché l’atteggiamento di uno che batte su una caviglia di donna, o almeno crede, è del tutto diverso in sè e per sè da quello di uno che accarezza il collo d’un piedicapra. (pp. 26-27)

That eventual nomination – and in the form of a new word, *piedicapra* – instead of denying the fact, actually has the power of a performative act, in which, by eventually *nominating* the object, the narration constitutes the object’s very existence. This moment of coincidence between the word and the object is the only determined and defined focus: ‘l’indefinitezza pertiene al prima (preparazione-ritardo), e al dopo (lenizione-smascheramento-indifferenza) del fuoco che è invece l’irrompere crudo e crudele del sema della cosa incriminata’.⁶⁹ Hesitation in *La pietra lunare* thus has a two-fold function: it represents the core of the novel as a fantastic novel; but moreover, it is also one of the centres in which indeterminacy is created. *La pietra lunare*’s hesitation is foremost a hesitation of language, which generates ellipses and suspension. As a result ‘L’effetto di sospensione si gioca qui tutto sulla questione della referenzialità della lingua proposta ed è in questo andito che il lettore partecipa alla costruzione fantastica del racconto’.⁷⁰ This explains why, despite the way in which the strong presence of the narrator and its strong authorial imprint seem to deny a space for intervention to the reader,

⁶⁷ Ceni, p. 94.

⁶⁸ Grignani, p. 109.

⁶⁹ Ceni, p. 98.

⁷⁰ Castaldi, p. 366.

ambiguity is still generated. This is not to be considered a contradiction because the way in which Landolfi uses hesitation is systematic and responds to a specific project:

Landolfi sceglie e pratica l'esitazione, ovvero una strategia che fa leva sul dubbio e lo moltiplica e diffonde le sue forme fin nell'estrema periferia e nelle ultime pliche del testo, per solito giocate da una logica dell'enunciazione esitante e dubbiosa.⁷¹

Therefore hesitation, just like irony, works as a multiplying device and not as a minimising one. It represents a major strategy in a novel in which hesitation 'è mantenuta lungamente in vita e pure a ridosso dell'epilogo ne resta una parvenza [...] quantunque prevalgano gli indizi che portano il lettore a sciogliere i dubbi e a trovare una spiegazione plausibile'.⁷² This effect is purposely pursued by Landolfi and must lead us to reconsider the role that the reader must take in reading the novel, which is more active than it first appeared on observation. Furthermore, we should not overlook the playful appendix of the faux review by Leopardi, *Dal giudizio del signor Leopardi sulla presente opera* (obtained through a "collage" of passages from Leopardi's *Zibaldone*), in which it is claimed that there is no future for the poetic language, and which therefore sheds an even more meta-literary light on the whole work. If Zangrandi sees in this *postilla* a fictitious 'avvaloramento della propria opera per mezzo delle parole di un grande della letteratura',⁷³ it is again in a meta-literary light that we need to consider this element. This is the case not only because, by manipulating passages from the *Zibaldone*, Landolfi provides a bad review for his novel, but also because it becomes another signal of the literariness of what preceded. More importantly, by borrowing Leopardi's words, Landolfi states once again how human thinking – and verbalisation (through which it is made available for communication) – is powerless when reasoning on what in nature is *unsayable* or *ineffable*:

La ragione è nemica d'ogni grandezza; la ragione è nemica della natura; la natura è grande, la ragione è piccola. (p. 151)

⁷¹ Carlino, p. 88.

⁷² Carlino, p. 110.

⁷³ Zangrandi, p. 39

Landolfi and Leopardi ultimately share the sense of the superiority of the *pensée indéterminée*, which justifies Landolfi's insistence on the impossibility of saying and his choice of the context of the reverie. As Poulet reminds us:

derrière les déterminations particulières, se dissimule quelque chose qui n'a pas de nom et qui est presque inexprimable. C'est la pensée indéterminée. On la reconnaît, parfois facilement, par exemple dans la rêverie. Mais son domaine est infiniment plus vaste, et ne se contente pas d'abriter simplement les idées vagues, les sentiments indistincts, si fréquents dans une certaine poésie. A l'autre extrémité de la pensée indéterminée, il y a le silence intérieur, la prise de connaissance d'un moi indépendant et l'impression d'un pouvoir illimité, tenu en suspens, en attendant qu'il nous pousse dans telle direction ou dans telle autre. C'est ce suspens qui importe. Il joue un rôle inappréciablement important en retardant le moment inévitable où la pensée s'engagera, bon gré mal gré, à fonds perdu, en direction de quelque objet déterminé.⁷⁴

The role of the paratextual insertion from Leopardi is also deemed crucial by Carlino, who points out that if the novel finished just with the revelation of the dream, we would only have a shifting from the fantastic to the *marvellous*,⁷⁵ and nothing more. This appendix sheds instead a new light on the interpretation of the novel and, in particular, the interpretation of the character of Gurù, whose relationship with language and reality is made clear by the insertion of "Leopardi's" reflections. This charming weregoat indeed

allegorizza la poesia: libera e senza inibizioni, allo stato di natura, ripristina i contatti usurati tra le persone e le cose [...]; scorge e indica dimensioni nascoste o non percepite [...]; parla un'altra lingua, più coinvolgente e profonda, più autentica e duratura.⁷⁶

This remains the case notwithstanding the fact that her speeches are tragically ungraspable.

What is more, as Cecchini points out:

introducendo una distanza ironico-pessimistica tra l'autore e la sua opera l'appendice sembra implicitamente negare alla letteratura

⁷⁴ Poulet, *La pensée indéterminée*, I, 6.

⁷⁵ See Todorov, *The Fantastic*, pp. 41.

⁷⁶ Carlino, pp. 111-12.

qualsiasi possibilità di catarsi e sembra suggerire al lettore che tutto quello che è stato raccontato non sia altro che sogno, gioco, illusione. È dell'insufficienza della letteratura e della poesia che si ragiona, insomma, anche ne *La pietra lunare*.⁷⁷

That is to say, the indeterminacy of the literary object is the very theme of the novel.

Once again, this is achieved through the use of irony and with the intention of flooring the readers and sweeping them off their feet. The final effect of the novel is then, eventually, a kind of mistrust for literary language, which is conveyed by the author's multifaceted (and ambiguous) attitude toward it, as reflected in the stylistic, linguistic and narrative choices of the novel, all of which cannot but be in the direction of indeterminacy.

6. Conclusion

The arguments and examples that we have developed in this chapter have highlighted how the ambiguity of *La pietra lunare* arises from the contrast between a determined modality (the fantastic ingredients of the novel) and a deliberate reticent and hesitating use of language (litotic, ironic, and metalinguistic). In this way, relying on the almost physiological ambiguity of the fantastic genre, indeterminacy is generated *beyond* it through the manipulation of the strategies that we have observed in this chapter. Moreover, we must stress once again that the novel's ambiguity is accentuated by the character of Gurù, who personifies the theme of the unsayable – *l'indicibile* – insofar as she represents and draws attention to the complex relationship between words and world. The hesitation of the word and the temptation of silence is, as Grignani highlights, a typical trait of Landolfi's writing, which we can also find in the diaries *Rien va*, *LA BIÈRE DU PECHEUR* and *Des mois*:⁷⁸ 'la scrittura dei diari è anch'essa

⁷⁷ Cecchini, p. 83.

⁷⁸ Tommaso Landolfi, *LA BIÈRE DU PECHEUR* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1953); *Rien va* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1963); *Des mois* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1967). Now all in Tommaso Landolfi, *Opere*, ed. by Idolina Landolfi, 2 vols (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991-92).

tentata spesse volte dal silenzio, da un senso di nausea della parola, dal vagheggiamento di ciò che fugge al dominio della verbalizzazione'.⁷⁹ As some critics have pointed out (for example, Pampaloni and Ghetti Abruzzi), this tendency also introduces an attitude that Landolfi shares with the hermetic poets. According to this critical reading, Landolfi's hermeticism – a complex and personal one – would express, in the prose form, 'quanto Montale esprime in poesia, cioè il male di vivere, la pena invisibile, il nulla alle spalle'.⁸⁰ The purpose of expressing a reflection on existence requires the modality of indeterminacy, and this kinship of Landolfi with hermeticism likens him to the hermetic-like approach of Vittorini (compare chapter IV), with whom Landolfi also shares a constant, though not programmatic, contention with realism.⁸¹ The most visible symptom of this hermetic or existentialist-like approach is the frustration borne out of observing and stating the ineffability of reality (and as a consequence the limited effectiveness of language and of the writing activity). This is well reflected in this passage from the diary *Rien va*:

E invece a forza di ripiegare e sostituire e simboleggiare, eccomi qui chiuso ormai senza speranza in questi meschini giochi di penna, e ben sapendo che non ho sostituito niente, che non posso sostituire niente, perché non si sostituisce la vita colla morte, ciò che è con ciò che non è.⁸²

Moreover, Ceni likens Landolfi's reticent and litotic tendency to Gadda's hyperbolic one. Though Landolfi prefers to proceed by *condensazione*, and Gadda chooses *amplification* (see chapter V), in both cases, the effect is abnormality (i.e. a manipulation of dimension of the discourse) which induces, as a result, either minimisation or exaggeration. Landolfi and Gadda share therefore, according to Ceni, a common 'annegamento del senso del dettato nell'incertezza dell'ambiguità'.⁸³ If the result, as I have

⁷⁹ Grignani, p. 105.

⁸⁰ Giovanna Ghetti Abruzzi, *L'enigma Landolfi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), p. 37.

⁸¹ Again Grignani: 'Landolfi con l'intera produzione mostra di non aver mai avuto alcuna fiducia nel realismo, con o senza ambizioni espressionistiche radicate sulle varianti di registro socio-geografico', p. 106.

⁸² Landolfi, *Opere*, II (1992), 317.

⁸³ Ceni, p. 88.

also suggested above, is similar, Grignani nevertheless shows how the personal approach of the two authors to language (and to reality) is diametrically opposed. While Gadda trusts in ‘il diritto dello scrittore alla *parole*, inalienabile diritto di scorrazzare in lungo e in largo nella sincronia e nella diacronia delle forme’ and shows ‘una sorta di smania di possesso linguistico a scopo conoscitivo [...], una sorta di ingordigia linguistica per smania di restituire un reale più profondo della sua superficie d’uso’, on the other hand for Landolfi ‘[l]a provocazione manieristica o linguaiola [...] è solo uno degli aspetti di un rapporto tortuoso e mai pacificato con il mezzo verbale, dietro cui si nasconde un’idea mediata e algida del reale’.⁸⁴

Even from the brief account that we have outlined in this chapter, it is possible to appreciate the specificity of Landolfi’s use of the fantastic mode. We might consider, as Castaldi does: ‘Quale fantastico è allora questo di Landolfi, dove l’esitazione del lettore avviene tutta in campo linguistico, nei luoghi misteriosi a cui il linguaggio accede allorché i legami coi suoi referenti si allentano?’⁸⁵ From our reflections on Landolfi’s *fantastico*, to his question, we might reply that such is the starting point for a literary reflection that has indeterminacy at its core and, in fact, transcends, or goes beyond, the fantastic genre.

Significantly, for Grignani, *irony* and *negation* are the two keywords that can summarise Landolfi’s poetics, and the two elements, which make him one of those

scrittori europei che sfuggono alle varie parole d’ordine contestative delle avanguardie. [...] Landolfi è un esemplare severo di questa non-scuola, che ha origini nell’Ottocento europeo e russo a lui ben noto, perché sugli apparati scenici di una realtà cui non presta fede innesta una critica coraggiosa all’arbitrarietà e inadeguatezza del mezzo linguistico, senza mai preoccuparsi della mimesi dei registri sociali o di uso.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Grignani, *Novecento plurale*, p. 101.

⁸⁵ Castaldi, pp. 370-371.

⁸⁶ Grignani, *Novecento plurale*, p. 111.

To conclude, we should consider the use of the fantastic mode in *La pietra lunare* as a means with which to exploit, and make more blatant or visible, the indeterminacy of the literary text. As Carlino attests:

La pietra lunare partendo dal fantastico, si pone al di là del fantastico e, con il *refrain* che collabora attivamente a intonare [...] segnala un'allegoria esitante [...] giacché il montaggio delle citazioni è in appendice, defilato nel paratesto, in uno spazio di interferenza – tra dentro e fuori il testo – aperto perciò al dubbio e all'esitazione.⁸⁷

As we have seen in this chapter, through the analysis of the work's ambiguously fantastic elements, and of the poetics of the unsayable on which it ruminates, *La pietra lunare* – only playfully and deceptively built in the respect of the nineteenth century's fantastic novel requirements – demands instead a twentieth-century reader that can actively react to, and mediate, the amount of ambiguity and indeterminacy that the novel has produced for him.

⁸⁷ Carlino, p. 112.

IV. A manuscript found in a bottle. Indeterminacy and the search for an interlocutor in *Conversazione in Sicilia* by Elio Vittorini

1. Introduction

Unanimously considered by critics as his best novel and as the most consistent expression of his poetics, *Conversazione in Sicilia* by Elio Vittorini presents some features that require special attention from our point of view. There is something in its style and structure that has puzzled both readers and critics since its very first appearance in 1938, and that has been defined in different ways, such as “vagueness”, “abstractness” and “ungraspability”. The puzzling effect that this novel generates mainly arises from its kind of double nature: namely, from its unusual mixture of realism, on the one hand, and of its allusiveness, on the other. The doubled nature of *Conversazione in Sicilia* is concisely summarised by Michael Hanne, for whom: ‘It is, paradoxically, through its near-hermetic allusiveness that *Conversazione in Sicilia* achieves a fierce moral and political exploration’.¹

Although this double nature has been duly noticed by critics, critical focus has so far dealt mainly with the question of “referentiality” and with the effort required to connect all of the work’s hard-to-grasp elements to the 1930s historical context. Studies have thus underestimated how a moral message might appear from its very peculiar form, rather than from a deciphering of its symbols. In this chapter, I will instead show how these aspects need to be considered in relationship to the use of the dialogic mode as a major indeterminacy strategy and the openness on which the novel is built.

¹ Michael Hanne, ‘Significant Allusions in Vittorini’s “Conversazione in Sicilia”’, *MLR*, 70 (1975), 75-83 (pp. 82-83).

Published in book form in 1941, the novel recounts the journey of Silvestro, a Sicilian typographer living in Milan, back to his hometown, Siracusa, after which he finds himself in despair of his human and historical condition. During the journey to Sicily and, later, on the island, he meets and converses with other Sicilians, with his mother, and eventually, the ghost of his brother, Liborio. These conversations mainly revolve around the situation and the doomed fate of humankind. Based on a plot characterised by a lack of action, *Conversazione*'s allusiveness has been connected to a supposed symbolism that, however present, cannot alone explain how the novel works. Furthermore, explanations that adopt the terms of a deciphering praxis, such as those that many critics have provided for the interpretation of the content of the novel, do not help in solving some other relevant problems. For example, these interpretations fail to acknowledge that a sense of vagueness is not eliminated by such an exegesis; in addition, they fail to explain from where the moral impetus and power of the novel each arise. Few novels make use of indeterminacy at the different levels of the text in the way *Conversazione in Sicilia* does, and thus referring to this concept will help to clarify what this sense of abstractness, vagueness, but also concreteness is.

Stylistic analyses of *Conversazione* have focused on the novel's uses of language, especially on the nominal and syntactical level, and on Vittorini's pursuit of a certain musical and rhythmic pattern. All the rhetorical and stylistic features that have been extensively studied (including the use of adjectives and of synaesthesia; the use of metaphors; the use of parataxis; the use of the polysyndeton; the (un)characterisation of characters through the process of antonomasia; and the descriptions of places, among others) have been individually connected to the sense of vagueness and abstractness that pervade the whole act of reading the novel. The problem with such discrete studies is that they fail to provide a complete account of the functioning of the work as a whole.

Nevertheless, although I cannot here move through an analysis of all the techniques mentioned above, I will continually refer to each of them in order to observe how they contribute to creating the text's overall indeterminacy. Similarly, I will not linger on other critical *topoi* on this

novel (such as the double nature of Silvestro's journey, the dramatic structure of the novel, the use of prophetic language, the refusal of "realismo psicologico", the descent to the underworld, the influence of some American writers on the style of the novel, and so on),² but I will mention them when specifically related to the problem of indeterminacy and interpretation. This will help both to clarify and review what has been said so far, but primarily it will enable us to specify the dynamics of indeterminacy in which particular stylistic devices or textual strategies are implicated.

Dealing with indeterminacy in the different ways in which it is here manipulated, I will hence pay attention to the role the reader is called to take on in the novel and to the problems that such an intervention must encounter and overcome: for example, filling the gaps in a highly vague and allusive discourse, the question of referentiality, and the fact that we can conceive the *conversation* in Sicily as a conversation with the reader, or at least as a call for intervention.³ I posit that this is made possible by means of the open and dialogical structure of the work.

Before going to the heart of this discussion, in section 2, I will start by focusing on how *Conversazione* was initially received and read, before turning my attention to how, later, a new literary sensitivity started to highlight the feature that makes this novel so engaging and morally powerful (namely: its openness). From such a point of reference, I will then move to analyse this open character. In section 3, I will then proceed to analyse the core of *Conversazione*'s dialogic structure by taking into account: how characters are used in dialogues; the balance between action and dialogue; and how reticence, implicitness, and musicality are produced in the dialogues. Finally, in section 4, I will reflect on how indeterminacy

² For an introduction to the early critical studies and *topoi* on *Conversazione* and in general on Vittorini's work, see Folco Zanobini, *Elio Vittorini: introduzione e guida allo studio dell'opera vittoriniana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1974) and Anna Panicali, *Elio Vittorini. La narrativa, la saggistica, le traduzioni, le riviste, l'attività editoriale* (Milan: Mursia, 1994).

³ We can find a hint – that surely demands to be further motivated – in Jonathan Usher's suggestive interpretation of Silvestro as a figure of the reader, and therefore of his journey as a double pursuit of meaning. See Jonathan Usher, 'Time and (e)motion in "Conversazione"', *Italian Studies*, 44 (1989), 77-86.

operates at the temporal and structural levels of the story, and foreground the complexity of the novel's structure. In the conclusion, I will reflect on how all these elements contribute to generating openness and indeterminacy, and I will consider how we should interpret them.

2. *Conversazione's* openness

a. Out of time – *Conversazione's* reception

It was the British author, Michael Dibdin who, in 2003, described *Conversazione* as a *timeless* and, at the same time, *timely* work.⁴ We can continue to call this novel *timeless* because of the universal values it presents to different generations of readers, and because of the suspended atmosphere of the journey it recounts; yet, we can call it *timely* to the extent that it is so permeated with and – up to a certain extent – explicit about the historical context it depicts. Apart from its content, the work also presents an attempt to investigate fully the genre of the novel. On the one hand, this existential exploration coincided with the contemporary modernist poetics that were being developed abroad, but, on the other hand, and in the Italian literary panorama of the 1930s, this interest characterised it as a unique example.

These two features, *timelessness* and *timeliness*, influenced the reception of the novel by contemporaries, but also in the post-war period, and contributed to fixing critical readings in opposed positions. Since its first appearance, and then more intensively in the following decades, critics' evaluations of *Conversazione* (and of the success or failure of Vittorini's intentions) have then been largely polarised into two different approaches. For one camp, the focus was on its catechistic and ideological message while, for the other, the attention was reserved for its formal aspects and Vittorini's pursuit of a 'literary truth',⁵ which we can

⁴Michael Dibdin, 'Appointment with the knife-grinder', *Guardian*, 26 April 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/apr/26/featuresreviews.guardianreview16>> [accessed 15 July 2016]

⁵See Elio Vittorini, 'Prefazione alla prima edizione del "Garafono Rosso"', in *Le opere narrative*, ed. by Maria Corti (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), pp. 423-50. See also below, IV.3.

summarise as an interpretation of the novel as a search for the most suitable literary form to convey human values and experiences. This polarisation is reflected in the way in which the critics judge the quality of the novel. Detractors invoke the overall failure of the ideological intention of the work, considered too ‘abstract’,⁶ thus ignoring the fact that the moral message and ideological power of the work each need to be investigated at a different level, besides that of the content. Those who appreciated *Conversazione*, meanwhile, highlighted the revolutionary character of its style and its novelty in the context of the 1930s Italian literary panorama, alongside Vittorini’s achievement of what he intended to be a wider project. This is, for example, the position of Toscani, whose general evaluation of the novel stresses how, with *Conversazione*, Vittorini managed to achieve a personal literary solution characterised by a: ‘trasmigrazione della realtà nel mito, che [...] [è] composizione di un disegno ideale e ideologico in un tessuto formale antiscolastico, antigeorgico, antiborghese’.⁷ A more recent, but no less laudatory, judgement on the novel is provided by Vittorio Spinazzola, who recognises *Conversazione* as one of the few legendary works the twentieth century has left to us. The novel, for the Milanese critic, had a clear ‘volontà di provocazione e di scandalo energica’ and owes its success to the ‘assolutezza simbolica e lirismo infrenabile’ of its style.⁸

Nevertheless, some criticisms targeted the style of the work too, especially complaining against its supposed influence and imitation of contemporary American writers’ stylemes (in particular, Hemingway and

⁶ Compare, for example, Asor Rosa: ‘I motivi storici, politici e sociali [...] restano in seconda linea. Quello che conta è l’affermazione, dentro la storica, oggettiva rivolta popolare, di una mitologia dello spirito, costantemente difesa e sostenuta anche contro ogni tentativo, sia pure distorto, di richiamare certe urgenti necessità di concretezza sociologica e politica.’ Alberto Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo: il populismo nella letteratura contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), p. 137.

⁷ Claudio Toscani, *Come leggere “Conversazione in Sicilia” di Elio Vittorini* (Milan: Mursia, 1975), p. 16.

⁸ Vittorio Spinazzola, ‘Conversazione in Sicilia’, in *Letteratura italiana. Le opere*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1992-1996), IV.2 (1996), 407-27 (p. 407).

Saroyan). This commonplace determination of Vittorini's style,⁹ however, has been largely debated and, in some cases, overturned by those who instead defended Vittorini's style. Amongst such are Girardi and Pautasso who suggest that *Conversazione* can be considered as Vittorini's completion of the search for a new and completely personal style.¹⁰ For Girardi, the experimental character of the work stands out from contemporary Italian literary production and must be compared to the 'langue delle tradizioni avanguardistiche europee' to the extent that, in *Conversazione*, 'la sostanza civile e politica dell'opera è tradotta in una ricerca linguistica e formale'.¹¹ From a different perspective, Pautasso considers the position of Vittorini's masterpiece in the context of his own previous production. From this comparison, the critic demonstrates how *Conversazione* has a doubly paradoxical nature: on the one hand, it represents the culmination of a poetical pursuit while, on the other hand, it coincides with its overturning. Still maintaining the centrality of this work in the context of Vittorini's whole production, though, Pautasso refuses to consider it as its very peak and as the realisation of Vittorini's project. For him, *Conversazione* is, in fact, a (successful) chapter in a wider and relentless literary pursuit. Pautasso's proposition is in some way shared by Calvino in as much as the latter describes Vittorini's more recent literary and critical production as a reaffirmation of what he had been stating all through his career, which, for Calvino, must be seen as an organic, still open, project. As he puts it: 'se *Conversazione* è stata davvero un'opera manifesto come nessun'altra, il lavoro successivo è stato quello di correggere la sua stabilizzazione in manifesto'.¹²

⁹ Probably the best way to account for how such a commonplace determination of the author's style was generated is to refer directly to some of the many reflections Vittorini himself wrote about these American writers, available in Elio Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico* (Milan: Bompiani, 1957). See for example Elio Vittorini, 'Notizie su Saroyan', *Letteratura*, 5 (1938), 141-43, then in *Diario in pubblico*, 98-99.

¹⁰ See Claudio Pautasso, *Guida a Vittorini*, 2nd edn (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977) and Antonio Girardi, *Nome e lagrime: linguaggio e ideologia di Elio Vittorini* (Naples: Liguori, 1975).

¹¹ Girardi, p. 12.

¹² Italo Calvino, 'Vittorini: progettazione e letteratura', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, I, 160-87 (p. 161). Originally published in the special issue of *Il menabò* dedicated to Vittorini on the first anniversary of his death, *Il menabò*, 10 (1967).

The fact that critics have focused on these two poles (*either* ideological *or* formal, instead of *both* ideological *and* formal), with the contribution of other factors (mainly concerning Vittorini's own ideological consistency), has visibly resulted in an obsession with aesthetic judgement. This singular focus has led critics to overlook some other important aspects of the work – like, for example, its open structure, and the dialogical and interactional tensions it contains. It can be said that the reception of this novel suffered for twenty years at the hands of the climate in the Italian literary debate and, in particular, from the specific needs and features that authors, readers, and critics were demanding of fictional narrative in the course of the 1940s and 1950s (namely, in the context of the neorealist debate). It is important therefore to highlight how, during the 1960s, *Conversazione* started to be read with a different approach that focused on its *open* character. It seems that a new sensitivity was needed to appreciate fully the force triggered by this book, as we are going to see in section 2.b.

b. An open novel?

Apart from some indirect references to the semantic area of vagueness, incompleteness, and ungraspability, early critical readings mostly failed to focalise where the puzzling and interactive force of *Conversazione* comes from.¹³ More precise hints at its openness came instead from a specific cultural context, the 1960s cultural debate, in which both new approaches to literary studies and some avant-garde movements expressed their perspectives. In particular, it is useful to notice the emergence of an intellectual environment very close to Vittorini in the later years of his life – namely, that of Umberto Eco and the Gruppo 63. In this direction, we have to first highlight the role that the journal *Il menabò* – run by Vittorini and Calvino between 1959 and 1966 – had as a stage for the presentation of some ideas both of Eco and of the neo-avant-garde movement. Also, we will need to stress the concept of ‘open work’ as Umberto Eco conceived it

¹³ See for example Giaime Pintor, ‘L’allegoria del sentimento’, *Prospettive*, 15 April-15 May 1941, then in Giaime Pintor, *Il sangue d’Europa (1939-1943)*, ed. by Valentino Gerretana (Turin: Einaudi, 1950), pp. 155-58.

and more generally the idea of openness as it was intended (at different levels) by the Gruppo 63.

It was indeed Sanguineti himself in his introduction to *Conversazione* in 1966 (significantly the year of Vittorini's death) who highlighted how, during a relatively short span of time (about twenty years), this novel had been read and interpreted in many different ways (not always without manipulation and stretching), from *solariana*, *ermetica*, *neorealistica*, and *jungiana* perspectives.¹⁴ For Sanguineti, however, this simply represents the price and the downside of 'quell'unico testo esemplare che la generazione dei padri ha lasciato, come opera aperta, alla nostra generazione letteraria'.¹⁵ What does Sanguineti mean here by *opera aperta*? The authority of the critic and the historical context are too compelling simply to label this definition as a coincidence, and the reverberation of Umberto Eco's theorization and of the Gruppo 63's experiments cannot in fact help being heard.

Both Eco's concept and the *openness* pursued by the *Neoavanguardia* were complex and multi-faceted ideas. They dealt with the structure of the work, with the role of the intellectual (that had to be "open" in an interdisciplinary sense), with a dialogue with other literatures (European and American), and, most importantly, with the role of the audience in building the work's meaning. With the hindsight of our twenty-first century approach, if we look back at the Gruppo 63's intentions and at their idea of openness, it becomes evident how Vittorini's approach to literature (as developed in particular in *Conversazione* and *Il menabò*) must have looked to this new generation of authors at least like that of a forerunner, and certainly a unique one in the previous generation. At this point we should ask ourselves: what was Sanguineti specifically referring to in the particular passage we have just quoted? Is it his own personal idea of openness or a need for reader's intervention to *add* something to the work's meaning? Is the openness Sanguineti speaks about a hermeneutic question or a structural feature of the novel? How directly is

¹⁴ Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Introduzione', in Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966), p. vii-xv.

¹⁵ Sanguineti, p. ix.

Sanguineti referring to Eco's concept, still so close in time and in the debate (and, incidentally, so close to Iser's theory of indeterminacy, see above chapter I)?

Eco's theorisation of the *open work* and *Conversazione's* composition are undoubtedly far in time from each other. It is however interesting to record that it was precisely in the pages of the fifth issue of Vittorini's, *Il menabò*, in 1962, that one of the essays included later in the first book edition of Eco's *Opera aperta*,¹⁶ 'Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà', made its first appearance. Interestingly, this very essay was dedicated to questions of experimentalism, to the relationship between literature and alienation, and to the relationship between language and the capitalistic society; namely, it is the issue dedicated to the neo avant-garde writers. In the other essays of the book,¹⁷ Eco presented all the main aspects of the *open work* both as an aesthetic condition of the work of art and as a contemporary mode. We can link these notions to Vittorini's general dissatisfaction with the out-dated norms and language of the Italian realistic novel of the time in which he wrote *Conversazione*, as stated in his preface to *Il garofano rosso*:

Ottimo per raccogliere i dati *espliciti* di una realtà, e per collegarli *esplicitamente* tra loro, per mostrarli *esplicitamente* nei conflitti loro, risulta oggi inadeguato per un tipo di rappresentazione nella quale si voglia esprimere un sentimento complessivo o un'idea complessiva, un'idea riassuntiva di speranze o insofferenze degli uomini in genere, tanto più se segrete. [...] Si è, in un secolo, impregnato talmente della realtà che ha continuato a voler conoscere, da esserne ormai saturo e non poter impregnarsi più di altro, da non poter rappresentare una realtà diversa [...]. Non risponde più, vale a dire, al compito proprio di un linguaggio poetico: il quale è di conoscere quanto, della verità, non si arriva a conoscere col linguaggio dei concetti.¹⁸

Here we must notice of course Vittorini's allusion to the necessity of eluding Fascist censorship in depicting those *insofferenze segrete*. But the reason for his search for a more suitable form of novel has a further and

¹⁶ Eco, *Opera aperta*.

¹⁷ Especially in 'La poetica dell'opera aperta' (pp. 31-64) and in 'Analisi del linguaggio poetico' (pp. 65-94).

¹⁸ Elio Vittorini, 'Prefazione alla I edizione del *Garofano rosso*', pp. 431-32.

more complex objective: '[con] *Conversazione*, io cercai in me stesso e intorno a me stesso in qual modo avrei potuto svoltare verso uno scrivere che mi permettesse di dire le cose che avevo da dire'.¹⁹ In *Conversazione* therefore, we can see the effort to provide poetic language with new features that can 'portarci a vedere una realtà al di sopra dei nostri dati di confronto [...]. Portarci ad afferrare il senso di una realtà maggiore'.²⁰

'Afferrare il senso di una realtà maggiore', in other words: to manage to grasp what, in *Conversazione*, is hinted at as the *twice real* (see below IV.2), is the final aim of such an endeavour. But let us compare this quote to a passage from Eco's 'Del modo di formare', in which we can appreciate how Vittorini's formal pursuit is not dissimilar to the one Eco describes for contemporary (1960s) artists, which he identifies as those who produce *open works*:

[l'arte contemporanea] esercita a livello delle strutture formali una rimessa in gioco continua del linguaggio stabilizzato e acquisito e dei moduli d'ordine consacrati dalla tradizione. [...] [Se] osserviamo l'affermarsi di *opere aperte*, dalla struttura ambigua, sottoposta a una indeterminazione degli esiti, questo avviene perché le forme, in questo modo, adeguano tutta una visione dell'universo fisico e dei rapporti psicologici proposta dalle discipline scientifiche contemporanee.²¹

Thus, a clear connection is made between the choice of manipulating indeterminacy and the delivery of a specific vision of the world – one that is dissatisfied with established norms and styles. Moreover, the open work model also provides the pattern for an allusive and indirect referential modality:

Nel momento in cui l'artista si accorge che il sistema comunicativo è estraneo alla situazione storica di cui vuole parlare, deve decidere che non sarà attraverso l'esemplificazione di un soggetto storico che egli potrà esprimere la situazione, ma solo attraverso l'assunzione,

¹⁹ Vittorini, 'Prefazione alla I edizione del *Garofano rosso*', p. 433.

²⁰ Vittorini, 'Prefazione alla I edizione del *Garofano rosso*', p. 434.

²¹ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 269.

l'invenzione, di strutture formali che si facciano il *modello* di questa situazione.²²

This certainly can be held true every time a new poetic paradigm is imposed over existing poetic norms, but we have to remember how *Conversazione* had been quite a unique attempt in the specific time and context in which it appeared insofar as it both had the intention of carrying out a search for a new form, and possessed an *openness* to the European and American novel and to an ideological involvement of the audience. Vittorini's project must indeed be considered nonpareil in the 1930s/1940s panorama, especially if all these urges were still compelling twenty years later when the neo avant-garde artists started their own revolution, and if the elements that this project contains were defined as features of contemporary works of art by Eco in 1962.

This is how Vittorini himself described the novel he was most satisfied with: '[*Conversazione*] risponde ad alcuni requisiti *cui vorrei sempre rispondessero i libri*: una certa novità formale, una certa tensione oggettivistica, una certa carica informativa...'.²³ From such a self-critique, we can conclude therefore that the author pursues and develops a new language and formal structure in an attempt to provide the literary work with a new, informative power. Interestingly, in his application of information theory to aesthetics, Eco shows how, in order to increase the quantity of information delivered, aesthetics messages manipulate language through the subversion of any probabilistic order: 'uno degli elementi di singolarità del discorso estetico [è] dato proprio dal fatto che viene rotto l'ordine probabilistico del linguaggio, atto a veicolare significati normali, proprio per accrescere il numero dei significati possibili',²⁴ and also 'l'informazione in quanto additiva è legata all'*originalità*, alla *non-probabilità*'.²⁵ This implies that works that force their indeterminacy and that show 'una intenzione di apertura *esplicita*',²⁶ by boosting the possibilities of interpretation, also intend to provide a

²² Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 269.

²³ Elio Vittorini, *Le due tensioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1967), pp. 67-70.

²⁴ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 115.

²⁵ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 107.

²⁶ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 89.

wider range of *information* and *meanings* so that they ‘consistono invece non in un messaggio concluso e definito, non in una forma organizzata univocamente, ma in una possibilità di varie organizzazioni affidate all’iniziativa dell’interprete nello stesso momento in cui le fruisce esteticamente’.²⁷

These reflections bring us back to the crucial interaction between author and reader in literary communication. Beyond the search for a new form and a new language, at the very dialogical core of *Conversazione*, we can see the urgency and the impelling need to create a communicative space and ground that reveals a pedagogic intent. What critics who perceived this novel as failing to transmit its ideological message have omitted to consider is precisely how its vagueness, its ungraspability, and its indeterminacy were actually preparing the ground and creating the premises for a different revolutionary purpose. They neglect to consider how the novel’s indeterminacy represents crossing the boundaries of literary communication and opening a *real* conversation with the audience. And this communication is not just with the audience of the time, not with a readership delimited in time and space. The aim of this open structure was to make its outreach *universal*. As Eco teaches us, there is a pedagogic role in the work’s openness ‘L’opera è aperta come è aperto un dibattito: la soluzione è attesa e auspicata, ma deve venire dal concorso cosciente del pubblico. L’apertura si fa strumento di pedagogia rivoluzionaria’.²⁸ The poetics of the open work, and Vittorini’s own, is a poetics that establishes:

un nuovo tipo di rapporto tra artista e pubblico, una nuova meccanica della percezione estetica, una diversa posizione del prodotto artistico nella società; apre una pagina di sociologia e pedagogia [...]. Pone nuovi problemi pratici creando situazioni comunicative, instaura un nuovo rapporto tra *contemplazione* e *uso* dell’opera d’arte.²⁹

I want to strongly suggest here that the interactive drive of *Conversazione* aims precisely at its *usage* instead of at its mere *contemplation*. This drive happens on the formal and linguistic level (as we are going to see in

²⁷ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 33.

²⁸ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 45.

²⁹ Eco, *Opera aperta*, p. 63.

further detail in the next sections). What Eco managed to highlight, as David Robey brings to our attention in the introduction to the American translation of the text,³⁰ is the moral intensity that open works can reach, ‘the special effect or function of the modern open work in relation to the world in which we live’;³¹ all the open work devices – meaning the conscious manipulation of a work’s openness – are then intended to pursue aesthetic form as social commitment and with a pedagogic aim.

c. An open interrogation

In Eco’s conception, the openness of the work is the very aspect in which the novel’s historical and social commitment is thus generated. But openness can also contribute to making a work accessible to different generations or types of recipients and to those coming from different perspectives, thus rendering the messages it carries universal. It was indeed Pautasso, only one year later, in 1967, in the conclusion of his chapter about *Conversazione*, who quoted exactly that same passage on the open work from Sanguineti’s introduction. To this he adds, giving a hermeneutical meaning to Sanguineti’s statement:

Il fatto che si presti a più interpretazioni, che regga letture che partono da prospettive così diverse come quella politica, storica, stilistica, psicanalitica, è la conferma che il lungo viaggio non ha affatto deteriorato il manoscritto vittoriano chiuso in una bottiglia.³²

It is again in 1967, in the issue of *Il menabò* entirely dedicated to Vittorini, that Calvino in his essay, ‘Vittorini: Progettazione e letteratura’, refers to the whole ‘discorso’ of Vittorini as a ‘discorso che è sempre stato aperto’.³³ Calvino is here mainly referring to the fact that Vittorini never stopped returning again and again to his intellectual *project*. However, Vittorini’s discourse and project had also a broader intention. His was a literary and moral quest that always took place beyond the borders of a

³⁰ David Robey, ‘Introduction’, in Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. xii-xxii.

³¹ Robey, p. xiii.

³² Pautasso, p. 137.

³³ Calvino, ‘Vittorini: progettazione e letteratura’, p. 187.

symbolic and allusive mode, thus being inevitably *open* and in need of an interlocutor. Vittorini's discourse, rather than being a monologue, has a dialogical approach and it is always in search of a *confrontation*, thus of an *interaction*. As Sanguineti himself said, with reference to *Conversazione*, it is not so much a conversation that takes place in the pages of the book, as it is an open dialogue. The whole book works like a conversation:

tra *l'a parte* del monologo a voce alta e il dialogo aperto [...] dove [...] si interroga e ci si interroga – due atteggiamenti che sono qui uno – e in cui la risposta, per quanto verbalmente si articola, sempre è segno: indizio allusivo, interrogante esso medesimo, chiuso in eco e in enigma. [...] Ed è il modo che si consegna al lettore di oggi, senza correzione, invitandolo ormai a ripetere le stesse domande, a decifrare “ognuno” come “tutti quanti”, gli stessi emblemi.³⁴

On this note we shall refer once more to *Progettazione e letteratura*, in which it appears Calvino is advocating the recognition of openness in Vittorini's work, not only in *Conversazione in Sicilia*, but in the entirety of his intellectual production. Calvino confirms the idea of ‘il libro unico’ of Vittorini, the possibility of enclosing a whole literary endeavour into a homogeneous project, whose enclosure nevertheless does not imply *closedness*. Quite the opposite, this *libro unico* seems to send us back outside itself, ‘fuori dalle sue pagine’. In conclusion, Vittorini's general discourse is a ‘progetto, o meglio progetto di progetto. E d'una letteratura che è a sua volta progetto [...]. [È] un modo di stare al mondo, è progettazione umana’,³⁵ well beyond the literary borders.

It is not a coincidence, I would like to suggest, that if we leave out the epilogue in *Conversazione*, Silvestro's journey and his *conversations* are concluded with the dream-like situation in which the pressing succession of the questions posed by the novel's characters is eventually left unanswered, and therefore *open*. For example:

“Ehm!”

“Ehm?” chiesero, seduti intorno, i miei interlocutori.

“Niente” io dissi. “Ho detto solo ehm!”

Ma di nuovo il soldato parlò in me, e di nuovo disse: “Ehm!”

³⁴ Sanguineti, p. xv.

³⁵ Calvino, ‘Vittorini: progettazione e letteratura’, p. 162.

“Che storia è questa?” si chiesero l’un l’altro Coi baffi e Senza Baffi.
 “È una parola suggellata” io risposi.
 I siciliani si guardarono tra loro.
 “Ah!” disse Porfirio.
 “Già” disse l’uomo Ezechiele.
 “Sicuro” disse l’arrotino.
 E il Gran Lombardo assenti col capo. Ognuno assenti.
 Uno disse: “Anche io la conosco”.
 “Che cosa?” Coi Baffi chiese.
 “Che cosa?” chiese Senza Baffi.
 In alto sorrideva, sopra a tutto questo, la donna di bronzo.
 “Ed è molto soffrire?” chiesero i siciliani.³⁶

Apart from Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi (who wonder “Che storia è questa?”), all the other interlocutors are able to understand *la parola suggellata*; they do not need to add anything else, they can fill the gaps of *implicitness*, and so the reader is called upon to take part in this sharing of meaning. It is also implied that the reader can understand – on the basis of the preceding *conversazioni* and of what we have learned from them – the meaning of ‘Ehm’ (or if not, then we are no better than Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi...). Nevertheless, the last question (“Ed è molto soffrire?”) is not answered; the very question concerning the fate of doomed humankind, the despair of (and in) mankind that generated the *astratti furori* is left open. Furthermore, if we analyse the epilogue, what the narrator tells us is even more striking: ‘Questa fu la mia conversazione in Sicilia, durata tre giorni e le notti relative, finita com’era cominciata’ (p. 709). While this ending introduces some circularity to the novel, it nonetheless represents anything but closure. As Girardi points out,³⁷ it rather stresses how an initial situation of conflict has not been solved in the course of the novel. The conversation (the *conversations*) took place just to give rise to a number of other conversations, or rather of interrogations, outside the book. The fact that this openness is so visible in a direct, unanswered question, leads us to reflect on the value and the role that conversations and dialogues as major devices assume in the development of the novel, which leads us nicely into the next section.

³⁶ Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, in *Opere narrative*, ed. by Corti, I (p. 708). All the quotations from the novel are from this edition.

³⁷ Girardi, p. 34.

3. *Conversazione*'s dialogic structure

More recently, in 1994 (although hints of this position were also present in 'Storia non è storicissimo' in the aforementioned 1967 issue of *Il menabò*), Guglielmi stressed how, in *Conversazione*, we have a prevalence of the phatic function, i.e. the use of language with reference to the interaction between the sender and the receiver.³⁸ This is why we need to link the openness of *Conversazione* to its peculiar use of dialogues, in which this interaction is specifically visible and triggered.

In *Conversazione*, dialogues between characters have minimal contextualisation with regard to action. They look rather like play scripts (even though completely deprived of any dramatic power) and they are presented in a rapid succession of direct speech signals such as 'dissi', 'disse', 'chiesi', 'chiese'. These dialogues are made of 'domande e risposte, calcate da frequentissime sottolineature del messaggio linguistico, in cui la didascalia (che funge spesso da cesura della frase) diventa una sorta di "basso continuo" nel periodo'.³⁹

This technique is deliberately used to avoid the elements that characterise the psychological novel (compare above what Vittorini said in the foreword to *Il Garofano Rosso*, IV.2), and it has often been considered as one of the main influences that Vittorini derived from the American novelists he had critically studied, especially Hemingway. But these questions and answers must be seen also as phatic signals that emphasise the dialogic dimension of the novel – the dimension that I consider the most characteristic aspect of this text. This stress on the very fundamentals of communication cannot but signal the openness of the work to its audience and a request for their intervention. As a result, this emphasis on the communicative and dialogical character of the novel – by which I refer both to *Conversazione* specifically, and to *the novel* as a genre and social

³⁸ See Roman Jakobson's theory of the functions of language: Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350-77.

³⁹ Girardi, p. 42.

device –⁴⁰ comes to represent an exploration (or even celebration) of literary dialogue as a ‘rifiuto del solipsismo’.⁴¹ In this section, I therefore aim to discuss how the dialogical and polyphonic structure of *Conversazione* creates its specific indeterminacy and openness.

a. The characters’ polyphony and the dialogic mode

Now, in order to consider the dialogical and polyphonic structure of *Conversazione*, we shall first of all refer to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel,⁴² and more specifically we shall recall how, for the Russian scholar, the dialogic and polyphonic structures are the defining characters of the novel as a genre. In this respect, by manipulating the forms of the dialogue and conversation, Vittorini successfully achieved for the work an overall dialogical openness which, alongside the conversations depicted in the book, generates an outward conversation with its readers.

The structure and function of dialogues in *Conversazione* are clearly connected to the development and role of characters. For example, in Silvestro’s journey from Northern Italy to Sicily the passengers on the train are presented to us:

M’ero appena gettato sul sedile di legno, nel treno in moto, che udii due voci nel corridoio, parlare tra loro [...].

Erano due voci da sigaro, forti e strascicate, dolci in dialetto. Parlavano in siciliano, in dialetto.

Affacciai la testa sul corridoio e li vidi al finestrino, due uomini di persona massiccia, tarchiati, in cappello e cappotto, uno coi baffi, l’altro no, due siciliani di tipo carrettiere, ma ben messi, floridi, presuntuosi nella nuca e la schiena, eppur con qualcosa di simulato e goffo che, forse, in fondo, era timidezza.

“Due baritoni” io dissi tra me. E uno, in effetti, quello senza baffi, aveva voce piuttosto da baritono, cantante e sinuosa. (pp. 582-83)

Apart from a single distinguishing feature, the presence or absence of a moustache that will give them their names *per antonomasia*, Coi Baffi and

⁴⁰ Cf. Guglielmi, ‘La conversazione di Elio Vittorini’, p. 12.

⁴¹ Spinazzola, ‘Conversazione in Sicilia’, p. 22.

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Alquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

Senza Baffi are described as a whole; in fact, they are identical, just like their discourses. But even more importantly, before being roughly described in their (equal) physical features, they are depicted as *voices* ('erano due voci da sigaro'); they both look (and Senza Baffi also sounds like) baritones. The antonomasia device is at work also for other characters, such as the *Gran Lombardo* and the *piccolo siciliano*. These epithets could seem at first glance to be referring to physical characteristics, but they actually hold moral connotations. The *piccolo siciliano*, who is actually small, is defined in such a way because of his human condition and because of his despair. Stressing his small stature serves to emphasise his opposition to the sturdiness of the two policemen on the train, who look – and sound – stout and pretentious because of the conformism of their conversation. Moreover, through his physical feature, the *piccolo siciliano* is also opposed to the Gran Lombardo, whose greatness lies more in the fact that he speaks of *other duties*. Even though he is at first described as big in terms of his physical aspect ('Era un siciliano, grande, un lombardo o normanno forse di Nicosia, tipo anche lui carrettiere come quelli delle voci sul corridoio, ma autentico, aperto, e alto, e con gli occhi azzurri', p. 586), later, in his conversation with his mother, Concezione, Silvestro extends the name of "Gran Lombardo" to a type of man that has vague distinguishing features and, as such, he changes his definition a few times as he attempts to find a link that likens the man met on the train to his father and grandfather:

"Che cos'è un Gran Lombardo?" disse.

Io mi strinsi nelle spalle. Non sapevo che rispondere, invero, e dissi:

"È un uomo..."

"Un uomo?" disse mia madre.

E io: "Un uomo alto, grande... Non era alto il nonno?"

E mia madre: "Era alto. Si chiama Gran Lombardo un uomo ch'è alto?"

E io: "No, veramente. Non per la statura..."

E mia madre: "Perché allora pensi che fosse un Gran Lombardo?"

E io: "Perché sì! Non era biondo e con gli occhi azzurri, il nonno?"

E mia madre: "È questo un Gran Lombardo? Uno che è biondo e ha gli occhi azzurri? È facile essere un Gran Lombardo!" [...]

Pensai a mio padre con gli occhi azzurri, non biondo, e come pensavo anche lui una specie di Gran lombardo, in *Macbeth*, e in

tutte le sue tragedie recitate su tavole di ferrovia, per ferrovieri e cantonieri, dissi: “Può anche essere solo con gli occhi azzurri.” [...] (pp. 619-20)

Silvestro, in summarising this part of the conversation finally finds the *moral* feature the three men share, namely the fact that they each thought of *other duties*:

Questo io dissi molto sul serio, con nostalgia del Gran Lombardo conosciuto in treno, e di uomini e uomini che fossero simili a lui, di mio padre in Macbeth, e del nonno, e dell'uomo in un'immagine come lui. “Sembra che dovesse *pensare ad altri doveri*” dissi. (p. 621) [my emphasis]

More than as *persons*, characters are, in this way, presented to us as *ideas*. The *piccolo siciliano* is just one of the many *piccoli siciliani* who can be found not just in Sicily, but also in the whole world. Equally, Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi, the *Gran Lombardo*, and *Liborio* as well as Silvestro's drinking friends (Calogero, Ezechiele, Porfirio, and Colombo) in part four stand neither singularly for themselves nor as symbols but for human types. In the novel's development, they make their individual voices heard, but they share common languages, *social* languages (even Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi are the expression of an individual yet shared language, even though different to the one spoken by Silvestro and the Gran Lombardo). They bring to the overall conversation of the work their points of view, which are not subjective ones, but rather the ideas that belong to all the *piccoli siciliani*, to all the *Gran Lombardi*. That is why the *antonomasia* process is chosen: it is used to confirm the idea behind the person, who is not important for the way in which he/she acts (and, in fact, does not act, as we will see) but for the *discourse* that he/she contributes to making possible and heard. Characters thus act only through their words and ideas. They become the embodiment of their ideas themselves, that is why descriptions are present but are not necessary.

The fact that they are the embodiment of ideas should not be dismissed too simply. It is in fact a crucial one. Characters embody these ideas fully – especially through their individual discourses – and they are

not just simple symbols that stand for them. There is not a simple subtext that can be disclosed automatically; there are instead many levels of discourse which need to be considered together. The characters make their individual voices and discourses heard, but if we put all the *discourses* together we reach a further meaning. That is to say that *the conversation* to which the title of the book refers is made out of a sum and interaction of individual conversations.

This interpretation helps us to understand also the conclusion of the novel which, with its unrealistic journey and peculiar conversation, brings up a comprehension of human suffering that is *doppiamente reale*, and that involves a plurality of points of view *within* a shared language. Not only do I propose that Vittorini was trying here to give a *single* symbolic interpretation, but I would also add that he was actually trying to engage his audience in the search for interaction, dialogue, and conversation with the rest of humanity as well. The novel has the form of a dialogue, of a conversation, *because* dialogue is the very form of the novel as a genre and as a human device. That is why we cannot attribute a totally symbolic interpretation to the work. Rather than a sort of allegorical story, with a moral and an encrypted message, this book should be considered as a celebration of the genre of the novel as representing the possibility of dialogue and human interaction, in opposition to the initial situation in which communication is denied and seems impossible (as we are going to see in a while). This implies a kind of reflection on the genre of the novel but, more importantly, if it has to trigger an interaction, it suggests that the work cannot but be open and undetermined.

Another characteristic that Bakhtin attributed to the genre of the novel is polyphony, insofar as characters' words and expressions are reflected and refracted both in the narrator's discourse (and in the author's discourse) and in the discourse of all the other characters.⁴³ This general feature of the novel is particularly exploited in *Conversazione* where a pattern of polyphony and chorality is not generated simply by the layering or summing of different individual voices, but rather arises from the use of

⁴³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

a homogenous rhythmical pattern. In fact, Vittorini's accuracy in pursuing a rhythmical modulation of language through the use of repetitions and of question-and-answer patterns – in which, very often, the question anticipates the answer – can be seen as an exploitation of the responsive and dialogical anticipation theorised by Bakhtin. Whilst a certain amount of new information is always delivered during the reiteration of the same pattern (answers that mirror questions and repeat them), the attention of the reader is nonetheless continuously drawn to the stylistic pattern of this modality such that it becomes clear that this very formulaic modality and its repetitiveness is meaningful. It is in this repetitive modality that the reader must look for meaning.

If every word stated in a dialogue demands an answer – so that in some way it both anticipates and is influenced by the answer itself – it is clear that its relationship with the object is not direct but rather is mediated by the interaction with other words, discourses, voices:

The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way.⁴⁴

There is indeed a complete fusion between a statement and the expected answers, thus between its understanding and the answers that come after it. The modality in which Silvestro converses with Concezione is a good example of this particular technique, and it is not surprising that after he has been asking some of his compelling questions for a while, the narrator reveals to us his frustration. He has asked Concezione many questions expecting some specific answers, yet he has obtained very little information:

“Ma cosa pensi di loro? Cosa pensi che sono?” io dissi. [...]
 “Che strane domande che fai! Cosa debbo pensare che sono? Sono povera gente con un po' di tisi e un po' di malaria...”
 Io scossi il capo. Facevo delle strane domande, mia madre poteva vedere questo, eppure non mi dava delle strane risposte. E io questo volevo, strane risposte. (pp. 646-47)

⁴⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 259-422 (p. 279).

Even more than its characters, then, the protagonists of this story seem to be the *conversations* themselves, which also explains why the plot shows an overall lack of action and takes us to the next point.

b. Dialogue vs. action

Girardi⁴⁵ wittily pointed out how Silvestro's main feature, from the very beginning, is *l'inazione*.⁴⁶ This statement can be extended to all the other characters of the novel, whose (few) actions are mentioned only to justify the happening of conversations. For example: 'Vittorini ama dei suoi personaggi ciò che essi allegoricamente o miticamente o utopisticamente rappresentano e dicono, non ciò che sono. In altre parole i personaggi risultano essenzialmente funzionali all'economia del messaggio ideologico-lirico, più che alla *favola*'.⁴⁷ Let us think for example of the *inertia* of the *siciliani* with whom Silvestro tries to start a conversation (see below IV.3.c), or to the general lack of action on the train, where the conversations between Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi and with the Gran Lombardo take place. The main purpose of the *giro delle iniezioni* is similarly to carry on the conversation with the mother and to provide content for the conversation itself. We could also consider purely discursive the nature of the encounter with Calogero, Ezechiele, Porfirio, and Colombo, the total inactivity of the ghost of Liborio and all the other characters in Silvestro's dream, and the unavoidable stillness of the statue of the woman. Indeed, the very last scene of the novel could not be more still. Concezione is described in the act of washing the feet of a man in her house (the vagrant? her husband?) but no previous or future consequentiality is given to the episode, that remains deprived of any active power.

Characters, moreover, are roughly presented with just a few recurring traits (see above IV.2.a, the technique of *antonomasia*);

⁴⁵ Girardi, p. 13.

⁴⁶ And this feature of the protagonist only strengthens a certain kinship to modernist anti-heroes.

⁴⁷ Maria Corti, 'Prefazione', in Elio Vittorini, *Le opere narrative*, pp. xi-lx (p. xxix).

furthermore, they are depicted in a general inaction. They are not *actants* and they come to the foreground of the narration only when they interact with the protagonist in a dialogue. Their distinguishing traits are scarce, and they are repeated formulaically like their recurring words. It is not a surprise then that we cannot grasp them as fully rounded characters. We do not have access to their inner lives or consciousness, and nor are their thoughts presented to us such that, more than as flesh and blood entities, we tend to consider them only as voices that we are permitted to hear from time to time. It is not a surprise, then, that when these voices gather together, they appear to us as ghost-like presences. There is, nevertheless, no risk of mixing up the voices. Even if they do not seem to have personal idiolects, they speak (and this is their only modality of acting, in a way) and therefore they fulfil their roles in the novel by transmitting their personal, individual ideas. We struggle to visualise them, yet we can hear their voices clearly, even if we do not have access to their minds.

The process of *antonomasia* and the lack of activity are not the only aspects by which the uncharacterisation of characters is generated. As the story progresses, we can observe a passage into a more and more dream-like and unreal atmosphere. In part three, characters gradually lose their real aspect; this process culminates in their appearing as spirits or ghosts in Silvestro's dream. But even before arriving at this point, when we are still in a setting that has a minimal connection with reality, we can see how people are depicted as spirits (and, more interestingly, as *voices*) during Concezione's injection rounds, in which the visual dimension is denied to Silvestro:

Parlavano lontano da me, tutte e tre le voci, ed erano di creature invisibili. Anche di me parlavano.

“L'avete fatto grande come voi!” disse la voce di donna.

Mi vedevano ed erano invisibili: erano come spiriti. E come uno spirito mia madre fece l'iniezione, perfettamente al buio, parlando d'etere e di ago. (p. 635)

Poi nella profonda oscurità di pozzo, brillò una luce di fiammifero, io vidi le mani di mia madre, e passato il momento di quella luce sulle sue mani, udii la sua voce. (p. 637)

If characters are not as important for their actions as for their words, then their characterisation is superfluous such that they are depersonified and turned into mere voices. In such a way, they each appear undetermined. The final effect of this technique of disembodiment is that, in this novel, the form of the conversation seems, through a self-reflexive process, almost a celebration of the typical dialogic mode and the very essence of the novel as a genre. For Bakhtin the dimension of the man in the novel is bound to *words* and not to *actions* (unlike for example in epic narration).⁴⁸ In *Conversazione*, we face a sum of voices expressing their singular ideologies, but in a shared common language that generates polyphony at the same time as it obtains an effect of chorality. This idea of chorality through polyphony can be confirmed also by the use of the rhythmical pattern. Girardi described *Conversazione*'s musical pattern as a polyphonic one; in other words, neither a lyrical nor an individual pattern. This musical pattern is maximally exploited in dialogues and in the rhythmical alternation of questions and answers. Even though the structure of dialogues seems to be a dramatic one (with rhythmic exchanges of questions and answers), nevertheless the core of the conversation is not to be found simply in this structure. In each conversation, questions and answers are entangled in a broader net, thus echoing, completing, integrating, and triggering what has already been said or is yet to be said.

More than a pursuit of new pieces of information, all the characters seek *verification* (this is visible also in Coi Baffi's and Senza Baffi's interaction). Moreover, interlocution is so pervasive and assumes such a

⁴⁸And, significantly, Bakhtin also points out how it is from its word-bound character that the incompleteness and openness of the novel spring, as the novel is a 'world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken' so that this openness constitutes a bridge with the readers of all the times: 'No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost; its sense and significance are renewed and grow as the context continues to unfold'. Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 3-40 (p. 30).

significant role that even a train becomes an interlocutor in Silvestro's inner existential interrogations: 'Potei ricordare me e il treno in un rapporto speciale come di dialogo, come se avessi parlato con lui' (p. 616).

In the passage below, it is interesting to observe how Concezione seems unable to tell, or perhaps uninterested in telling, her story to her son herself. She needs his questions to carry the narration further. Be they real questions or just rhetorical ones, it is evident here how responsiveness and alternation in the dialogue are fundamental for the very progression of the story, as well as anaphora:

"Era una terribile estate" disse mia madre.

[...] e non raccontava, rispondeva alle mie domande.

"Era una mattina, era un pomeriggio?" domandai io. [...]

Ma non raccontava, mia madre, rispondeva alle mie domande, e io le domandai: "E allora lui?"

Di nuovo mia madre si fermò, non raccontava, rispondeva alle mie domande, e io domandai qualcosa, non so più che cosa [...]. E io di nuovo le domandai qualcosa, non so più che cosa. [...] E io di nuovo le domandai non so più che cosa. (pp. 631- 32)

Additionally, characters' words and ideas are reflected and dispersed throughout the novel as formulas, echoed in the discourse of other characters and of the narrator. For example, in another passage of the description of the Gran Lombardo and of his pursuit of *other duties*, it is interesting to notice how Vittorini emphasises that he is reporting the Gran Lombardo's discourse by continuously repeating 'così disse' and the very same words the man uses (compare my emphases):

Era un padrone di terre con tre belle figlie femmine, *così disse, tre belle figlie femmine*, e aveva un cavallo sul quale andava per le sue terre [...] e avrebbe voluto acquistare un'altra cognizione, *così disse, acquistare un'altra cognizione*, e sentirsi diverso [...], sentirsi in pace con gli uomini come uno, *così disse, come uno* che non ha nulla da rimproverarsi. [...]

Avrebbe voluto avere una coscienza fresca, *così disse, fresca*, e che gli chiedesse di compiere altri doveri, non i soliti, altri, dei nuovi doveri, e più alti, verso gli uomini [...].

"Credo che l'uomo sia maturo per altro" disse. "Non soltanto per non rubare, non uccidere, eccetera, e per essere buon cittadino... Credo che sia maturo per altro, per nuovi, per altri doveri, altre cose,

da compiere... Cose da fare per la nostra coscienza in senso nuovo.”
(pp. 589-90)

Let us see how these expressions are reflected both in Silvestro's and in Concezione's discourses:

[...] sempre con nostalgia del Gran Lombardo, chiesi: “Era soddisfatto di sé? Era soddisfatto di sé e del mondo il nonno?” [...]

“No, del mondo non lo era”.

“Ah, non lo era?” dissi io. “Del mondo non era soddisfatto e di sé lo era?”.

E mia madre: “Sì, credo che di sé lo era...”.

“Non pensava ad altri doveri?” dissi io. “Lo era?”.

E mia madre: “Perché non avrebbe dovuto esserlo? Si sentiva un re sul suo cavallo, nella cavalcata... E aveva noi tre belle figlie femmine! Perché non avrebbe dovuto esserlo?”. (p. 622)

And later, significantly, while describing the vagrant with whom she had a love affair many years before, she asks her son:

“Ecco” disse mia madre. E fu per continuare, ma mi guardò e mi chiese: “Non mi domandi se era un Gran Lombardo?”.

“Oh!” esclamai io. “Perché? Che c'entra?”

“Credo che lo fosse” disse mia madre. “Credo che pensasse ad altri doveri. Non è un Gran Lombardo uno che pensa ad altri doveri?”. (p. 633)

In the fourth part, Silvestro meets and spends time with some shopkeepers (each of whom seems to offer a different solution for the hopeless calm of doomed humanity). Each of them is also characterised by a recurring phrase or particular key words, which they continue to repeat throughout the part:

Calogero, the knife grinder: “Coltelli e forbici!”

Ezechiele, the saddlemaker: “Molto, molto offeso è il mondo”.

Porfirio, the draper: “Non coltelli, non forbici, ma acqua viva”.

Their own typical phrases however resonate with, and intersect each other's discourse. Further, they all share a *leitmotif* about the pain they suffer and that now is shared by Silvestro too:

E l'arrotino: "Egli soffre".

E l'uomo Ezechiele: "Sì, egli soffre".

E l'arrotino: "È per il dolore del mondo offeso che egli soffre. Non è per se stesso." (p. 671)

[Porfirio] scese la sua larga mano dall'alto, cercò la mia e me la strinse in una stretta che, malgrado tutto, era gentile.

"Mi compiaccio" egli disse sopra alla mia testa. E rivolgendosi agli altri chiese:

"Soffre, avete detto?" [...]

"Sì, Porfirio" l'uomo Ezechiele rispose. "Soffre e non per se stesso."

"Non per le piccolezze del mondo" spiegò l'arrotino. [...]

"No" l'uomo Ezechiele disse. "È per il dolore universale che soffre."

E l'arrotino disse "Per il dolore del mondo offeso" (pp. 678-79)

Himself drunk and in despair, these words become Silvestro's own:

E tutti erano uomini ignudi e folli che si impadronivano delle fantasime per virtù del vino.

"Oh, mondo offeso! Mondo offeso!" gridai io, a questo pensiero. (p. 689)

The words and discourse of the different characters mingle together, thus creating an overall on-going discourse and conversation that loses every individual connotation and becomes, as such, and at the same time, undetermined and polyphonic.

c. Reticence and implicitness

If, in reading *Conversazione*, critics have tended to struggle – and, to some extent be obsessed with – deciphering the meaning of the novel, this is owing to its vague and allusive, open character, and to the use of the dialogic and rhythmical pattern we have just analysed. This urge rises therefore from the very structure of the work that continuously leaves us with the feeling that there is something much more meaningful going on beneath the surface of the story and the recollection of a journey. There is something that is implicit and left unsaid that actually coincides with the moral drive of the novel, and that requires some intervention of the reader in order to let it come to the surface.

If we return for a while to the final and crucial part of the novel, when all the characters gather around the *monumento alla patria* and, in

turn, repeat the “contentless”, yet significant, word first pronounced by Liborio, Silvestro’s brother, who has just been killed in a war, ‘Ehm!’, we can notice, with Falaschi, how this *parola suggellata*, besides all the possible interpretations of the novel (including the ideological, historical and literary), primarily stands for a poetics of implicitness and of the unsaid. Quite significantly, this very poetics is the one that Vittorini himself praised in the American writers he promoted (such as Hemingway and Saroyan), and Falaschi suggests that we should interpret this whole passage as a representation of the ‘impossibilità di ridurre la scoperta a segno rientrante nel sistema del linguaggio concettuale’.⁴⁹

We should not designate too hastily this impossibility as the acceptance of failure. On the contrary, we might read it as the celebration of a communicative praxis in which it is sometimes essential to avoid explicitness. On this note, Spinazzola recognises Liborio’s ‘Ehm!’ as the keyword of the whole work: ‘Il suo senso è e non può non essere “suggellato”: ma diventa comprensibilissimo quando si condividono i sentimenti di chi così si esprime’.⁵⁰ Thus we ought to conclude that it is not for *paralipical* sake that this space is left empty. It is rather to let all that which is implicit find a place in the text. Incidentally, Falaschi concludes his introduction to the novel by referring to the value of implicitness: ‘ciò che è implicito nella letteratura è dunque quello che non si sa e che è stato scritto ma che non si deve leggere’.⁵¹ That is to say, literary communication, in order to be effective, needs to occupy the tension between the said and the unsaid. What is omitted is just as important as what is said, and this tension is reflected in *Conversazione* also at the level of the conversations of which it is constituted. If we analyse, for example, the beginning of the novel, before Silvestro’s journey starts – and before the events which lead to his decision to take on the journey – the first pages appear as a prologue that deals with the very opposite of the conversations that are to follow: that is, with the

⁴⁹ Giovanni Falaschi, ‘Introduzione’, in Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1989), pp. 5-54 (p. 46).

⁵⁰ Spinazzola, ‘Conversazione in Sicilia’, p. 20.

⁵¹ Falaschi, p. 54.

impossibility of saying and speaking while facing both an individual internal crisis and a shared sorrowful time for doomed humanity. The narrator tells us:

Io ero, quell'inverno, in preda ad astratti furori. *Non dirò* quali, non di questo mi son messo a raccontare. [...] Vedevo manifesti di giornali squillanti e chinavo il capo; vedevo amici, per un'ora, due ore, e stavo con loro *senza dire una parola*, chinavo il capo; e avevo *una ragazza o moglie* che mi aspettava ma *neanche con lei dicevo una parola*, anche con lei chinavo il capo. (p. 571)

Ero quieto; ero come se non avessi mai avuto un giorno di vita, né mai saputo che cosa significa esser felici, *come se non avessi nulla da dire, da affermare, negare*, nulla di mio da mettere in gioco, e *nulla da ascoltare, da dare e nessuna disposizione a ricevere*. (pp. 571-72) [my emphases]

In the second quote, the narrator negates the possibility of dialogue, at the same time as intimating the unbearable of the ongoing situation:

ma mi agitavo entro di me per astratti furori, e pensavo il genere umano perduto, chinavo il capo, e pioveva, *non dicevo una parola agli amici*, e l'acqua entrava nelle scarpe. (p. 572)

Apart from the letter Silvestro's father sends to him (which we might consider as a first interaction that breaks the impossibility to speak and gives rise to the journey), Silvestro's first attempt to begin a conversation with someone takes place only in chapter three, on the ferryboat to Sicily. Although ultimately successful, Silvestro initially struggles to start small talk with the *piccoli siciliani di terza classe*, as he has to repeat his sentence for three times before someone responds. This someone is a man, who has all the features required to start *the conversation*:

“Non c'è formaggio come il nostro” io dissi.
Nessuno mi rispose, tutti mi guardavano, le donne dalla femminilità voluminosa sedute su grandi sacchi di roba, gli uomini in piedi, piccoli e come bruciacchiati dal vento, le mani in tasca. Ed io di nuovo dissi:
 “Non c'è formaggio come il nostro” [...]

“Non c’è formaggio come il nostro” dissi per la terza volta.
 Allora uno di questi siciliani, *il più piccolo e soave, e insieme il più scuro in faccia e il più bruciato dal vento*, mi chiese:
 “Ma siete siciliano, voi?”. (pp. 576-77) [my emphases]

The little Sicilian’s wife, however, remains quiet and does not say a single word, not even to refuse the invitation of her husband to eat an orange. The other passengers likewise do not speak: ‘tirò fuori un’arancia, e disperatamente l’offrì, ancora chino sulle gambe piegate, alla moglie e, dopo il rifiuto senza parole di lei, disperatamente fu avvilito con l’arancia in mano,’ (p. 580). Thus we can make a connection between silence and reticence, on one hand, and despair, on the other.

A different dynamic of implicitness, silence, and reticence takes place in chapter five, set on the train to Catania. Here, Silvestro first witnesses the conversation between Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi, the two symbols of fascist bourgeoisie and conformism, and then he is himself involved in a conversation with the Gran Lombardo and a few other passengers. The two episodes show two different types of shared implicitness but, while the first one is observed from a distance by Silvestro and is described with irony by the protagonist narrator (the same irony that will appear later in the comments of the Gran Lombardo and that will be shared by Silvestro too), the second episode demonstrates an implicitness that comes from the sharing not only of class values, but, most importantly, of an awareness of the need to refer to *altri doveri* and of a broader experienced human condition, just as it happens in front of the *monumento alla patria* when all the bystanders share the *parola suggellata* (see above IV.2.c).

Let us first analyse the conversation between Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi:

Si guardarono negli occhi, si sorrisero, io lo vidi dalla faccia dell’uno e dalla schiena dell’altro e così continuarono a parlare, Coi Baffi e Senza Baffi, di quello che intendevano per delinquenza politica. Pareva intendessero la mancanza di rispetto, di considerazione, dissero, e accusarono, senza risentimento, l’umanità intera, dissero che l’umanità era nata per delinquere.

“Qualunque classe... qualunque ceto...” disse Coi Baffi. (pp. 583-84)

E Senza Baffi: “Siano ignoranti... Siano istruiti...”.

E Coi Baffi: “Siano ricchi... Siano poveri...”.

Senza Baffi: “Nessuna differenza”.

Coi Baffi: “Bottegai”.

Senza Baffi: “Il mio pizzicagnolo, a Lodi...”.

Coi Baffi: “E a Bologna, un avvocato...”.

Di nuovo si guardarono negli occhi, di nuovo si sorrisero, di nuovo io vidi questo dalla faccia dell'uno e dalla schiena dell'altro, e li udii nel fragore della corsa tra gli aranci e il mare raccontarsi di quel pizzicagnolo a Lodi e di quell'avvocato a Bologna. (p. 584)

Here we can see at work, again, the technique of repetition and refraction analysed above. Details are not needed and, as if this conversation was just a copy of many others, we are not told the specific stories of the lawyer and of the grocer. Vittorini seems here more concerned, through the mirroring of each other's words (so perceptible, even from the reflection of the words on each other's face or back), in the responsive, repetitive pattern of the conversation and in showing us the innuendos the two passengers share. In this sense, the use of ellipses – representing visually on the page that which is *not said* – is quite meaningful (‘Il mio pizzicagnolo, a Lodi...’; ‘E a Bologna, un avvocato...’) and Vittorini uses them in many other passages:

“Vedi” disse Coi Baffi “non hanno rispetto.”

“Non hanno considerazione” disse Senza Baffi.

E Coi Baffi: “A Lodi, il mio barbiere...”

E Senza Baffi: “Il mio padrone di casa, a Bologna...”.

E si raccontarono di quel barbiere a Lodi, di quel padrone di casa a Bologna [...]. (p. 584)

As readers – unlike in the passage of *la parola suggellata* – we are excluded from the conversation by this reticence, just as we are excluded from the values that the two men share. However, just as Coi Baffi and Senza Baffi understand each other in their continuous innuendos, the narrator calls us to share his disappointment and to infer *who* the two men are and what they stand for. Moreover, the logic of implicitness created by their elliptical dialogue is echoed also by the reticence that surrounds their job as policemen (‘Senza Baffi disse che sua madre non diceva quello che lui era, aveva vergogna di dirlo, e diceva che era impiegato al Catasto’, pp. 584-85).

Thus, just like Silvestro – who in many passages seems to be akin to the reader – we cannot continue to witness the conversation because someone else has closed the compartment’s door and is now trying to include Silvestro, and us along with him, in a new shared understanding. It is the Gran Lombardo:

“Non sentivate la puzza?” disse l’uomo a me di faccia [...]
 “La puzza? Che puzza?” io chiesi.
 “Come? Non la sentivate?” disse lui.
 “Non so” io risposi “non capisco di che puzza parlate.”
 “Oh!” egli disse. “Non capisce di che puzza parlo.” E si voltò verso gli altri nello scompartimento. [...]
 E il catanese disse: “Il signore parla della puzza di quei due...”
 “Quei due?” io dissi “Quei due al finestrino? Facevano puzza? Che puzza?” [...]
 Capii allora che cosa la puzza fosse e risi.
 “Ah, la puzza!” dissi “La puzza!”
 Tutti si fu allegri e soddisfatti, rappacificati, ma nel corridoio quei due tornavano dov’erano stati bambini, al loro paese. (pp. 586-88)

In these episodes ellipses and reticence are employed in a particularly meaningful and visible way. However, the presence of implicitness and silence alongside the conversations represents a thread that can be found in many other parts of the text, also where they do not play such a central role. This opposition of said and unsaid also works as a kind of *leitmotif* throughout the conversation between Silvestro and Concezione.

Per due o tre minuti *restammo in silenzio* mangiando l’aringa. (p. 607) [my emphasis]

Tornammo a tavola *e come la guardavo senza parlare* lei mi disse: “Ma che mi guardi?” (p. 610) [my emphasis]

Differently from the one with the Gran Lombardo, their conversation is not based here on the implicit sharing of values; instead, the dynamic that prevails is one of repetition and mirroring. Silvestro’s compelling questions are indeed paraphrased continuously in Concezione’s answers, so that the amount of information brought along by the answers is relatively little, even while the repetition of questions, answers, and their echoing in turn in Silvestro’s and Concezione’s discourses, cooperate in

creating a rhythmical pattern that has a significant role in generating the overall meaning of the novel:

“Si mangiavano *chioccioline*.”

“*Chioccioline?*” dissi io.

“Sì, e *cicoria selvatica*” disse mia madre.

[...]E io: “E mangiavamo *chioccioline* per venti giorni?”.

E mia madre: “*Chioccioline e cicoria selvatica*”. (pp. 606-07) [my emphases]

The final result of this rhythmical pattern is that, in emphasising the formulaic and implicit character of the conversations, it attaches a surplus of meaning to the overall meaning of the novel by means of its ambiguous nature:

La musica crea quella sovrasignificazione al di sopra della vicenda e del personaggio singolo che è uno degli interessi fondamentali di Vittorini. Ci si trova quindi, rispetto all’ottica del romanzo naturalista e realista quale appariva allo scrittore, di fronte a un’operazione antimimetica, di ricerca della dimensione universale, cui la musica, linguaggio “ambiguo” per eccellenza, partecipa con funzioni basilari, diventa elemento strutturale e strutturante tutte le altre componenti dell’opera.⁵²

At the end of the novel, when the journey has run out of all its (re)collective power, the protagonist, Silvestro finds himself again in despair: ‘andai per le strade di quella Sicilia non più viaggio, ferma, e fumavo e piangevo.’ (p. 704). Now, as he wanders through the Sicilian roads, he is followed by creatures and people who have lost their human appearance and are now ghosts or spirits who ask him incessantly why is he crying. He cannot, however, give them any answers:

⁵² Girardi, pp. 46-47. The pursuit of musicality is connected to the attempt to solve the problems related to the genre of the novel and to realism. Vittorini’s aim was to provide poetic language with what more usually belongs to the genre of melodrama, that is to say *musicality*, or that feature that can ‘portarci a vedere una realtà al di sopra dei nostri dati di confronto [...]’. Portarci ad afferrare il senso di una realtà maggiore’ (Vittorini, ‘Prefazione alla I edizione del *Garofano rosso*’, *Opere narrative*, p. 434).

“Ah! Ah! Egli piange! Perché piange?” urlarono i corvi tra loro, venendomi dietro.

Io continuai il mio cammino senza rispondere, ed ecco mi venne dietro anche una vecchia nera. “Perché piangete” domandò.

Nulla io risposi, e andai oltre [...].

Mi vedevano e mi chiedevano: “Perché piangete”. O chiedevano a quelli che già mi seguivano: “Perché piange?”. [...]

Ma io non avevo nessuna risposta da dar loro. (p. 704).

It is the final time, in dialogue, that the tension between said and unsaid, as well as indeterminacy and openness operate. If, on the one hand, this initially creates a distancing effect, of something that cannot be disclosed, on the other hand, it encourages the reader to provide and attribute meaning by themselves. This impossibility to provide an answer to the characters (‘Ma io non avevo nessuna risposta da dar loro’) is indeed different to the silence of the *non speranza* of the start of the novel. Here, the narrator is simply negating the possibility that an answer can be provided *within* the premises of the novel and is, again, inviting the reader to continue the conversation *outside* of it.

4. Building vagueness

Alongside the structural openness of the novel triggered by the dialogic mode I have just analysed, there are some other devices that contribute to creating that “vagueness” which readers of all times experience when reading this work. In this section, I will give an account of the functioning of the temporal and memorial devices operating at the structural level in *Conversazione*; in particular, I will focus on how they contribute to Vittorini’s outlook of a deeper reality, and to the deceptive simplicity and linearity of the novel.

a. La quarta dimensione

The first element that we can situate in relation with the vague atmosphere of the book is the temporal characterisation of the story’s unfolding; indeed, critics have often described this as a situation of timelessness. In

this respect, Toscani refers to an atemporality⁵³ that would be typically “vittoriniana” and functional to the achievement of the atmosphere of what Vittorini called *la quarta dimensione*, i.e. an almost metaphysical and parallel dimension in which Silvestro finds himself, and that is triggered by the Sicilian environment and the recollection of memories of his childhood:

“Ma guarda, sono da mia madre” pensai di nuovo, e lo trovo improvviso, esserci, come improvviso ci si ritrova in un punto della memoria, e altrettanto favoloso, e credevo di essere entrato a viaggiare in una quarta dimensione. Pareva che non ci fosse stato nulla, o solo un sogno, un intermezzo d’animo, tra l’essere a Siracusa e l’essere là [...].

Salii, nel sole, guardai ancora una volta l’indirizzo sulla cartolina, e fui da mia madre, riconobbi la soglia e non mi era indifferente esserci, era il più pieno del viaggio nella quarta dimensione. (pp. 599-600)

In this passage, we can also note some interesting stylistic phenomena. Silvestro perceives his journey as *improvviso* and *favoloso*. If the latter adjective is meaningful, casting a certain dreamlike or fantastical shadow on the novel, the choice of *improvviso* could be seen as more related to the temporal set of the journey and its recollection. The same adjective is repeated after a few words, ‘come improvviso ci si ritrova in un punto della memoria’, but, here, we cannot decide if it must be intended as an apposition to *ci si ritrova* or as *improvvisamente*. What matters is that the result is confusion on the syntactical level that shows us how an apparently innocent word decision can contribute to creating an atmosphere of suspension and unreality. On this note, Toscani describes the novel’s atmosphere as a purely allusive one in which ‘la dizione delle cose quali sono’ is always associated with a secret thought that refers to something else (the historical context, the unconscious, a prophetic tension, etc.). This allusive atmosphere is reflected at the stylistic level and, mainly, at the syntactical one where we find: ‘un’organizzazione delle parole del

⁵³ Genette called ‘achrony’ an indeterminate chronological deviation in the narrative. See Gerard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972).

discorso secondo combinazioni e accostamenti funzionali al contenuto' and depending on '[un] ordine particolare [...] che spesso giunge alle soglie dell'irrelato, dell'illogico, dell'indeterminato'.⁵⁴ That is exactly what happens in the example we have just provided; as a result, we cannot help but wonder which is the *real* meaning of that *improvviso*.

A question related to the temporal one is the function of memory (as can also be observed in the passage quoted above: 'come improvviso ci si ritrova in un punto della memoria'), crucial in the organisation of the recollection of sense in Silvestro's journey and in his *conversations*. Usher maintains that the use of the memorial device in the novel is quite conventional, but it is nevertheless interesting to see how memory is set in an 'environment of simultaneity' that is created by means of a 'fascinating series of stratagems designed to foster this simultaneity'.⁵⁵ Among these we can list, for example: an overall lack of action, the rarefaction of temporal references, and the suppression of consequential links between the different sequences. Paradoxically, this simultaneity is actually based on a time outline that is as linear and discernible in the narrative as it is vague and illogical in the meaning (see below IV.4.c). This phenomenon occurs not without consequences for the experience of reading that sees the reader himself actually caught in the *quarta dimensione* of the text. Here, a 'complex interplay' takes place among the different temporal stratagems that 'affect[s] not only our assumptions about time but also our general perceptions about the book's meaning'.⁵⁶ This interplay has a puzzling effect that is boosted by the apparent simplicity of the temporal outline since, as Spinazzola has noted, Vittorini provides us with 'un sistema di coordinate spaziotemporali che appaiono rispettare i canoni della verosimiglianza, eppure li oltrepassano in nome di una percezione soggettiva degli ambienti e della durata delle vicende esperite da Silvestro'.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Toscani, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁵ Usher, p. 77.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁷ Spinazzola, 'Conversazione in Sicilia', p. 14.

The problem of vagueness does not concern only the temporal set of the novel. Falaschi offers an interesting reflection on the spatial⁵⁸ and visual dimensions of *Conversazione in Sicilia* in his comparison of the four different editions of the novel. Particularly interesting for us are the comments made by Falaschi on the 1950 edition,⁵⁹ and the 1953 edition.⁶⁰ While the 1953 reissue contains some pictures taken during photographic reportage in the places mentioned in *Conversazione* (selected by Vittorini, who took part in the journey to Sicily), the 1950 edition contains illustrations drawn by the artist Renato Guttuso. In Falaschi's opinion, because the strength of this novel lies in its vagueness and ungraspability, the latter is the least successful edition because: 'il disegno di Guttuso si rivela banale e molto più realistico (neorealistico) della fotografia. Manca il gioco delle sfumature di grigio, il contrasto ombra-luce e nero-bianco; l'immagine viene grezzamente semplificata'.⁶¹ On my reading, Falaschi suggests that what is eliminated from the simple reading of the text – and also from its reading with the black and white pictures of the *real* Sicily – is a certain indeterminacy that is a very “visible” feature and that should not be lost. Falaschi also brings to our attention how the whole novel is chromatically undefined: '*Conversazione* è in gran parte un libro in bianco e nero'⁶² in which 'la comparsa dei colori è rara, e riguarda oggetti che hanno una posizione centrale sulla scena'.⁶³ The same can be said for the characters who appear as 'silhouettes'. Contours appear linear, nevertheless they are scarce and lack detail, so that they end up being paradoxically defined and undefined at the same time, just like the temporal outline. And it is not a coincidence that, as Falaschi points out,

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the role of indeterminacy in the spatial development of novels, see below chapter V on Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore* in which I will analyse and define descriptions as the textual *loci* par excellence of literary indeterminacy.

⁵⁹ Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, illustrated by Renato Guttuso (Milan: Rizzoli, 1950).

⁶⁰ Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, illustrated by Luciano Crocenzi (Milan: Bompiani, 1953).

⁶¹ Giovanni Falaschi, 'Introduzione', in Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p. 12.

⁶² Falaschi, p. 19.

⁶³ Falaschi, p. 21.

one of the first questions the critics had to cope with in analysing this novel was ‘se parlasse della Sicilia o no’.⁶⁴

b. The twice real

Dealing with issues of time and space returns us once again to the problem of realism. It is not surprising – especially if we consider the historical moment in which *Conversazione* was released in book form, and was discussed – that critics have, at every turn, debated whether this novel is realistic in its intentions (and also, if it is successful in its being realistic or not). Regarding questions of *realism* in *Conversazione*, the answer is not straightforward; rather, the novel seems to have a more complex, double nature. Likewise, the stronger realism of some parts have no mimetic intention and, conversely, as we are going to see shortly, they actually contribute to triggering the atmosphere of vagueness we have been dealing with so far.

It is not by coincidence, that some critics have noticed how the most realistic passages – such as the part in which Concezione wants Silvestro to be present while she gives injections to good-looking and prosperous ladies – are not the most inspired and actually, as Pautasso suggests, they coincide with a sort of ‘abbassamento di tensione’.⁶⁵ It is interesting to reflect on how, in fact, in the development of the novel, there is a paradoxical thread where the attempt to hold a more solid grasp on reality coincides with an increase of vagueness and with an intensely metaphysical or dreamlike atmosphere – that of the *quarta dimensione*, and that of memory, in which reality actually seems to gain more meaning, thus becoming *twice real*. The novel explicitly defines this simultaneously real and dreamlike dimension in these terms, as we can observe in the following passage:

⁶⁴ Falaschi, p. 31. On the relationship between words and images and for other reflections on the two illustrated editions of *Conversazione in Sicilia*, see also Giuseppe Lupo, *Vittorini Politecnico* (Milan: Franco Angeli Edizioni, 2011).

⁶⁵ Pautasso, p. 116.

Si alzò con l'aringa in mano, tenendola verso la coda, ed esaminandola, da una parte, dall'altra; e io vidi, nell'odore dell'aringa, la sua faccia senza nulla di meno di quando era stata una faccia giovane, come ora io ricordavo che era stata, e con l'età che faceva *un di più* su di essa. Era questo, mia madre; il ricordo di quella che era stata quindici anni prima, venti anni prima [...]; il ricordo, e l'età di tutta la lontananza, *l'in più d'ora*, insomma *due volte reale*. [...] [E] anche l'aringa era questo, il ricordo e *l'in più di ora*, e questo era ogni cosa, il ricordo e *l'in più di ora*, il sole, il freddo, il braciere di rame in mezzo alla cucina, e l'acquisito nella mia coscienza di quel punto del mondo dove mi trovavo; ogni cosa era per questo, *reale due volte*; e forse era per questo che non mi era indifferente sentirmi là, viaggiare, per questo che era *due volte vero*, anche il viaggio da Messina in giù, e le arance sul battello-traghetto, e il Gran Lombardo in treno, e Coi Baffi e Senza Baffi, e la verde malaria, e Siracusa, la Sicilia stessa insomma, *tutto reale due volte*, e in viaggio, *quarta dimensione*. (pp. 603-04) [my emphases]

In this passage, the atmosphere of time-suspension and dream is rendered by the memorial device which merges different time levels, but also by the way in which synaesthesia ('vidi, nell'odore dell'aringa, la sua faccia') mingles sensorial perceptions. Thus, the still image of the mother holding a herring triggers a kind of summary of the whole journey of Silvestro until that moment. This journey is situated in the fourth dimension: namely, a dimension in which a deeper contact with reality is possible. The suspended character of this dimension is created also by the repetition of the phrases 'due volte reale' and 'l'in più di ora', which belongs to the wider anaphorical trend of the novel.

Significantly, and retaining our focus on the novel's relationship with realism, this *twice real* perception has very little to do with realism, mimesis, and referentiality. If we follow the instructions in the author's note, Silvestro's recollected Sicily and his journey to Sicily cannot refer to the actual Sicily, but, rather, such imaginings need to be connected to a universal space. This echoes the demand of the novel as a message that needs to find an interlocutor. We can see Silvestro deny the narrative's reality and, as such inexplicitly, make it universal and available to all, in the passage below:

Ad evitare equivoci o fraintendimenti avverto che, come il protagonista di questa *Conversazione* non è autobiografico, così la

Sicilia che lo inquadra e accompagna è solo per avventura Sicilia; solo perché il nome Sicilia mi suona meglio del nome Persia o Venezuela. Del resto immagino che tutti i manoscritti vengano trovati in una bottiglia. (p. 710)

Whilst reality itself is called into question at the very beginning of the novel, the inertial situation of the protagonist together with the atmosphere of stillness mixed with fury instil doubt that Silvestro has ever had a real existence:

Ero quieto; ero come se non avessi mai avuto un giorno di vita, né mai saputo che cosa significa esser felici, [...] come se mai in tutti i miei anni di esistenza avessi mangiato pane, bevuto vino, o bevuto caffè, mai stato a letto con una ragazza, mai avuto figli, mai preso a pugni qualcuno, o non credessi tutto questo possibile, come se mai avessi avuto un'infanzia in Sicilia, tra i fichidindia e lo zolfo, nelle montagne (pp. 571-72)

The journey that follows cannot but sound like a quest for a confirmation and verification of this previous existence. But, instead, the protagonist finds himself travelling into the fourth dimension.

This is not the only passage in which the question of reality and referentiality come along with a geographical element. In the same way, in fact, a feeling of identity and belonging is brought by the letter that Silvestro receives from his father; here, the recognition or re-appropriation of identity is triggered by the evocation of geographical places: 'Riconobbi lui e ch'ero stato bambino, e pensai Sicilia, montagne in essa' (p. 573). This re-appropriation is, nevertheless, illusory and temporary:

Ma la memoria non si aprì in me che per questo solo [...] e ritornò otturata, e io fui quieto nella mia non speranza come se mai avessi avuto quindici anni di infanzia, e di Sicilia, fichidindia, zolfo, Macbeth, nelle montagne. (p. 573)

Not even the *real* journey to those places will help to restore either the places or Silvestro himself.

Here, we can also highlight the contrastive juxtaposition between abstractness and inertia, one the one hand, and such referential items on the other. It is the sight of both the newspapers announcing ‘new massacres’ and of a tourist advertisement for Sicily that induces in Silvestro a turning point: ‘Mi ritrovai allora un momento come davanti a due strade, l’una rivolta a rincasare, nell’astrazione di quelle folle massaccate, e sempre nella quiete, nella non speranza, l’altra rivolta alla Sicilia, alle montagne’. Despite this juxtaposition though – representing the illusory character of the choice – the unavoidable despair is once again restated: ‘Mi era lo stesso tuttavia prendere l’una o l’altra, il genere umano era lo stesso perduto’ (p. 575).

Once Silvestro is in Sicily, however, every experience comes to gain a new meaning. Having left the abstractness and the hopeless calm behind, he experiences here *il doppiamente reale*. This is not simply *real*. It has rather gone through a process of, what we might term, “unrealification” to the extent that this double *realness* transforms it into something unreal, thus making it acquire a new meaning. This process of “unrealification” (that at the beginning is *improvviso* and abrupt, as well as temporary and reversible), ultimately eliminates every reference to reality as we know it. We can see this at work in the following passage from the end of the novel:

Era notte, sulla Sicilia e la calma terra: l’offeso mondo era coperto di oscurità, gli uomini avevano lumi accanto chiusi con loro nelle stanze, e i morti, tutti gli uccisi, si erano alzati a sedere nelle tombe, meditavano. Io pensai, e la grande notte fu in me notte su notte. Quei lumi in basso, in alto, e quel freddo nell’oscurità, quel ghiaccio di stella nel cielo, non erano una notte sola, erano infinite; io pensai alle notti di mio nonno, le notti di mio padre, e le notti di Noè, le notti dell’uomo [...]. (pp. 686-87)

This is why Pautasso invites us to refrain from continuously trying to refer all the rich symbolism of *Conversazione* to contextual reality. Vittorini was engaged in a search for “truth”, that can take place (and is successful) only within the literary premises: ‘la ricerca della verità, questa ininterrotta

tensione di Vittorini, può coincidere solo con la ricerca di una verità letteraria'; since 'i grandi contenuti [storici] [...] non hanno alcuna forza d'intervento' the writer can only achieve his goal 'operando principalmente sul linguaggio e sulle tecniche' in a way that results in 'un alone di sostanziale ambiguità',⁶⁶ which acquires a universal value. On this note, Guglielmi shows how the insertion of historical material in this utterly allusive pattern actually avoids every 'storicismo'. Vittorini reinvented the materials in a completely new formal system such that he obtained that 'i materiali antropologici che egli manipola potessero essere inseriti in un contesto contemporaneo e dunque storico senza che esso fosse dissolto o, al contrario, subisse una trasposizione mitologica o un trattamento ideologizzante'.⁶⁷ In this new formal system, Vittorini avoids both naturalism and a direct determination, and places under duress the idea of language as a determined abstraction. Indeed, realism represents only one of the many semantic levels of the novel, and not necessarily the most important one.⁶⁸

c. Linearity vs. difficulty

Alongside the specific open and dialogic structure of the novel, we ought to foreground at this point how vagueness operates at the narrative level. This is firstly connected to a paradoxical situation at a plot level, where we have, to borrow Spinazzola's words, a 'struttura narrativa impeccabilmente consequenziale', while, nonetheless, 'l'intreccio si allarga e articola svolgendosi su una pluralità di livelli'.⁶⁹ In spite of the linearity of the *quadri narrativi*, and the overall uniformity of the work, each part and almost all chapters are presented to the reader with very little consequential link, with the effect that the parts and chapters appear to be only juxtaposed, thereby indicating that they are to be experienced individually. The same can be said of the individual *conversazioni*. The

⁶⁶ Pautasso, pp. 102-03.

⁶⁷ Guido Guglielmi, 'Storia non è storicismo', *Il menabò*, 10 (1967), 97-104 (p. 97).

⁶⁸ Guido Guglielmi, 'La conversazione di Elio Vittorini', *Allegoria*, VII (1994), 9-29 (p. 18).

⁶⁹ Spinazzola, 'Conversazione in Sicilia', p. 33.

temporal outline of the novel (see above), moreover, contributes to complicating the narrative level since we have a

gioco alterno di riferimenti cronologici determinati e indeterminati' that 'vale a rendere ambiguo il rapporto fra il Silvestro che racconta e il Silvestro che viene raccontato [...]. Le due figure non possono non essere diverse: ma il testo tende a farle percepire come sovrapposte.⁷⁰

That is why Pautasso suggests a different interpretative approach: we should consider Vittorini's manipulation of the language as a 'ricerca di un ritmo in grado di sostenere una tensione lirica anche in una struttura narrativa'.⁷¹

As a consequence, more than one critic has described *Conversazione* as a deviation from usual narrative patterns, which develops structures that seem to go in a more lyrical and melodramatic direction.⁷² Though I agree that a narrative analysis of this novel is challenged by the presence of many devices that cannot be included in a traditional narrative survey, I nevertheless recommend that the Italian scholarship's description of the novel's 'antinarrative structures' be discarded.⁷³ What we ought rather to do – without forgetting the work's overall narrative structure – is to refer to it as a frame within which a lyric tension takes place and within which we can observe an insistent and 'intenzionale scarnificazione dell'azione e dei gesti'.⁷⁴ To this I would add that this "scarnificazione" involves all the characterisations, the descriptions and, hence, all that is *phenomenological* in the novel, and it is in this reduction or subtraction that indeterminacy unfolds. It is interesting furthermore to record here that more than one critic has made a comparison between *Conversazione*'s vagueness and some devices used

⁷⁰ Spinazzola, 'Conversazione in Sicilia', p. 9.

⁷¹ Pautasso, p. 110.

⁷² See, for example, Pintor, 'L'allegoria del sentimento', and Gianfranco Contini, *Altri esercizi (1942-1971)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972).

⁷³ As we will see in chapter V, this is also the case for Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*.

⁷⁴ Spender quoted in Pautasso, *Guida a Vittorini*, p. 130. Spender's quote is from 'Combinazione di microfono e microscopio', in *La fiera letteraria*, 29 ottobre 1950.

by Italian Hermeticism,⁷⁵ a poetic style that Vittorini himself had significantly defined as ‘poesia dell’eliminazione’.⁷⁶ This aspect becomes even more evident if we compare the first book edition of the novel (published by Parenti, in 1941) to the previous version, which appeared in the journal *Letteratura* (1939). Indeed, in the Parenti edition,

scompaiono [...] in funzione di una più serrata concentrazione narrativa e stilistica, sia incisi esternamente descrittivi [...], sia digressioni dal mero sapore esplicativo [...]. Vengono inoltre eliminate tutte quelle notazioni che pertengono al livello tematico più esterno della vicenda e che connotano l’io-narrante su un piano di stretta contingenza.⁷⁷

This poetics of subtraction and *scarnificazione* gave rise to another critical *topos*, greatly discussed amongst critics of *Conversazione*: its supposed linearity and simplicity. Some problems, however, arise when the overall difficulty of the work is considered, and these are mainly related to the highly allusive content of the novel. To recall the subtractive tendency we have just noted at the end of last section, we can observe with Bonsaver how the very incipit of the novel shows a clear clash between a ‘tecnica narrativa apparentemente lineare e d’immediata comunicatività’ and ‘una voluta sottrazione di punti di riferimento dal punto di vista semantico’⁷⁸ that, in my opinion, evinces how indeterminacy in this novel is produced in a dynamics between the semantic and linguistic-structural levels. More specifically, there is a semantic uncertainty that is produced at a stylistic and structural level, as is fittingly shown by Bonsaver. Analysing the first lines of the novel, he writes: ‘particolarmente indicativa è l’espressione “ragazza o moglie”, dove la congiunzione “o” introduce un voluto grado di’indeterminatezza che si rifiuta ad ogni tentativo di razionalizzazione del contesto testuale’.⁷⁹ (‘Vedevo manifesti di giornali squillanti e chinavo il capo; vedevo amici, per un’ora, due ore, e stavo con loro senza dire una

⁷⁵ Cfr. Toscani, p. 27 and Pampaloni quoted in Pautasso, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Cfr. Elio Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico*, pp 40-43.

⁷⁷ Raffaella Rodondi, ‘Note ai testi’, in Vittorini, *Le opere narrative*, I, 1165-1248 (p. 1202).

⁷⁸ Guido Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini: Letteratura in tensione* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2008), p. 122.

⁷⁹ Bonsaver, p. 123.

parola, chinavo il capo; e avevo una *ragazza o moglie* che mi aspettava ma neanche con lei dicevo una parola, anche con lei chinavo il capo'; p. 571, my emphasis).

By consequence, what happens at the stylistic level ends up blurring the supposedly linear development of the events because the novel's vagueness is pervasive and involves 'a tutti i livelli formali, la categoria della cosa e dell'avvenimento'.⁸⁰ A good example of this interweaving between the formal and the narrative level is the use of some "nominal devices". For instance, the omission of the article, that we can observe in the incipit passage quoted above ('manifesti di giornali'; 'muti amici', not to say that the abstract furies the narrator is experiencing are not explained and are mentioned always without either an article or the partitive article, 'in preda ad astratti furori'), *opens* the possibility of a richer semantic interpretation by putting nouns in a different dimension: 'l'indeterminazione fa parte della stessa dimensione assoluta, liberata da ogni rapporto contingente, introdotta dall'assenza dell'articolo. Privo di qualsiasi determinazione, il nome acquista aspetti semantici inusitati'.⁸¹ *Conversazione's* style is then deceptively simple. The single lexical and stylistic choices might not be striking or might not sound that unusual (like in the case of the omission of articles), and their repetition might contribute to this idea of simplicity. However, it is exactly by means of this dynamics of omission and repetition, that the language acquires a formulaic character and that the style is built up layer upon layer, thus signalling instead a complex allusive system.

The memorial device is, moreover, another element that jeopardises the supposed simplicity and linearity of the novel. As Diffley and Honess, in their analysis of the theme and function of childhood in this work have observed, memorial elements, as they shape the narrative development, emerge in a non-linear way that has some consequences on our reading experience:

⁸⁰ Girardi, p. 88.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

It follows that our experience of reading the novel will not be an experience of a logical recovery. [...] Rather, in Vittorini, we are presented with the apparently illogical and haphazard recovery of a small number of key elements, which, together or separately, evoke childhood.⁸²

This is well demonstrated by the passage in which the herring brings to Silvestro an image of his childhood, which is nevertheless neither vivid nor precise and that actually merges together different levels. Once again, it is through subtraction and rarefaction that this evocation is rendered through a general ‘avoidance of details’ and through the technique of repetition that, on the one hand, puts the object in a suspension in ‘time and (often) place’,⁸³ while, on the other, it triggers its symbolic dimension.

5. Allusiveness and decoding. Conclusion

All these elements of illusory simplicity and layered complexity cannot but converge in a difficulty at the interpretative level. Interpretative uncertainty was indeed noticed by some critics. For example, Falaschi considered the work a *romanzo a chiave* and thus available to a complete historical-bound deciphering. But even as he attempts to maintain this character of the novel, and to foreclose its reception, Falaschi records a particular difficulty in this process, due to the novel’s specific and unique multi-layered form. Despite himself, he notes, ‘il fatto che essa si muove davvero su piani diversi, non nel senso generale che attribuiamo a tutte le opere letterarie, ma in uno specifico e suo proprio, inerente alla poetica di Vittorini’.⁸⁴ Falaschi’s remarks indicate how supposition that we can reach a full and accurate deciphering of the work, leaves something unspecified and, indeed, it is this lacuna that actually coincides with the very moral impetus of the novel. Edoardo Esposito, quoting Pancrazi (1941), writes

⁸² Paul Diffley and Claire Honess, ‘Il cuore dell’infanzia, siciliano e di tutto il mondo: The Function of Childhood in the Novel of Elio Vittorini’, *Romance Studies*, 27 (1996), 31-48 (p. 35).

⁸³ Diffley and Honess, p. 36.

⁸⁴ Falaschi, p. 31.

Certo non si trattava di un simbolismo facile da penetrare per chi non ne avesse le chiavi, come diceva Pancrazi, sentimentali: “Qual è il senso ultimo di questo viaggio? Di quale ingiustizia soffrono, quale giustizia umana e sociale sperano questi uomini e fantasmi? Non sappiamo bene, tutto resta sincopato, vago: ma il lettore, mosso dentro, è tratto a integrare lui figure e parole”.⁸⁵

It is indeterminacy, once again, that triggers the reader’s intervention and the ultimate interpretation of the work. Thus, deciphering can keep its exegetical value and its validity, but it is not substantial or necessary:

Questo non perché tale interpretazione non sia possibile, ma perché non è necessaria, e perché finisce per dare del libro una falsa idea di un testo “a chiave”, pensato e costruito in tutti i suoi particolari in vista di una decodificazione.⁸⁶

The author himself discouraged an automatic decoding of the work, as we can read in a letter that Vittorini wrote to Joy Potter, in which he praised the scholar’s prudence in deciphering the novel’s symbolism yet invited caution with such a praxis, and in which he stressed the centrality of the linguistic level: ‘Mi sembra giusto che Lei usi cautela nel rilevare significati morali o metafisici nelle immagini allegoriche e nei simboli delle mie narrazioni: non pretendono di averne; sono forme metaforiche; mezzi per dare al linguaggio mobilità e varietà espressiva’.⁸⁷ Vittorini suggests that there is nothing that is said at a content level that can allow us to disregard what is left after a complete decoding – namely a strong sense of implicitness, a sense that something more meaningful has been meant without having been expressed.

‘Il simbolo di Vittorini [...] non è una chiave e non deve necessariamente aprire qualcosa; soprattutto non deve aprire solo quello che sembra, perché muove piuttosto dall’esigenza di affermare “qualcosa

⁸⁵ Edoardo Esposito, *Elio Vittorini, scrittura e utopia* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011), p. 59.

⁸⁶ Esposito, *Elio Vittorini, scrittura e utopia*, p. 63.

⁸⁷ Lettera del 31 marzo 1964, in *Lettere 1956-1965*, ed. by Edoardo Esposito (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), and cfr. Esposito, *Elio Vittorini, scrittura e utopia* p. 64.

in più” rispetto alle interpretazioni razionalmente proponibili’, Esposito adds.⁸⁸ There is no key, because far from being closed, the work is rather open in the pursuit of a reality that is *twice real*.

There is no doubt, at this point, that we should reject a word-by-word deciphering of the novel. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore a relevant issue that the symbolic pattern permeating the whole novel poses. Those critics who saw in it a possible deciphering have described it as a stratagem to avoid the attention of Fascist censorship. Even if this intention has been unquestionably pursued by Vittorini, critics like Giovanna Gronda and Giuseppe Lupo have insisted on how the 1953 edition came out with no intervention of the author, at a stylistic level. An intervention on the style of the novel could unfold its symbolic entanglement and could diminish the level of reticence of the work. If censorship was certainly an acceptable motivation for the first two editions, however it was no longer active in 1953 when both types of changes would have surely fitted into the post-war and post-Fascism literary trend. We must conclude then that Vittorini deliberately kept both entanglement and reticence as stylistic features of the novel.

Moreover, the 1953 edition contains the photographs by Crocenzi that, at least on my reading, rather than working as referential devices, paradoxically contribute to highlighting the vagueness of the novel in as much as, rather than giving a direct referentiality to the places and people depicted, they seem to aim at a universal referencing: ‘Così ho dato diversi tipi di madri siciliane in corrispondenza della madre-sintesi raffigurata nel testo, diversi tipi di bambini in corrispondenza del mito dell’infanzia, diversi tipi di uomini indomiti e irrequieti in corrispondenza del Gran Lombardo’, interestingly comments Vittorini on the photographs selected.⁸⁹ We must then accept the fact that ‘la minaccia della censura non basta da sola a spiegare la scelta espressiva vittoriana’.⁹⁰ For *it is* an expressive intention, more than a historical one, as Vittorini stated clearly

⁸⁸ Esposito, *Elio Vittorini, scrittura e utopia*, p. 65.

⁸⁹ Elio Vittorini, ‘La foto strizza l’occhio alla pagina’, *Cinema nuovo*, 33, 14 aprile 1954, pp. 200-02.

⁹⁰ Giovanna Gronda, *Per conoscere Vittorini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), p. 136.

in 1948 in the already-recalled ‘Prefazione’ to *Garofano Rosso*. Thus, we have to consider also those revisions made for the Parenti edition in 1941 in the pursuit of a compelling stylistic research that, as Girardi reviewed, were all in the direction of an insistent loosening of the spatial and temporal notations and of a ‘rarefazione di ogni parvenza del reale’⁹¹ that was, however, initiated well before and whose tendency can be tracked through all Vittorini’s narrative production.

This returns us to Esposito’s perspective, mentioned above. Rather than hiding, concealing and closing, the allusive device is used by Vittorini as what I would call a ‘transfiguration producer’, that in fact gives rise to a ‘processo di trasfigurazione per cui uomini cose e luoghi acquistano un “sovrappiù di realtà” senza nulla perdere della loro umana concretezza’.⁹² Once again we are facing the recognition of a sense of vagueness (here described as a ‘reality intensifier’). It looks, however, much more difficult to find explanations to how this is produced. At least, Gronda appears confident in maintaining that the result Vittorini reached with *Conversazione* is the ultimate one he had pursued all through the years of his apprenticeship. Still these results are hardly explained, the critic says, either by referring to Vittorini’s previous experiences (in Symbolism, Decadentism, Hermeticism, etc.) or by citing those rhetorical and stylistic techniques that scholarship on the author’s works has continued to highlight. As she admits: ‘Certo la scrittura di *Conversazione in Sicilia* è caratterizzata da usi grammaticali, linguistici e stilistici particolari di cui si avvede il lettore attento [...]. Pure questa strumentazione stilistica non esaurisce il fascino dell’opera’,⁹³ of which Gronda rather stresses a certain ‘spregiudicatezza stilistica’⁹⁴ and a dialogical character.

To conclude, conducting an analysis of the techniques and factors that contribute to creating the vagueness characteristic of the book, along with highlighting the conflict between linearity and difficulty which they generate, has helped us to accentuate the openness of *Conversazione*, and

⁹¹ Girardi, p. 100.

⁹² Gronda, p. 137.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 138.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

to emphasise the way in which this novel calls for a certain responsiveness: ‘*Conversazione in Sicilia* appare un libro semplice e nello stesso tempo complesso, portatore di un senso generale ben percepibile e tuttavia aperto alle possibilità interpretative più varie’.⁹⁵

On my reading of the novel, its vagueness and symbolism must be discussed on more than just a semantic level (i.e. what do the symbols stand for). Whatever interpretation we impose on the so-called allegorical aspect of the novel, that is not, in fact, the ultimate point. It is very clear to readers what the *astratti furori*, the journey in the fourth dimension, and the conversations are about: namely, an intense pain for the wronged world and doomed humanity. And this is clear from the very beginning. Further, indeterminacy and vagueness are not merely a way to elude censorship or to add a mythical or allegorical layer to the narration. Every detail, description, character, and event that belongs to the so-called real world, cannot be grasped as such because it has been involved in a total transfiguration. Abstractness and ungraspability are therefore the stylistic and symbolic consequences of the very *astratti furori* in which Silvestro finds himself at the beginning of the novel. We could say that those *astratti furore* invest with their abstractness the novel itself.

In the *reality of the novel* everything has been rendered vague and undetermined by the *astratti furori* and by the *quiete nella non speranza*, i.e. the hopeless situation in which the protagonist, the characters, and the reader, have happened to find themselves. Some events or episodes – like, for example the *giro delle iniezioni* – might suspend this general atmosphere, but the effect is only temporary. It is not by accident that, although a disruption has occurred, and although a journey happened in between, nothing is concluded and nothing has changed at the end. The journey in the fourth dimension is not a Proustian one, it is not recollection, and it does not help in retrieving something that was lost. It is rather a universal journey in pursuit of an interaction, of a conversation with someone else who can understand and provide meaning for the *parola suggellata*, for that ‘Ehm!’, that needs to be found at the same time *outside*

⁹⁵ Spinazzola, ‘*Conversazione in Sicilia*’, p. 3.

the premises of the novel (like a message in a bottle), but whose participation must be triggered *inside* them by literary communication. The openness and indeterminacy of *Conversazione* are not intended to produce a meaning which is hardly graspable. Rather, their purpose is to trigger the act of grasping a higher meaning by means of an interaction, of a dialogue.

V. *n+1*: indeterminacy by accumulation in Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*

1. Introduction

From its very first pages, it is clear to the reader that *La cognizione del dolore* has little, if not nothing, to do with vagueness, symbolism, or ellipsis. The novel opens with a description of the imaginary country of Maradagàl in the aftermath of a war with the adjoining state of Paragual in 1924. Violence still looms over Maradagàl and, in response, a group of war veterans decide to form a squad of vigilantes, the *Nistituo de Vigilancia para la Noche* to protect the rich from crime. The focus then moves to the protagonist, don Gonzalo, a neurotic young man who lives with his elderly mother, to whom he is bound by a difficult relationship, embittered by violent discussions about the management of the villa in which they live. This troubled relationship, based on mutual incomprehension and incomunicability, is central to the novel. In the last two chapters, the mother is found in grave conditions by the vigilantes, after an aggression takes place in the villa. The novel is left incomplete.

Although the novel is left suspended with its non-conclusion, however, at least at the beginning, the most striking feature of the book is its linguistic and structural “density”, its “amplifying” character, namely its *difficulty*. As I am going to argue in this chapter, it is exactly by means of density that this sense of difficulty eventually results in effects of indeterminacy and ungraspability. This case study will prove particularly interesting because, unlike in the cases that we have already discussed (Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, Landolfi's *La pietra lunare* and Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*) where omissions and reticence were major devices that contributed to indeterminacy, we can see here an example of indeterminacy produced not by subtraction but, rather, by addition.

Once again, the difficulty of reading the novel finds a counterpart in critics' difficulty in classifying this work. In view of the particular style of Gadda's prose together with the intervention of the textual strategies that we are going to analyse in the following sections, many critics have

suggested that *La cognizione* cannot be seen as a novel owing to its apparent anti-narrativity (see below, V.4). Instead, it is perceived as a series of more or less connected fragments of prose.¹ The aim of this chapter is therefore two-fold: first, I will give an account of how indeterminacy is produced in *La cognizione* by the presence of specific textual strategies and I will consider the consequences of such for the reader's interpretative task; second, I will focus on the fact that indeterminacy informs the sense that this book is "anti-narrative", before challenging such hypotheses insofar as the work maintains an unusual, but distinct narrative structure that is based precisely on its indeterminacy.

The ultimate effect of "difficultness", however, as Roscioni points out, is not the outcome of a purposeful challenge to the reader; in fact, it is the unavoidable consequence of a heuristic and gnoseological urge. As Roscioni suggests, 'non sono rare le pagine in cui la sovrapposizione di riferimenti, moltiplicati dall'ambiguità o polivalenza semantica del lessico, impone al lettore meno preparato un arduo compito di deciframento'.² Nevertheless,

nessuno scrittore è meno volontariamente oscuro di Gadda. [...] Si ha spesso la sensazione che Gadda tema di non essere capito o voglia giustificare l'offesa che le sue storie o la sua scrittura fanno alle convenzioni logiche e linguistiche del lettore.³

In Gadda's own philosophical reflections (*Meditazione milanese*), in his critical reflections (the *Cahier d'Études* for *Racconto italiano di un ignoto del novecento*, a real *narratological* diary as shown by Maria Antonietta

¹ Contini talks about 'poème en prose' (Gianfranco Contini, 'Introduzione alla Cognizione del dolore'. First published as the introduction to the first book edition of *La cognizione del dolore* (1963), enlarged version (Turin: Einaudi, 1970). Now in Gianfranco Contini, *Quarant'anni d'amicizia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 15-35 (p. 19). On the same page is Mengaldo, who argues that more than narrative, Gadda's operation consists of 'dilatare e giustapporre "poemetti in prosa"'. Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Fu un vero narratore?', in *Giudizi di valore*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), pp. 116-19 (p. 119).

² Gian Carlo Roscioni, *La disarmonia prestabilita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), p. 92.

³ Roscioni, p. 92.

Grignani and Flavia Ravazzoli),⁴ and more generally throughout all the author's theoretical production, there appears an abiding speculation about the problem of reception in relation to representation as a specific aspect of a more general gnoseological problem. The consequence of these speculations, as we are going to see, is rendered in the fictional practice by means of what I propose to call 'multiplicity devices'. By multiplicity devices, I mean textual strategies that are meant to convey the multifaceted and multi-layered substance of reality, as much as the difficulty for the interpreter to cope with its transposition into a fictional account, as well as its unavoidably ungraspable character. In Gadda's fictional works, and more specifically in *La cognizione* (which from its very title intimates its relationship to the gnoseological question),⁵ this results in one main effect: the text appears so *dense* that, at a first reading, it seems almost impenetrable. Far from engaging the readers in the hard task of its interpretation, it rather detaches and pushes them back; this density thus affects the reader's comprehension and, as a consequence, the construction of meaning too. It is exactly in the perspective of a heuristic and gnoseological urge that the difficulty of the text finds justification and resists being seen as purely auto-referential. As Stellardi confirms: 'Solo grazie a questa spinta [filosofica] le acrobazie stilistiche e linguistiche di Gadda superano il limite della tecnica'.⁶

The difficulty that any type of reader experiences at the beginning of the novel can be attributed to the highly visible and intense interactions

⁴Maria Antonietta Grignani and Flavia Ravazzoli, "Tragitti gaddiani", *Autografo*, 1 (1984), 15-33. Giuseppe Stellardi, however, invites caution in using the *Cahier* to interpret the narrative structure of Gadda's works, arguing the substantial failure of that planning process. See Giuseppe Stellardi, *Gadda. Miseria e grandezza della letteratura* (Turin: Casati, 2006).

⁵For a thorough analysis of this title, see Emilio Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', in *Letteratura italiana, Le opere*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa, IV.2 (1996), pp. 201-337. In particular, Manzotti accounts for the origin of the title and for both its explicit and implicit references: 'nel titolo di *cognizione del dolore*, una citazione alla lettera, come sembra verosimile, dallo Schopenhauer, ma consonante con stilemi di prosatori storico-moralisti, è contenuta sullo sfondo del luogo classico del rapporto diretto tra dolore e conoscenza una idea di *itinéraire*, di graduale, inelutabile incremento di conoscenza e di dolore; e con essa, quella di indagine, di tentativo di ricostruzione delle ragioni filosofiche e contingenti, "pratiche", di un destino singolo' (p. 208).

⁶Stellardi, p. 66.

of different devices at the linguistic and rhetorical level. It is not a coincidence that this has been the most studied aspect of *La cognizione*'s style, as Emilio Manzotti's famous introduction to this novel shows. Scholarship has remained preoccupied with, in particular, such techniques as Gadda's multilingualism and *pastiche*, alongside the *topoi* of Gadda's "barocco" and the poetics of deformation as well as their contextualisation in the panorama of the Italian novel.⁷ Both historical and literary references (especially regarding the theme of the war, the contamination of places like Brianza and Argentina, and the references to authors such as Manzoni, D'Annunzio, Carducci, Dante, and Leopardi), and autobiographical references (such as determined attention to Gadda's family situation, to his relationship with his mother, the villa at Longone, to his own experience in South America, and to psychoanalytical interpretations) – indeed, all that relates to, and is borne out in the repertoire system – recur throughout Gadda's works, and have been broadly studied by these critics. The same can be said, finally, for the philosophical aspect of *La cognizione* (but more generally of all Gadda's

⁷ See, among others, alongside with the already quoted works by Manzotti and Roscioni: Federico Bertoni, *La verità sospetta. Gadda e l'invenzione della realtà* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001); Walter Binni, 'Lo svolgimento della prosa di C.E. Gadda' then in *Poetica e poesia. Letture novecentesche*, ed. F. & L. Binni (Florence: Sansoni, 1999), pp. 99-109; Gianfranco Contini, "Introduzione" in Carlo Emilio Gadda, *La cognizione del dolore* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963), pp. 5-28, then in Contini, *Quarant'anni di amicizia*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 15-35; Robert S. Dombroski, *Introduzione allo studio di Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974) and *Creative Entanglements, Gadda and the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), then *Gadda e il barocco*, translated by A.R. Dicuonzo (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002); Raffaele Donnarumma, *Gadda. Romanzo e pastiche* (Palermo: Palumbo Editore, 2001); Guido Guglielmi, 'Lingua e metalinguaggio di Gadda', in *Rendiconti*, 2 (1963), 71-78, then in *La letteratura come sistema e come funzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), pp. 128-37; Guido Guglielmi 'Gadda e la tradizione del romanzo', in *Rendiconti*, 34 (1994), 3-18, then in *La prosa italiana del Novecento 2*, pp. 181-209. Guido Lucchini, *L'istinto della combinazione. Le origini del romanzo in Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1988). Luigi Matt, *Gadda. Storia linguistica italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2006); Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, 'Gadda', in *Storia della lingua italiana. Il Novecento*, ed. by Francesco Bruni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), pp. 148-54 and 317-22, and 'Alcuni problemi della prosa contemporanea', in *La tradizione del Novecento. Prima serie* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996) pp. 163-73; Ezio Raimondi, *Barocco moderno: Carlo Emilio Gadda e Roberto Longhi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003).

production, including his own philosophical reflections), and thus it is an essential starting point for an analysis of the novel.⁸

As a peculiar stylistic feature of his prose, the density of Gadda's writing was certainly not ignored; much has been said about the difficulty of this style, which Walter Binni famously described as characterised by 'i pericoli della pesantezza, della fatica dell'immagine che si raggiunge dentro la sua stessa ganga e insomma di un cibo che spesso fa groppo'.⁹ Nevertheless, some other reflections are needed to chart and understand the relationship between this stylistic difficulty and indeterminacy.

One of the first aspects we need to consider is that, as I have anticipated, *La cognizione's* indeterminacy and ungraspability are generated despite the fact – or better, *because of the fact* – that the reader is provided with an overwhelming amount of specifications and details. As I was suggesting above, Gadda's work is a prime example of how indeterminacy can be present at different textual levels and can be produced not only by subtraction but also by addition – in its showing us '[lo] stato caotico, disordinato e non ordinabile del mondo, che può essere percepito solo per difetto o per eccesso, e mai tramite compiuta adeguazione o perfetta riproduzione'.¹⁰ *La cognizione* therefore represents an essential passage in our survey of the manipulation of indeterminacy in the Italian novel.

In this chapter, I will proceed to highlight three relevant elements – each firmly connected to the others – in which I recognise the “centre of manipulation” of indeterminacy in *La cognizione*. The first phenomenon I will consider is *accumulation*. It represents both the origin and the final result of Gadda's own use of indeterminacy. I will argue that accumulation is indeed the very driving force of *La cognizione* and, in section two, I will analyse how it unfolds in a series of “multiplicity devices”. Regardless of

⁸ Cf. for examples, Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Il mondo come sistema di relazioni: il pasticciaccio gnoseologico dell'ingegnere Carlo Emilio Gadda' in *Il ménage a quattro. Scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2005), pp. 22-78; Federico Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*; Gianfranco Gabetta, 'Gadda e il caleidoscopio dell'euresi', in *aut aut*, 256 (1993), 15-46.

⁹ Walter Binni, 'Svolgimento della prosa di C. E. Gadda', p. 214.

¹⁰ Stellardi, p. 39

how different the textual strategies are that produce this density (e.g. the proliferation of adjectives, the use of noun phrases, the use of descriptions and digressions, the linguistic pastiche, or the presence of lists and catalogues), they can all be labelled under the category of *accumulation*. What they produce is a multi-layered text with which the reader has to cope. In section two, I will provide examples of how these different techniques are all used to create an accumulative effect that influences the overall meaning of the work.

Accumulation is at work also in the second aspect I will consider: namely, the use of *description*. In their relying on the accumulation of details in a specific way, descriptions must indeed be considered as the privileged *loci* of indeterminacy's production. We have already seen how characters' descriptions and their representations of space call indeterminacy into question in the three novels analysed so far. In *La cognizione* this needs to be highlighted as a particularly important aspect. Despite the doubts that some critics have raised about the possibility of calling this work *a novel*, and despite the attention given to the descriptive system of the work itself (for example by Manzotti),¹¹ I will argue that the relationship between the manipulation of indeterminacy in this text and the work's narrative unfolding needs to be emphasised. The supposed impossibility of classifying this work as a "novel" lies in the ambiguity between the descriptive parts and the "fully" narrative ones. In the last section of this chapter, I will therefore focus on the structure of the work and on the supposed lack of pure narration as another crucial issue that needs to be investigated from the point of view of indeterminacy. Descriptions are, indeed, the parts of a literary text that most blatantly show its *being literary*. It is in such textual places that the contrast between representation and reality in the determination of objects emerges. In *La cognizione*, descriptions are built and used in a unique way, and I aim to show how the power of indeterminacy is here fully exploited together with other accumulative techniques for the manipulation of indeterminacy. While the use of accumulative techniques has been noticed and studied at a

¹¹ Cf. Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore'.

linguistic and rhetorical level in *La cognizione*, their role in the development of narration has not been analysed yet. In the fourth section, I will finally suggest that rather than proceeding in an ordered structure, narration, too, is organised by accumulative addition. Rather than a consequential proceeding, there are in fact two parallel narrative poles that work as two expanding vortexes, akin to two tornados moving back and forth through the story, thus gathering and bringing along new elements. These two narrative poles work as two magnets that collect elements of the narration by an accumulative logic, and they coincide with the figure of Gonzalo and with that of his mother.

For section 2 – namely, the one in which I will investigate the use of accumulation as the “foremother” of multiplicity devices – I will borrow tools from traditional stylistic analysis. In the third and the fourth sections, meanwhile, I confront critics’ difficulty referring to this piece as fiction with traditional narratological tools. We will find that the usual temporal and consequential categories cannot, in fact, be used to analyse this work. As such, we will have to make use of a different theoretical perspective that is able to account for the different development of the novel, and that can reveal more thoroughly the relationship between the narrative structure and indeterminacy.

Approaching Gadda’s works represents having to confront ourselves with an immeasurable, always expanding, and overwhelming bibliography, and with a most distinguished community of scholars. Remaining aware of this and, hence, of the impossibility of here taking into account all that which has been said so far about the style of this author and this novel, I reserve focus for one specific aspect: how indeterminacy works in *La cognizione* and how indeterminacy contributes to its very peculiarity. I will therefore aim to “push” ‘l’analisi della pagina di Gadda ben al di là dell’interesse per i fuochi d’artificio linguistici e stilistici che ne caratterizzano la superficie’.¹² My original critical approach will nevertheless involve leaning on existing analyses of Gadda’s

¹² Stellardi, p. 33.

work, especially during my exploration of the stylistic level of *La Cognizione*.

The first way in which density is evident in *La cognizione* is in the way in which the text is so entangled by the insistent intertwining of linguistic and rhetorical techniques. So imbricated are such techniques that it appears impossible to unravel or disentangle the various strategies affecting indeterminacy from each other and analyse them individually. Before moving on to isolate the three most relevant aspects to our analysis (*accumulation, description and narration*), I would like therefore to offer here a sample passage in order to exemplify the way in which these three phenomena are each entangled, and how they contribute to the production of density. The following passage is a descriptive part that belongs to the first *tratto*. Here, the narrator, visually approaching Villa Giuseppina (in which the major events of the novel take place), describes a series of “ville” in Pastrufazio, a village in the Serruchón district, located in the imaginary South-American state of Maradagàl. The excerpt offered below is quite long; I have quoted it in full in order to give a sense of the accumulation effect generated. Indeed, focusing on a close reading will allow us to observe how the entanglement process works. The reading I will provide of this passage should work as an introduction, an anticipation, and a sample of the three phenomena with which I will deal over the course of this chapter. As such, I will continually refer back to this passage in order to steer my theoretical exposition. The passage appears as follows:

<p>Di ville, di ville!; di villette otto locali doppi servissi; di principesche ville locali quaranta ampio terrazzo sui laghi veduta panoramica del Serruchón – orto, frutteto, garage, portineria, tennis, acqua potabile, vasca pozzonero oltre settecento ettoltri: – esposte a mezzogiorno, o ponente, o levante, o levante-mezzogiorno, o mezzogiorno-ponente, protette d’olmi o d’antique ombre dei faggi avverso il tramontano e il pampero, ma non dai monsoni delle ipoteche, che spirano a tutt’andare anche sull’anfiteatro morenico del Serruchón e lungo le pioppaie del Prado; di ville! di villule!, di villoni ripieni, di villette isolate, di ville doppie, di case villerecce, di ville rustiche, di rustici delle ville, gli architetti pastrufaziani avevano ingioiellato, poco a poco un po’ tutti, i vaghissimi e placidi colli delle pendici preandine, che, manco a dirlo, “digradano</p>	<p>5</p> <p>10</p> <p>15</p>
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dolcemente”: alle miti bacinelle dei loro laghi. Quale per
 commissione d’un fabbricante di selle di motociclette
 arricchito, quale d’un bozzoliere fallito, e quale d’un
 qualche ridipinto conte o marchese sbiadito, che non
 erano riusciti né l’uno a farsi affusolare le dita, né l’altro, 20
 nonché ad arricchire, ma purtroppo nemmeno a fallire,
 tanto aveva potuto soccorrerli la sua nobiltà d’animo,
 nella terra dei bozzoli in alto mare e delle motociclette per
 aria. Della gran parte di quelle ville, quando venivan fuori
 più “civettuole” che mai dalle robinie, o dal ridondante 25
 fogliame del banzavóis come da un bananeto delle
 Canarie, si sarebbe proprio potuto affermare, in caso di
 bisogno, e ad essere uno scrittore in gamba, che
 “occhieggiavano di tra il verzicare dei colli”. Noi ci
 contenteremo, dato che le verze non sono il nostro forte, 30
 di segnalare come qualmente taluno de’ più in vista fra
 quei politecnali prodotti, col tetto tutto gronde, e le gronde
 tutte punte, a triangolacci settentrionali e glaciali,
 inalberasse pretese di chalet svizzero, pur seguitando a
 cuocere nella vastità del ferragosto americano: ma il legno 35
 dell’Oberland era però soltanto dipinto (sulla scialbatura
 serruchonese) e un po’ troppo stinto, anche, dalle
 dacquate e dai monsoni. Altre villule, dov’è lo spigoluccio
 più in fuori, si drizzavano su, belle belle, in una torricella
 pseudosenese o pastrufazianamente normanna, con una 40
 lunga e nera stanga in coppa, per il parafulmine e la
 bandiera. Altre ancora si insignivano di cupolette e
 pinnacoli vari, di tipo russo o quasi, un po’ come dei
 rapanelli o cipolle capovolti, a copertura embricata e bene
 spesso policroma, e cioè squamme d’un carnevalesco 45
 rettile, metà gialle e metà celesti. Cosicché tenevano della
 pagoda e della filanda, ed erano anche una via di mezzo
 fra l’Alhambra e il Kremlin. (pp. 22-23)¹³

The first and most evident aspect that we can observe in this passage is its
 literally breathtaking syntactical structure. The first period starts with an
 indirect object (‘Di ville!’) while the subject and the verb of the clause
 (‘gli architetti pastrufaziani avevano ingioiellato’) come only after twelve
 lines (line 13). The same technique is used in the third period of the
 passage (line 20), while the second period lacks a main verb and depends

¹³ All the quotations from the novel are from Carlo Emilio Gadda, *La cognizione del dolore* (Milan: Garzanti, 1994).

on the previous period, leaning completely on the long relative clause (line 19).

The use of the relative clause – sometimes without a main verb – is a recurring strategy in *La cognizione*, and it is used to potentially expand the sentence infinitely ('che spirano a tutt'andare anche sull'anfiteatro morenico del Serruchón e lungo le pioppaie del Prado', line 10; 'che non erano riusciti né l'uno a farsi affusolare le dita, né l'altro, nonché ad arricchire', lines 20-21). The same expansion effect is obtained throughout this passage by means of lists, parentheses and asides ('orto, frutteto, garage, portineria, tennis, acqua potabile, vasca pozzonero oltre settecento ettoltri', line 5; 'quando venivan fuori più "civettuole" che mai dalle robinie, o dal ridondante fogliame del banzavóis come da un bananeto delle Canarie', line 27). These strategies are often combined together in the same clause. We can see this at work in the middle of the passage where the basic, yet complex, main clause 'Noi ci contenteremo [...] di segnalare come qualmente taluno de' più in vista fra quei politecnali prodotti [...] inalberasse pretese di chalet svizzero' (lines 29-34) is expanded by two asides ('dato che le verze non sono il nostro forte', line 30, and 'col tetto tutto gronde, e le gronde tutte punte, a triangolacci, settentrionali e glaciali', line 33) and completed by a concessive clause ('pur seguitando a cuocere nella vastità del ferragosto americano', line 35).

The first eight lines themselves represent the object of the clause that does not consist only 'di ville' but of a phenomenology of villas, presented in a complex series of variants each adding further specifications and adjectives. Further, this is not only a phenomenology of variants and types of villas, but also a phenomenology of the very same word 'ville': 'Di ville, di ville!; di villette'; 'di principesche ville' (line 1); and 'di ville, di villule!, di villoni ripieni, di villette isolate, di ville doppie, di case villerecce, di ville rustiche, di rustici delle ville' (lines 11-12). This double and entangled phenomenology cannot but show how reality and language – the manifold possibilities of reality and the infinite possibilities of language, as much as their *conflicting* relationship – are so strongly connected in this novel. Even if its occurrences are concentrated in the first part of the passage, the word 'ville' keeps on returning (14 times,

considering the different variations), as if it is a refrain. In a way, this word represents a point of reference for the reader who, even if overwhelmed by the difficulty of the passage, is also continuously reminded of its topic and is instructed of the importance of the chronotope of the villa for the novel's development.

The range of phenomenological possibilities of villas is also rendered by the use of disjunctions: 'esposte a mezzogiorno, o ponente, o levante, o levante-mezzogiorno, o mezzogiorno-ponente, protette d'olmi o d'antique ombre dei faggi avverso il tramontano e il pampero' (lines 5-8). In this "chain" of possibilities regarding the position of the villas, it is also interesting to notice how the different variants are triggered by the previous one (mezzogiorno > ponente > levante > levante-mezzogiorno > mezzogiorno-ponente; protette d'olmi > o faggi). They follow a principle of contiguity that we are going to analyse later in relation to accumulation (see below V.2). The highlighting of manifold possibilities works also for those possibilities that are negated but that are nevertheless present: for example, as it happens for the negative disjunction ('né l'uno a farsi affusolare le dita, né l'altro, nonché ad arricchire, ma purtroppo nemmeno a fallire', lines 20-21) and the adversative clause ('protette d'olmi o d'antique ombre dei faggi avverso il tramontano e il pampero, ma non dai monsoni delle ipoteche', lines 7-9).

In the last part of the passage we can also notice how, sometimes, specifications are paradoxically more akin to rough *approximations*. This technique once again expands the clause and the plethora of images it transmits (for example, 'di tipo russo *o quasi, un po'* come dei rapanelli o cipolle capovolti', line 32; 'ed erano anche *una via di mezzo* fra l'Alhambra e il Kremlin', line 35, my emphases).

Combined together, the result is a passage in which syntax is highly fragmented and complex. Pay attention, for example, to how, in the very last sentence of the passage, consequentiality is significantly interrupted by a full stop ('Altre ancora si insignivano di cupolette e pinnacoli vari, di tipo russo o quasi, un po' come dei rapanelli o cipolle capovolti, a copertura embricata e bene spesso policroma, e cioè squamme d'un carnevalesco rettile, metà gialle e metà celesti. Coticché tenevano della

pagoda e della filanda', lines 43-47). We also have a predominance of subordinate clauses over main ones. Finally, owing to the sheer amount of adjectives, attributions and specifications, we have a general predominance of items and things over actions and situations.

All the aspects I have attempted to highlight here are examples of the intertwined presence of various techniques in *La cognizione*'s prose. As I will demonstrate in the next sections, these strategies can each be referred to indeterminacy and to its manifestations in the novel in the sphere of accumulation, description, and narration.

2. Accumulation and density as textual principles

Indeterminacy in a passage as dense and detailed as the one we have just analysed lies in the fact that the ultimate result or product of our act of reading is a most ungraspable image. We cannot see where the blanks lie, yet we cannot visualise a “determined” picture either. In passages such as this, we face a similar situation to that which is known as ‘verbal overshadowing’. By this, I mean that we encounter a kind of negative effect of verbalisation wherein the act of putting something into language by the subject (the verbalised description) thwarts their ability to recognise or retrieve a determined visual image or memory. (This is what happens, for example, to eyewitnesses during investigations, if they make written notes or provide verbal descriptions). Overdetermination results in indeterminacy. This seems to have an exponential effect in a passage like the one of the *ville*, where the spots of indeterminacy are generated, in spite of the text’s density, by the use, for example, of approximations (‘quasi’, ‘un po’ come’, ‘una via di mezzo’) and disjunctions, which cast uncertainty. The spots of indeterminacy themselves are thus involved in the phenomenon of accumulation, just like if multiplication happened not only in positive terms but negative ones too – i.e. if the blanks were multiplied. The result is a kind of directly proportional relationship between accumulation and gaps. Stellardi highlights the importance of the relationship between text’s density and what is left unsaid in Gadda’s prose:

L'essenza vera della grande ed eloquente scrittura praticata da Gadda sta nel non dire, o meglio nel lasciare o creare un profondo spazio di non detto fra la pieghe delle parole: nell'articolare magistralmente il detto e non detto. [...] L'"effetto di non-detto" non si accompagna necessariamente a un uso economico della lingua, ma anzi può benissimo andare a braccetto con una vera (e splendida) tumefazione barocca della lingua.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that it is with an image that reminds us of Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, that of the 'abisso', that Stellardi describes the blanks of the literary discourse in Gadda's prose:

non si tratterebbe di intensificare la parola facendo il vuoto attorno ad essa (dunque di usare il non detto per amplificare il detto), ma invece di configurare uno spazio di discorso in cui il detto, per quanto invadente, compatto e in apparenza impermeabile, tradisca la presenza di un vasto abisso di non detto, proprio lì sotto i nostri piedi.¹⁵

The image of the abyss appears in Calvino's novel in the chapter titled, "Senza temere il vento". Here, literary communication, and, I suggest, literary indeterminacy are represented by the same metaphor:

In un turbamento che dura un istante, mi pare di stare sentendo quel che lei sente: che ogni vuoto continua nel vuoto, ogni strapiombo anche minimo dà su un altro strapiombo, ogni voragine sbocca nell'abisso infinito. [...] Forse è questo racconto che è un ponte sul vuoto, e procede buttando avanti notizie e sensazioni e emozioni per creare uno sfondo di rivolgimenti sia collettivi che individuali in mezzo al quale ci si possa aprire un cammino pur restando all'oscuro di molte circostanze sia storiche che geografiche. [...] Anche il racconto deve sforzarsi di tenerci dietro, di riferire un dialogo costruito sul vuoto, battuta per battuta. Per il racconto il ponte non è finito: sotto ogni parola c'è il nulla. [...] Come tra i gradini di ferro del ponte, nel dialogo intervalli di vuoto s'aprono tra una battuta e l'altra.¹⁶

If, in Calvino's passage, we have the idea of textual blanks and, further, the idea of the positive possibility that they allow ('per creare uno sfondo [...] in mezzo al quale ci si possa aprire un cammino'), in Gadda's prose, the tendency to the *horror vacui* highlights the very same blanks it tries to fill in and actually emphasises the impossibility of filling them. This

¹⁴ Stellardi, p. 101.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁶ Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, pp. 689-91.

impossibility, however, must not be seen as a failure of the literary medium or of the poetic intention, since incompleteness and indeterminacy are essential features of our relationship with reality and the unavoidable results of our attempts to know it.¹⁷ The accumulation of details of the phenomenal world is the only option to render the complexity of reality. The discourse's density thus shows the “*incolmabile*” gap between reality and its representations, and between words and objects, particularly to the extent that complexity is attributed to the partial cognition of the subject. Density and accumulation are the verbal symptoms of the indeterminacy of the ‘sistema della conoscenza’:

Il sistema di relazioni espresso dalla conoscenza umana totale ha in sè, anche attualmente, un errore o più errori). Ove si voglia chiamare errore sia la contraddizione o antinomia, sia una falsa relazione attuale, inventata di sana pianta [...] Io intendo alludere, oltre che a queste contraddizioni, anche alle posizioni fittizie con cui la ragione cerca di tamponare le falle del sistema che essa ama di rappresentare come chiuso; mentre in realtà è apertissimo e indeterminato. Ed alludo altresì alla indeterminatezza derivante dalla impossibilità di chiusura d'un sistema: qualcosa rimane sempre inspiegato [...].¹⁸

We need therefore to consider the decomposition and the fragmentation of reality on the one hand, and its multiplication in a multi-faceted and multi-layered representation in a dense and accumulative style on the other, as two sides of the same coin. Let us observe how Gadda here considers density and accumulation as the ground for reality's interpretation and its representation:

¹⁷ This is Carla Benedetti's warning when she points out how critics have misunderstood Gadda's poetic aim, by attributing to him the intention of closing the system: ‘E, cosa ancor più singolare, gli è stata attribuita per poterne poi registrare il fallimento in sede narrativa. Si è attribuito alla sua scrittura questa ambizione di poter ordinare una conoscenza, se non addirittura nella concatenazione di una storia, il mostruoso groviglio del reale. Si è fatto di questo vagheggiamento folle, contrario a ogni “saggezza sistemica” [...] addirittura uno dei cardini della sua poetica, per poi sottolinearne l'inevitabile frustrazione: una tragica resa al caos del reale come conseguenza di un eroico sforzo di mettervi ordine.’ Carla Benedetti, ‘Gadda e il pensiero della complessità’, in *Gadda. Meditazione e racconto*, ed. by Cristina Savettieri, Carla Benedetti, and Lucio Lugnani (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2004), pp. 11-30 (p. 27).

¹⁸ Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Meditazione milanese*, in *Scritti vari e postumi*, ed. by Dante Isella and others (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), p. 741.

Data una realtà (sia pure concepita come esterna) l'attribuirle successivamente con penetrante intento significati integranti, e cioè il passare dal significato $n-1$ ad n , $n+1$ $n+2$ è *costruire* perciocché è inserire quella realtà in una cerchia sempre più vasta di relazioni, è un crearla e ricrearla, un formarla e riformarla. È ciò che fanno i commercianti, o i costruttori, o chiunque amplia o crea o fa; o acutamente interpreta una realtà.¹⁹

This famous quote from *Meditazione milanese* gave rise to two of the most studied *topoi* in the field of Gadda's studies, that concerning what Gadda called 'il sistema della deformazione conoscitiva' and that of *multiplicity* (Calvino's *Lezioni americane* chapter entitled "Molteplicità" is just one study among many others).²⁰ Deformation and multiplicity in Gadda have been analysed in all of their forms and led to the famous definition of Gadda as a baroque author.²¹ Although we are attempting to transcend these limiting *topoi*, we still need to focus a while upon *multiplicity* if we want to understand the problem of interpretation in respect of *La cognizione*. From Gadda's words (quoted above), it appears clear how the question of interpretation is connected or, rather, *bound* to composition. The process of composition is indeed additive itself since it deals with the adding of significations. We could call Gadda's poetics a "poetics of $n+1$ ". Indeed, this attitude is reflected at all the levels of his fictional composition – from the syntactical level to the narrative, and from the descriptive level to the overall structure of the novel – as we are going to see shortly.

Gadda's additive tendency is visible in different techniques throughout *La cognizione*, with the effect that the reader is positioned in front of a series of devices that are different from one another but share the same accumulative vocation. As we have seen in the passage of the 'ville',

¹⁹ Gadda, *Meditazione milanese*, p. 753.

²⁰ Italo Calvino, 'Molteplicità', in *Lezioni americane*, in *Saggi 1945-1985*, I, 715-33. Thus Calvino describes Gadda's style: 'in ogni episodio dei romanzi di Gadda, ogni minimo oggetto è visto come il centro d'una rete di relazioni che lo scrittore non sa trattenersi dal seguire, moltiplicando i dettagli in modo che le sue descrizioni e divagazioni diventino infinite. Da qualsiasi punto di partenza il discorso s'allarga a comprendere discorsi sempre più vasti, e se potesse continuare a svilupparsi in ogni direzione arriverebbe ad abbracciare l'intero universo' (p. 718).

²¹ See Ezio Raimondi, *Barocco moderno* and Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*.

the privileged concretisation of this takes place at a linguistic level in the tendency to expand the sentence by means of added details, specifications, attributions, periphrases, juxtapositions, and lists – each of which reflect explicitly *n+1* poetics.

As we have just seen, the poetics of *n+1* (namely, a poetics of continuous addition and specification), does not contradict the definition of a poetics of indeterminacy. Quite the contrary, in *La cognizione*, it is from addition that indeterminacy arises. This happens because accumulation, rather than straightforwardly coinciding with an increase in information, overwhelms the reader such that he finds himself unable to isolate the elements of representation and give them a coherent meaning. This creates a paradoxical interpretative situation: on the one hand, the reader's obsession for specification is frustrated by the work's production of indeterminacy; on the other hand, indeterminacy opens a broader space for the reader's intervention.

Accumulation is therefore an essential device within *La cognizione*; in fact it can be seen as the scaffolding of the entire novel, as a principle operating at every textual level. As the passage about the 'ville' exemplifies, accumulation is, first of all, visibly at work on a linguistic-rhetorical level. Manzotti has highlighted how, in Gadda's writing, many interesting phenomena take place at a syntactical level (specifically, at the level of the noun phrase). Without going into too much detail, Manzotti suggested that Gadda's additional tendency is applied to the syntactical level in two, oppositional ways: either in the form of *gigantism*, i.e. in the construction of "monstrous" sentences (that means "unreadable", with challenging subordination), or in the form of *amplificatio* of single phrasal structures by means of lists, coordination, disjunctions, and free associations that create a 'sintassi cumulativa della coordinazione (copulativa e disgiuntiva), una sintassi dell'elenco, del catalogo'.²² Whichever form it takes, *La cognizione*'s syntax, more than leading the reader to the construction of meaning, seems, rather, to challenge signification, being 'una sintassi estremamente costruita ed "artificiale"

²² Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 296.

che contraddice nei fatti la sua funzione prima di portatrice di significati, mascherando la struttura elementare degli eventi o delle successioni narrative di eventi che vengono descritte'.²³ What the reader gains from such an arduous reading (like the one we have experienced by reading the description of the *ville*) is nothing more than a handful of details, such that he becomes the spectator of a syntactical *tour de force*, if an intentional one. As Manzotti tells us: 'frasi espanse [...] depositeranno nella memoria del lettore [...] un pulviscolo di particolari – un effetto che certo è coscientemente perseguito'.²⁴ One form that expansion and *amplificatio* take is the insistent use of periphrases often associated with the choice of using difficult and unusual terms. We can observe this accumulation of periphrases in the first example: 'una grandinata che *locupletò di pesos papel* tutti i negozianti di vetro' (p. 24). The whole sentence signifies only 'una fortissima grandinata', where 'pesos papel' stands in for 'banconote' or, simply, 'denaro'; and wherein 'locupletò di pesos papel' translates as 'fece guadagnare').

The next example, meanwhile, shows a direct application of the *n+1* compositional technique. This appears in the first *tratto*, when a description of Gonzalo's attitude to food – partly given from the narrator's perspective, partly through the point of view of the doctor – is presented: 'dicevano che fosse vorace e avido di cibo e di vino, e crudele'. The same words appear some lines below, with an added adjective (a + 1, if you will): 'vorace, e avido di cibo e di vino: crudele: e avarissimo' (p. 36). This repetition, on the one hand, functions as a refrain, helping the reader to resume the description after a partial digression on Gonzalo's cruelty to a cat when he was a child. But, on the other hand, it also adds something, thus implying that perception is only contingent and thus admits changes; new details can always be added.

Again, in the depiction of Gonzalo's gluttony, we can see an example of the overwhelming lists that characterise the style of *La cognizione*. The overwhelming effect is produced not only by the accumulation of elements of the list itself but, rather, by the way in which

²³ Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 298.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

almost every item brings with it a series of attributions and specifications.

Indeed, this list contains another list within it:

Del grifo e del naturale porcino di lui, altresì adduceva la favola, in aggiunta a quel di sopra, come nel corso di una interminabile estate egli non avesse cibato se non aragoste in salsa tartara, merlani in bianco con fiotti di majonese, o due o tre volte il peje-rey; e piccioni arrostiti in casseruola con i rosmarini e le patatine novelle, dolci, ma non troppo, e piccole, ma di già un po' sfatte, inficiate, queste, nel sugo stesso venutone da quegli stessi piccioni: farciti alla lor volta, secondo una ricetta andalusa, con l'origano, la salvia, il basilico, il timo, il rosmarino, il mentastro, e pimiento, zibibbo, lardo di scrofa, cervelli di pollo, zenzero, pepe rosso, chiodi di garofano, ed altre patate ancora, di dentro, quasiché non bastassero quelle altre messe a contorno, cioè di fuori dal deretano del piccione; che erano divenute quasi una seconda polpa anche loro, tanto vi si erano incorporate, nel deretano: come se l'uccello, una volta arrostito, avesse acquistato dei visceri più confacenti alla nuova situazione di pollo arrosto, ma più piccolo e grasso, del pollo, perché era invece un piccione. (p. 40)

Lists often rely on the criterion of contiguity and on a process that Manzotti calls 'la metonimia infinita gaddiana': a tendency not to lose any of the possible associations that connect analogically an entity to every other entity.²⁵ And this is the ruling principle of the many digressions²⁶ of the novel too.

Returning to Gadda's powerful and overwhelming use of lists, we ought to note that they appear in different parts of the text. The list of the food eaten over a summer by Gonzalo is offered all of a sudden, amidst the doctor's thoughts on Gonzalo and, more specifically, the doctor's thoughts about the rumours the people in Pastrufazio produced about Gonzalo. As in many other passages of the novel, here, it is nevertheless quite difficult to decide from which point of view and by which narratorial voice this list and its associations are given. Moreover, lists are a "transversal" device occurring not only when the discourse is conducted by the narrator but also, as we have seen, through the doctor's free indirect speech, through

²⁵ 'Tutta la scrittura di Gadda è retta da un principio di associazione generalizzata che la sottopone sistematicamente, riga per riga, parola per parola, ad una esplosione metonimica.' Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 302.

²⁶ For a study of the use of digressions in Gadda's fictional works, see Oliva Santovetti, 'Ramified plots. Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*', in *Digression. A Narrative Strategy in the Italian Novel* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 133-85.

Gonzalo's thoughts, as well as through his mother's thoughts. The effect is such that perspectives, points of view and narrative voices are confused. Here is a passage from his mother's narrated monologue²⁷ and associations:

Nel vecchio secretaire di noce ch'ella non riusciva più a disserrare [...] ci doveva esser il ritratto.... I ritratti.... I gemelli di madreperla.... forse, anche le due lettere.... le ultime!.... le forbicine da lavoro, il ventaglio nero, di pizzo.... Quello che le avevano regalato in palude, quando si era accomiatata dai colleghi, dalle poche alunne.... Più d'una febricitante, tutte avevano voluto il suo bacio.... Ma non le mancavano, por suerte, delle forbicine di riserva: tre paia, anzi. (p. 121)

In the sixth *tratto*, the chain of thoughts and the free associations of Gonzalo at the sight of the poor dinner that his mother has put together for him takes the form of a phenomenology of the migrants of *La cognizione's* imaginary South America. This digression is extended for almost ten pages, and it is only rarely interrupted by a few narrative annotations, with Gonzalo staring at the poorly set table while his restless mother wanders around. The associations contained in this digressive part, of course, follow the contiguity and metonymic principle: they accumulate an incredible multitude of human types and variants, each carrying along its amount of attributions and specifications. Here are some examples:

Maree d'uomini e di femmine! con distinguibile galleggiamento di parrucchieri di lusso, tenitrici di case pubbliche, fabbricanti di accessori per motociclette e coccarde. (p. 130)

Oppure, agli antipodi, i salumai grassi, come baffuti topi, insaccatori di topi; torreggianti sul loro marmo alto con mannaia, i macellai-scimitarra; o paonazzi sensali, nel foro, a bociare sobre el ganado; o bozzolieri in marsina tumefatti dalla prosopopea delle virtù keltikesi al completo, con undici bargigli, se pure inetti a spiccare una sola zeta dai denti: elettrotecnici miopi come carciofi: preti (presbiteriani) in abito di ballo, droghieri brachischelici dalle brache piene di saccarina contrabbandata. (p. 131)

²⁷ See Cohn, *Transparent minds* and above, II.3.c.

Tutti, tutti! Turchi, frittellari, circassi, mendicanti, ghitarroni d'Andalusia, polacchi, armeni, mongoli, santoni arabi in bombetta, labbroni senegalesi dai piedi caprigni, e perfino i Langobardò di Cormanno, immigrati da Cormanno (Curtis Manni). (p. 133)

The recurrence of *associative* passages such as these, together with other cumulative devices as well as a hyper-coordinating, hyper-disjunctive and hyper-subjunctive use of the syntax, contribute to the effect of the overwhelming abundance of information and its amplification offered to the reader for interpretation. Thus, the reader finds himself facing a magmatic material that can hardly be dissected and grasped. The theme and horizon dynamics is here puzzled by the effort for the reader to grasp the relevant material for the construction of meaning.

Another phenomenon that increases the interpretative difficulty of the work is the much-studied technique of linguistic *pastiche*, in which different languages – and diatopic, diastratic, diachronic variants – are juxtaposed in a linguistic accumulation. This, however, has not just the intention to imitate spoken language but also the purpose of providing variations and accumulations without reason or intention. Just like in the passage of *le ville*, linguistic variants and varieties appear to offer once again an indication of the multiplicity of the real, of its infinite possibilities and its phenomenology.

Besides the use of these strategies at a rhetorical-linguistic level, accumulation also works at the level of the work's structure, and in the unfolding of narration, whose progression relies on accumulation too, rather than on sequence, as we will see in section four.

Dealing with the gnoseological problem (of which *La cognizione* is *almost a mise en abyme*), the perception of reality and the relationship between the subject and the data perceived from what is phenomenally available becomes one of the main themes of the novel. That is why one of the privileged accumulative device is description. Description, rather than being merely the counterpart of narration, here gains, as we are going to see in the next section, greater significance and poses a series of important questions with reference to literary indeterminacy.

3. Descriptions as the privileged *loci* of indeterminacy

More than as a realm of characters, actions and events, we could read *La cognizione* as a sample of the materiality of *things* and *reality* and of our cognitive relationship with them through the sensorial perception of data. As Bertoni points out, ‘una sezione consistente della sua poetica [di Gadda] potrebbe essere etichettata come una ricerca del rapporto parola-cosa’.²⁸ From our perspective, this emphasises the relevance of the problem of indeterminacy in Gadda’s prose system.²⁹

In order to understand the basic dynamics that take place between things and words as well as to appreciate their relationship with indeterminacy, we need to focus on the most blatant textual manifestation of this relationship, i.e. *description*. Let us start with a basic definition of description from a narratological perspective. Gerald Prince defines description as:

The representation of objects, beings, situations or (nonpurposeful, nonvolitional) happenings in their spatial rather than temporal existence, their topological rather than chronological functioning, their simultaneity rather than succession. It is traditionally distinguished from narration and from commentary [...]. A description can be more or less detailed and precise; typical and stylized or, on the contrary, individualizing; decorative or explanatory/functional.³⁰

In *La cognizione*, descriptions, and mainly descriptions of objects and places (and the amount of digressions that they carry with themselves), are privileged textual *loci* through which narration runs. Narration appears – as we are going to see shortly – as unstable and confusing, in view that, in the novel, we find a combination of figural and authorial narrative

²⁸ Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*, p. 40.

²⁹ I am aware of the risks of trying to impose a poetics on Gadda’s complex and multifaceted compositional system. I agree once again with Stellardi’s caution, that maintains: ‘In Gadda non c’è una poetica, e neppure un’antipoetica. Quando si volesse affibbiargliene una, questa per l’appunto non potrebbe che essere *una*, e obliterare così le tante altre incompatibili sfaccettature della sua scrittura’ (Stellardi, p. 70); nevertheless I am here dealing with some individual aspects of a single work, which should thus allow me to draw some general conclusions on the work itself.

³⁰ Prince, *ad vocem*. On description, see also Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l’analyse du descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1981).

moments that cannot be easily distinguished. Before moving to the question of the narrator, we ought to recognise that the importance of description has been partially neglected both by literary critics and by narratologists until recent times. Werner Wolf is among those who brought to the foreground the role of description in the text/reader interaction:

the nature of artefacts and texts as intentional constructs renders it highly probable that even the descriptive construction of representation of the “givens”, for instance of a narrative possible world, is not an “innocent” business but serves a purpose (like the narration of events) and that description has its place in it – and is hence implicated in the construction of meaning of the artefact or text as a whole as well as in guiding various responses of the recipients.³¹

As I have suggested before, descriptions are also the most blatant indeterminacy devices; in trying to represent or reproduce the phenomenal appearance of places and objects, they confront themselves with the limitedness of language and of literary communication to reach the determinacy of *real* objects. The limits of language as a communication device was a problem with which Gadda was particularly concerned:

Trasporre la realtà nel linguaggio significa mettere a punto un efficace dispositivo retorico. Descrivere, rappresentare, “rendere” un oggetto reale o addirittura “farlo vedere”, come se fosse sotto i nostri occhi, equivale in realtà a nascondere un vuoto, a dissimulare la distanza irriducibile che separa le parole dalle cose.³²

Thus Stanzel clarifies the problem of spatial representation in narrative, describing narrated space as naturally indeterminate:

While the temporal ordering of events is a necessary condition of the act of narration, perspectivization of a fictional space does not occur of its own accord – it requires an additional effort. Every genre of art,

³¹ Werner Wolf, ‘Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation’, in *Description in Literature and other Media*, ed. by Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 1-87 (p. 18).

³² Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*, p. 39.

every medium can of course overcome its inherent tendency, but this always requires extra attention from both the producer and the recipient. In general literary perspectivization does not strive to achieve the visual sharpness of perspectivization in the graphic arts, since narrative perspectivization as a rule aims not at the discovery and presentation of the spatial interrelationship between objects but rather at the selection of the objects represented in terms of their semiotic importance and at the accentuation of meaning attached to particular objects. Narrated space, as Roman Ingarden has shown, is always a 'schematic structure' which is only partially determined. It contains many 'areas of indeterminacy' which are blanks for the reader's imagination. Their realization or 'concretization' is left to a large extent to the reader's imagination. It is precisely in the case of the spatial perspectivization of a narrative scene that such indeterminate areas are very numerous, often posing the reader quite difficult questions of interpretation.³³

The abiding gap that exists between language and things seems, then, to be one of Gadda's greatest concerns; and the anxiety of bridging this gap cannot but affect the representation of space and objects.

The phenomenology of villas in the passage discussed above corresponds to the type of description Manzotti defined as *descrizione per alternative*.³⁴ If the individual object cannot be represented in a determined way, then one solution to the problem is to provide its phenomenology. The reader in this case is presented with a series of alternatives and variants. But how should he cope with them? How can he refer them to his frames, to his extra-textual, referential world in which alternatives cannot be present at the same time and are, instead, mutually exclusive? How can he condense these kaleidoscopic refractions to a single point of view? The ultimate effect, rather than a clear picture and representation of the series of villas, is closer to a cubist painting. The description appears as fragments and added details that the reader struggles to put together in the right order; he is provided with 'ciò che si potrebbe chiamare una

³³ Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, pp. 115-16.

³⁴ 'La descrizione "per alternative" coglie aspetti diversi del rappresentato al variare di determinate "dimensioni" e dei parametri relativi ad una dimensione [...] [cioè] non è una descrizione "finita", contingente; ma piuttosto la sommatoria di una pluralità di descrizioni, una tendenzialmente onnicomprensiva "descrizione potenziale" passibile di tutta una serie di concretizzazioni [...]; viene condotta "per alternative", cioè mediante "varianti", "casi", "manifestazioni" tra di loro complementari'. Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 306.

“sommatoria” di contingenze possibili: la giustapposizione di alcuni o molti degli aspetti diversi, tra loro alternativi, di una realtà-caleidoscopio’.³⁵ This way of proceeding might make us think of an avant-garde or post-modernist technique, but – at an intentional level, as Bertoni allows us to notice – there is nothing avant-garde in the author’s project. Gadda meant, in fact, to render reality with a sensibility that is much closer to the naturalism and the nineteenth-century novel of Verga or Zola, with whom he shared the same objective.³⁶ It is even more interesting to see how Bertoni³⁷ compares these similar approaches to different hermeneutical perspectives. Zola’s descriptive technique, in its being canonical, rhetorical and neat, would then be flat at the hermeneutical level since no revelation can illuminate the reader’s interpretation. Meanwhile, Gadda’s descriptions – centrifugal, iterative, multi-perspectival – would call for interpretation, and thus would overtake naturalism since ‘Le certezze scientifiche del naturalismo non accedono a una penetrante ermeneutica del reale’.³⁸

Referring once again to *ville* passage, we can extend further Bertoni’s observations, and add that the reader here is not so much presented with blanks and is therefore not asked to fill gaps that have taken flight from a determined reality; instead, he is presented with reality as it is, namely complex and indeterminate itself. There is no need to mediate or dismiss anything. Reality and perception are demanding the interpreter’s effort. The presence of the narrator, alongside the various textual strategies at work in the descriptions, on the one hand, are far from engaging the reader in the construction of meaning; rather than being brought into the text, the interpreter is, instead, pushed away from it. On the other hand, the narrator and the other textual strategies overwhelm the reader with the

³⁵ Manzotti, p. 313.

³⁶ Stellardi too refuses to consider Gadda an experimental writer and stands in the way of some interpretations of his work under the label of postmodernism, such as Norma Bouchard, *Céline, Gadda, Beckett. Experimental Writings of the 1930s* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2000), cf. once again Stellardi, pp. 81-81. Furthermore, Stellardi shares with Bertoni the idea of a “naturalistic” approach to reality in Gadda.

³⁷ Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*, p. 72

³⁸ Botti, Francesco Paolo, *Gadda o la filologia dell’Apocalisse* (Naples: Liguori, 1996), p. 57. The quotation is in Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*, p. 72.

accumulative and layered nature of the reality presented, which triggers therefore the reader's active engagement in the novel.

If we return to Prince's definition of description and, especially, his sense of description as opposed to narrative and commentary parts, we have to observe also how the boundary between the description and the commentary is difficult to chart. In classical narratology, while narrations and commentaries are attributed to a narrator, descriptions are attributed to an observer. But in the case of *La cognizione* – in which, as we are going to see in the next section, the point of view is unstable, and we move from figural and authorial narrative situations – this distinction between narration and description, and between *diegesis* and *non-diegesis*, is very difficult to recognise, as the narrator intrudes abruptly over the course of the description:

Noi ci contenteremo, dato che le verze non sono il nostro forte, di segnalare come qualmente taluno de' più in vista fra quei politecnali prodotti, col tetto tutto gronde, e le gronde tutte punte, a triangolacci, settentrionali e glaciali, inalberasse pretese di chalet svizzero. (p. 23)

This is even more evident in the following passage in which the narrator indulges in a digression on the architectural style of the "ville" until he finally decides to end this digression by exclaiming: 'Ma basti, con l'elenco delle escogitazioni funzionali' (p. 24). The passage eventually resumes the description, zooming on Villa Giuseppina:

Fra le ville della costa di San Juan, lungo lo stradone del Prado, (saettavano i rimandi rossi dei loro vetri avverso il taciturno crepuscolo), c'era anche, piuttosto sciatta, e ad un tempo stranamente allampanata, Villa Maria Giuseppina; di proprietà Bertoloni. Il crepuscolo, e il suo fronte malinconioso e lontano, appariva straniato, ad ora ad ora, da lunghe rughe orizzontali, di cenere e di sanguigno. La villa aveva due torri e due parafulmini, alle due estremità d'un corpo centrale basso e lungo; tanto da far pensare a due giraffe sorelle-siamesi, o incorporàtesi l'una nell'altra dopo un incontro a culo indietro seguito da unificazione dei deterani. (p. 24)

From this passage, we can also appreciate how, even focused on a single villa, Gadda's descriptive technique is far from being static; here, in fact it is quite dynamic. Lingering on tiny details and using the juxtaposition of uncommon adjectives, often of a synaesthetic nature (*sciatta e allampanata, il suo fronte malinconioso e lontano, di cenere e di sanguigno*), the description progresses by contiguity and metonymy.

It will be useful, at this point, to take into account the remarks of those critically concerned with descriptions, and with the role of the reader in them (among others, Ansgar F. Nünning and Werner Wolf), but also how Seymour Chatman emphasised the relationship between metonymy/contiguity and descriptions. These perspectives will highlight how particular attention must be paid to metonymical devices in *La cognizione*, especially if we want to unfold how the reader's intervention is triggered but also, more simply, in order to appreciate how narration itself works in this novel.

Chatman wrote: 'The metonymic structure may entail the relation of objects to each other as they occur in the world or in the imagination but also the relation of objects to their own qualities'.³⁹ Nünning, on his side, comments on this passage as follows:

The principles of metonymy and contiguity enable readers or listeners to infer and project the constitutive features that belong to a described object even if these are not enumerated in a description. In addition, conventions [and] frames [...] ensure that the reader's world-knowledge will fill many of the gaps that every description is bound to leave.⁴⁰

The metonymy/contiguity process plays then a central role in the constitution of the cognitive frame that the reader needs to recognise the description as such. The German scholar insists on how 'textual data and the reader's world-knowledge always interact in the reading process' and,

³⁹Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 24.

⁴⁰Ansgar F. Nünning, 'Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction', *Description in Literature and other Media*, ed. by Wolf and Bernhart, pp. 91-127 (p. 95).

depending on how the text copes with an arbitrary process of selection and arrangement of information, he distinguishes two types of description. He defines these types in the passage below:

The type designated as bottom-up, data-driven description is characterised by a plenitude of details and descriptive elements about the object in question. By contrast, top-down, frame-driven descriptions rely much more heavily on the metonymic logic of descriptive systems and contextual frames, merely cueing readers to activate the appropriate contextual frames by providing only so much information about the phenomenon in question as to enable readers to identify the respective real-life object.⁴¹

Such a pragmatist point of view interestingly takes as its focus the main communicative situation that goes on between the reader and the text. But if we think of Gadda's description of the villas we have analysed above, we find ourselves facing a paradox: if we wanted to label Gadda's descriptions using one of Nünning's definitions, which term would be more appropriate? The reader is overwhelmed with an incredible amount of information and details that are communicated by means of metonymic chains; still, he has to actively strive to build the description frame, being presented with some possibilities rather than with a single, static depiction and with images that are often of a metaphorical nature.

The phenomenon must be placed, again, in relation to Manzotti's idea of 'la metonimia infinita gaddiana' that generates descriptions that are always: 'descrizioni "plurali": che rifuggendo dalla mimesi della contingenza si svolgono per piani o stati di cose multipli'.⁴² In *La cognizione*, descriptions are thus always plural, cumulative, and multi-layered. This fact demands even more attention if we remember that Roman Jakobson highlighted the centrality of the metonymic process in realistic fiction,⁴³ an aspect that must be connected to Gadda's aim to represent reality in its phenomenal manifestation to the subject's cognition.

⁴¹ Nünning, p. 99.

⁴² Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 305

⁴³ Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and two types of Aphasic Disturbances", in *Fundamentals of Language*, ed. by Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

Whatever the type of description used, and however we choose to label such techniques of description, the reader is, all the same, overwhelmed and confused. This is the result of the syntactical expansion of the sentence and of the ‘pulviscolo di particolari’ left in the memory of the reader, as we have seen above in section 1. Far from being determined, then, in *La cognizione*, descriptions are literally *undetermined*. But in Gadda’s thought system, influenced by a strong philosophical ground, the problem of indeterminacy does not affect only literary representation and narrative construction (in which indeterminacy is a feature related to the literary medium itself and not simply an authorial choice). Indeterminacy, for Gadda, is, rather, the very character of reality itself, in which objects and items are undefined and unfinished by nature: ‘Gli oggetti sono punti da cui partono (o, piuttosto, in cui convergono) raggi infiniti, e non hanno, non possono avere “contorni”’.⁴⁴

This character of reality is paralleled in the novel by its multi-layered structure, by the use of rhetorical devices and accumulation, and by the ramifications and the alternatives that we have just analysed. In fact, all these strategies are *needed* to convey the complexity of reality: ‘Più numerose e intricate sono le relazioni tra le cose, e più necessario è il ricorso a figure grammaticali e retoriche particolari’.⁴⁵ The very same indeterminate nature of reality and of its representation has consequences on the language of depiction itself. Alternatives and metonymies result in the use of lists, periphrases, disjunctions, and centrifugal attributions. Such are also the counterparts of Gadda’s mimetic effort that augments the potentiality offered by the coexistence of what would be mutually exclusive in the textual world ‘dando vita a un linguaggio che esprime la successiva stratificazione e la multiforme interferenza dei fatti’.⁴⁶ Gadda’s interest in objects can be charted in what Roscioni pointed out as the author’s tendency toward nouns over adjectives, a partiality that results in the use of stylemes like ‘la chiarezza dell’estate’ (instead of ‘la chiara estate’). Such nominal stylemes emphasise ‘le proprietà intrinseche o

⁴⁴ Roscioni, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Roscioni, p. 19.

⁴⁶ Roscioni, p. 19.

oggettive delle cose' in order to highlight that 'è soprattutto grazie a queste proprietà che esse vengono percepite'.⁴⁷

While the function of an adjective in a description is to increase precision or, better, to fill with detailed connotations empty names/labels/schemas, the continuous adding of nouns coincides, rather, with the adding of undetermined entities (so, once again, an accumulation) that need to be further specified. The effect of adding nouns, in contrast to the effect of adding adjectives, is such that the eventual image is even less determined than the original one. By borrowing Manzotti's definition of 'infinite metonymy', we could therefore say that descriptions in Gadda's work function as 'infinite indeterminacy' devices.

At the beginning of this section, I referred to Prince's classical definition of description which emphasises its static nature. In *La cognizione*, though, as we have seen, descriptions do not appear static owing to their changeable character, as created by means of variants, alternatives, and metonymic shifting. We must connect this character to the non-static nature of the observation of reality itself as conceived by Gadda in *Meditazione milanese*: 'da un punto di vista gnoseologico [...] noi siamo condotti ad affermare questa molteplicità di significati del reale e a interpretarla come *flusso o creazione*, più che come stasi' [my emphasis].⁴⁸ We might even be tempted to suggest that it is to the realm of description that scholars should refer when they pose the problem of Gadda's 'readability/unreadability' –⁴⁹ namely, we should direct them to those passages in which accumulation is maximally exploited. But, whatever the final verdict ('Gadda è leggibile!' or 'Gadda è illeggibile!'), it is particularly interesting to notice that, in these textual *loci*, it appears clear how in Gadda's works (and in *La cognizione* especially), the reader's role is unmistakably active. This is consistent with Savettieri's view that:

⁴⁷ Roscioni, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁸ Gadda, 'Meditazione milanese', p. 754.

⁴⁹ See Rinaldo Rinaldi, 'Gadda illeggibile' and Cristina Savettieri, 'Gadda leggibile', both in *Antinomie gaddiane*, ed. by Raffaele Donnarumma, supplement no. n+1 to the *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* (EJGS), 3 (2003), <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/suppn+1/antinomieindx.php>> [accessed 3 December 2017].

[l]a lettura non è un consumo passivo, è un lavoro, una produzione di senso, non precostituita, ma che si fa nel farsi della lettura stessa. La leggibilità è un effetto di questa dinamica di connessione e riconnessione degli strati del testo, che al lettore è affidata.⁵⁰

Therefore, in defining a second type of description in Gadda's prose, Manzotti was correct in stressing its dynamic quality: 'la descrizione "commentata"' that is

una descrizione a fasce disomogenee quanto al tipo o livello testuale: più specificamente una descrizione che allinea enunciati descrittivi ed enunciati di commento dei primi, che cioè giustificano, generalizzano, storicizzano, estendono analogicamente, e così via. La descrizione commentata è dunque continuamente mossa da "salti" verso l'alto o verso il basso del livello rappresentativo basico.⁵¹

Nevertheless, in section 4, I will question Manzotti's idea that

[q]uesta sorta di controcanto introdotto nella descrizione ha come fatto precipuo (tra gli altri) di rallentare sensibilmente la velocità descrittiva e soprattutto di relativizzare o addirittura smentire la rilevanza narrativa delle notazioni singole.⁵²

Quite the contrary, it is precisely in the undetermined and dynamic quality of the descriptions that the narrative impulse of *La cognizione* takes place, as I will argue in the following section.

4. Accumulation in the narrative structure of *La cognizione*

Moving our emphasis from the chronological nature of narrative unfolding in opposition to the spatial one of description, will also help us to understand *La cognizione's* narrative structure; in particular, we will consider the development of the narration more as a kind of *dynamicity* of descriptions and digressions than as a sequence of events. The stress on this aspect of narration has been suggested, firstly by Mikhail Bakhtin but, more recently, it has been further developed by scholars such as Stanford

⁵⁰ Savettieri, 'Gadda leggibile', p. 2.

⁵¹ Manzotti, p. 302.

⁵² Manzotti, p. 302.

Friedman.⁵³ Although *topos* is attracting increasing attention over *chronos*, it remains partially neglected and often considered only in relationship to its static and almost accessorial function in the description. This is to say, its potentiality in the unfolding of the narrative pattern itself continues to be disregarded.

Scholars such as Bertoni⁵⁴ and Dombroski have, however, dedicated insightful reflections to the spatial dimension in Gadda's writing (and especially in *La cognizione*). Dombroski, in particular, puts the spatial element of descriptions in relationship to the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. Indeed, Dombroski posits that it is precisely the compound and cumulative structure of the description that triggers the reader's intervention: 'le unità che compongono la descrizione costituiscono stazioni che abilitano il lettore alla transizione da un livello all'altro'.⁵⁵

As we have seen in several passages above, it is not always easy to distinguish the narratorial voice from Gonzalo's own voice. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that one of the most debated questions on this novel has been the entanglement of the author, the supposed subject of the cognition, the narrator, and the main character, Gonzalo. As Dombroski puts it, 'autore, narratore e personaggio si sovrappongono in modo tale da rendere praticamente impossibile ogni distinzione'.⁵⁶

Extending Dombroski's analysis, we could add to this entanglement the reader himself, who is called to participate in the narrative, and to experience the act of acquaintance with grief. What Dombroski called '[la] disseminazione della voce narrante'⁵⁷ generates another lack for the reader, insofar as it occludes a point of reference; it causes the reader to be frustrated in the attempt to bring together the

⁵³ Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*; Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative', *Narrative* 1 (1993), 12-23; Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* (London: Verso, 1998); Ruth Ronen, 'Description, Narrative and Representation', *Narrative*, 5.3 (1997), 274-86, among others.

⁵⁴ See Bertoni, *La verità sospetta*.

⁵⁵ Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*, p. 63.

disseminated and fragmented narratorial voice. The restless ambiguity of the point of view is thus central to Gadda's ultimate intention. Considering authorial intention justifies the work's emphasis on: 'la conoscenza in quanto processo ovvero quale percezione continua del soggetto conoscente' that 'comporta che evochi la condizione di unicità propria del punto di vista a partire dal quale la narrazione viene dispiegata'.⁵⁸ For Dombroski, there is a sort of "conscience" ruling the text, and this "conscience" coincides with the very point of view from which the narration is led. Moreover, this "conscience" binds the reader since it 'crea l'ideologia del testo provvedendo la conoscenza necessaria a porre il lettore nella giusta posizione per comprenderne il racconto, e vi perviene elaborando un discorso che conferisce alla narrazione la sua forma particolare'.⁵⁹ The reader, however, is not only deprived of the stable guidance of the figure of the narrator. He must also struggle with a non-consequential type of narrative development that relies on relatively few pure narrative elements.

In narrative studies, and in analyses of narrative fiction, descriptions, digressions and narrated monologues are often perceived as a pause in the narration, and as devices functional to narration but "subordinate" to it. I suggest, instead, that, in *La cognizione*, the descriptive attitude gains a much more significant role, not only by influencing narration but actually cannibalising it. If we consider the plot of *La cognizione*, we can observe and, indeed, be surprised by its linearity. The story unfolds in the course of a handful of days. Further, the *emplotment* consists basically of the description of a few episodes and moments that lead to justify, or are in some way related to, one single event (the attack on the mother in the villa at night) which is left incomplete, and with which the novel ends, if we exclude the three appendices to the text (the poem *Autunno* and the two notes 'L'editore chiede venia del recupero chiamando in causa l'Autore' and 'Chiarimenti indispensabili', pp. 197-210).

⁵⁸ Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*, p.12.

⁵⁹ Dombroski, *Gadda e il barocco*, p. 22. Compare the quotation from Iser that we discussed above (above, I.1.a.): 'The strategies have to maneuver the reader into the right position, so that all he has to do is adopt the attitude mapped out for him'. *The Act of Reading*, p. 190.

As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter (above V.1), critics have overwhelmingly been concerned with the extent to which we can consider *La cognizione del dolore* as a narrative work *tout court*. Manzotti, among others, highlights the essential ‘anti-narrativity’ of *La cognizione* ‘in cui la consecuzione degli eventi vi interviene come componete d’importanza accessoria’.⁶⁰ Against this position stands, among others, Savettieri who argues that ‘solo una considerazione parziale delle strutture della *Cognizione* può condurre a conclusioni simili’.⁶¹ I share with Savettieri the notion of the impossibility of using traditional narratological tools to analyse Gadda’s fictional works.⁶² Yet, this impossibility does not straightforwardly amount to a lack of narration; rather, it requires that we look at Gadda’s, and more specifically, at *La cognizione*’s narrative pattern from a different perspective in which descriptions play a more important role. Although rarefied, fragmented, and cannibalised, narration is indeed still present in the novel. The metonymic and contiguity devices dispersed throughout the whole work arrange and shape the narration itself. Some passages in the novel may appear as futile or as pretexts to create that baroque effect that we all can observe in Gadda’s style; still, every description, comment and digression (e.g. Palumbo’s scandal, the question of the Nistitúos de vigilancia, Bertoloni’s “haunted” house, the death of the epic poet Caçoncellos) contributes to, and makes possible the climactic, narrative moment, even if they are not connected to it in a traditional narrative unfolding. To sum up, it is in the dialectic between “pure” narration and description that indeterminacy and difficulty are created at the narrative level. The very core of a narration is its sequential and consequential structure, and it can be seen as a chain of linked facts unfolding from a start to a conclusion, set in a chronological layout. That is not what a description is: a description has its own temporal collocation that is static and not dynamic. Gaps and blanks occur, of course, (and are indeed unavoidable) in pure narrative

⁶⁰ Manzotti, *Introduzione*, p. 323.

⁶¹ Cristina Savettieri, *La trama continua* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2008), p. 145.

⁶² Cristina Savettieri, ‘Self-reflection and ambivalence in Gadda’s *L’Adalgisa*’, *The Italianist* 35.3 (2015), 412-25

passages as well (for example, by means of ellipses). But the consequentiality of events (assumed by the reader insofar as he recognises the cognitive frame of narration itself)⁶³ is a forceful hint for the interpreter who must bridge their gaps and connect them meaningfully. Descriptions, by contrast, in their proceeding according to metonymy and contiguity, are selected moments, frozen in time and juxtaposed, leaving to the reader the task of connecting them. In *La cognizione*, this experience is also somewhat uniquely intimated by a few narrative components of the novel.

As we have suggested before, and as is schematised by Manzotti, the basic story of *La cognizione* consists of very few episodes that all take place in the course of a few days (the visit of the doctor to the villa, the storm and the afternoon of the mother in the villa, Gonzalo's dinner, an afternoon of Gonzalo having a coffee at the villa, the late afternoon in the villa and the threat to the mother, the aggression toward the mother). To these events that Manzotti groups in three main *scenes*, we must add "Palumbo's scandal". This episode that opens the novel and recurs often, here and there (especially in relation to the character of the doctor who narrates the episode to Gonzalo and to other characters). More overtly, this episode is eventually linked to the climactic event (the aggression to the mother). I suggest the this episode – set outside the plot of the novel itself, and functioning as a prologue or, better, an ante-fact –works as a kind of refrain and provides the only *fil rouge* to the reader. The reader can use it as a criterion to put all the other elements together, and to provide an overall meaning to the work. All the other "events", however, have very little narrative content, serving more like frames for the unfolding of, what I would like to call, "two vortexes", a minor and a major one, which move parallel to each other before eventually converging in the final event.

These vortex-like movements are not visible at the beginning of the novel; in fact, they gather momentum slowly until they eventually appear and confront each other towards the end. The doctor's visit, which starts with the thoughts of the doctor while he goes to the villa and then turns into a philosophical dialogue with Gonzalo, is ultimately absorbed by

⁶³ Cf. Nünning, 'Towards a Typology, Poetic and History of Description in Fiction' and Wolf, 'Description as Transmedial Mode'.

Gonzalo's thoughts and free associations.⁶⁴ This situation is indeed a recurring one, since it happens again during two of Gonzalo's moments in the villa; but it also operates in the fifth *tratto* dedicated to the mother, who is alone in the villa and starts thinking about her two sons, and about the miserable condition of Gonzalo. For Manzotti, the three scenes in which Gonzalo and his mother are involved represent static moments that primarily serve to initiate a climax: 'una combinatoria di solitudine e contrasto: il figlio, la madre, la madre e il figlio. La staticità temporale della trama sottolinea implicitamente opponendovisi l'angoscioso precipitare dei giorni e degli anni'.⁶⁵ While we can certainly agree with the fact that this tripartite structure has the effect of reaching (and signaling) an acme, and while we can share an appreciation of the temporal stillness of these moments in the context of the plot and the emplotment, still, we cannot call them purely "static". The usual categories of dynamic narrative parts and static descriptive ones seem to me not applicable to *La cognizione*.

Right at the beginning of the fifth *tratto*, we have a change in perspective as the point of view of the mother is presented through the narrated monologue technique. Here, we can appreciate how her restlessness is dramatised in a series of anaphoric sentences (often amplified with the *n+1* technique we have seen above) that describe her *vortical* movement inside the house, accompanied by recurring thoughts about her youngest son who died in the war, the household, and Gonzalo:

Vagava, sola, nella casa. Ed erano quei muri, quel rame, tutto ciò che le era rimasto? (p. 111)

Vagava nella casa: e talora dischiudeva le gelosie d'una finestra, che il sole entrasse, nella grande stanza. (pp. 111-12)

Vagava nella casa, come cercando il sentiero misterioso che l'avrebbe condotta ad incontrare qualcuno [...]. (p. 112)

⁶⁴ The passage gradually takes the form of a monologue, or, as Stellardi suggests, it is still a dialogue but not between Gonzalo and the doctor any more, rather between Gonzalo and the reader (Stellardi, p. 113).

⁶⁵ Manzotti, 'La cognizione del dolore', p. 240.

The mother's narrated monologue is not completely her own however. It is mediated by the comments of the narrator, who intervenes with *his* language in the mother's chain of thoughts,⁶⁶ thus augmenting the indeterminacy of the narrative. Her narrated monologue is concluded by the regret that Gonzalo rarely shows up at the house:

Ma il suo figliolo non appariva se non raramente sul limitare di casa.
(p. 122)

The regret is immediately connected to the beginning of the sixth *tratto* in which we have a continuous and relentless alternation of the movements of Gonzalo and the mother within the house, as well as their thoughts; 'protagonisti assoluti i loro pensieri più che i loro atti' as Lugnani puts it.⁶⁷ He adds: 'Ma per lampi continui non smetterà di illuminarsi simultaneamente il palcoscenico della narrazione, dove contro canta o tiene bordone il narratore affabulante e confabulante'.⁶⁸ Thus, the sixth *tratto* begins:

L'alta figura di lui si disegnò nera nel vano della porta-finestra, di sul terrazzo, come l'ombra di uno sconosciuto [...]. (p. 123)

Andò in cucina a preparargli qualcosa da cenare. Era assolutamente necessario, anche a dimostrazione della validità funzionale della villa [...]. (p. 124)

Here, we hear clearly the echo of the mother's words. But in the course of the sixth *tratto*, the narrative rhythm's pace increases, and both the movements and the thoughts of the two characters are reconstellated in an unmediated juxtaposition that once again creates difficulty, owing to the ambiguity of 'un flusso discorsivo-narrativo gestito per intero alla parola narrante' in which a 'separazione netta di ottiche e di voci è per forza

⁶⁶ Thus Lugnani: 'Il discorso narrativo pare per intero adibito ad esprimere l'agitazione materna, ma nello stesso tempo, traducendola in concitazione linguistica, la travalica colorendola di tinte e timbri [...] che è impervio riportare alla castigata urbanità della señora.' As Lugnani points out, the narrator is like 'un camaleontico ventriloquo.' Lucio Lugnani, "Pezzi di bravura" e discorsività narrativa', in *Meditazione e racconto*, ed. by Savettieri and others, pp. 42-66 (pp. 55-56).

⁶⁷ Lugnani, p. 50.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

frutto d'una leggera forzatura: il testo è assai più ambiguo di così',⁶⁹ and which ultimately maximises the novel's indeterminacy. When Gonzalo arrives in the dining room, the sight of the dinner table and the house's furniture starts a long digression (full of lists and phenomenologies) about South America. Here, the point of view *moves* quickly and anxiously from one character to the other, as we can observe in my narratorial classifications below:

[Gonzalo]: Quando discese, con un libro, la zuppa sembrò attenderlo in tavola, al suo posto, nel cerchio della lucernetta a petrolio [...]. Quel lumignolo così stanco e dimesso, immobilità chiusa nel suo cilindro di cristallo [...] gli parve essere tutto quello che la madre concedeva [...], tutto quello che il padre e la madre avevano ritenuto bastevole, dopoché utile, alla vita, al progresso, alla felicità dei figli. Eppure avevano ben conosciuto anche loro, cane il diavolo! quali mai tessere, o biglietti d'invito, qual sorta di pentàcoli o di talismani unti valevano verso le porte, in disserrare ai mortali, e fino ai pitecàntropi-granoturco, i battenti istoriati d'oro e d'avorio massiccio, le girevoli portiere degli Odéons. Maree d'uomini e di femmine! con distinguibile galleggiamento di parrucchieri di lusso, tenitrici di case pubbliche, fabbricanti di accessori per motociclette, e coccarde. Verso i barattoli di peptone Liebig treni di vacche, dal nord-ovest; carri discoperti con passerella centrale che il gaucho dai malinconici occhi, sovrintendendo, percorre. Tale gli appariva fortuna, nel Sud-America. (p. 130)

[The mother]: Il figlio, all'impiedi, presso la tavola, guardava senza vedere il modesto apparecchio, il poco fumo che ne veniva esalando: mentre la sua vecchia mamma cercava ancora qualche posata, un piatto, un pretesto, dalla credenza all'armadio di cucina. Era di nuovo inquieta. (p. 132)

[Gonzalo] Ragazzi: con gambe come due spàragi. Idiotti dentro la capa più che se la fosse fatta di un tubero, infanti una pur che fosse favella: dopo dodici generazioni di granoturco e di migragna dai piedi verdi venuti fuori anche loro dall'Arca bastarda delle generazioni, a cercar di barbugliare una qualche loro millanteria tirchia nel foro [...]. (p. 132)

[The mother] La mamma, ora, dopo essere uscita e rientrata più volte, attendeva ella pure all'impiedi, quasi tremando, le mani ricongiunte sul grembo, che il figliuolo si mettesse a tavola. [...](p. 135)

[Gonzalo] Dove andava la sua conoscenza umiliata, coi lembi laceri della memoria nel vento senza più causa né fine? [...] Camerieri neri,

⁶⁹ Lugnani, p. 54

nei “restaurants”, avevano il frac, per quanto pieno di padelle [...].
(p. 136)

This modality is repeated throughout the *tratto*. With a continuous inflation of details, digressions, and emotions, and with an accumulative anticipation, the narration seems likely to explode. And, indeed, it does explode in a climax that involves the aggression toward the mother. The conclusion to this part, taking place in the seventh *tratto* (namely, the long hug and kiss of Gonzalo to the mother), appears like the calm before the storm. These alternating passages remind us of the image of the hurricane in the fifth *tratto*, which is not simply metaphorical, but that also accompanies the *climax* of the narrative content of the novel:

L'uragano, e anche quel giorno, soleva percorrere con lunghi ululati le gole paurose delle montagne, e *sfociava poi nell'aperto contro le case e gli opifici degli uomini*. Dopo ogni tetro *accumulo* di sua rancura, per tutto il cielo si disfrenava alle folgori, come nel guasto e nelle rapine un capitanoccio dei lazzi a gozzovigliare tra sinistre luci e spari. (p. 113) [my emphasis]

It is true that, in the mother's and Gonzalo's scenes, the story does not seem to proceed in any way. Though there appears not be any progression, however, there is a movement taking place, like a counterpart to the relentless moving of the mother in the house during the storm. Lists, catalogues, periphrases and all the other accumulation devices operating in the chain of thoughts and free associations that we have seen in the previous sections, cause these two characters to move around like vortexes or magnets, collecting and attracting details, specifications and data. Once again, the principle of *n+1* prevails. It substitutes a more traditional consequential unfolding of the plot, which is nevertheless quite simple and chronologically linear, and refuses to unfold in a “conventional fashion”. As Lugnani reflects: ‘Quella che latita è la temporalità narrativa più convenzionale fatta d'una diegesi limpidamente distesa nella cronicità e contrappunta dai più trasparenti dispositivi anaforici’.⁷⁰

To conclude, the reader faces a sinusoidal movement of digressions (although it might be difficult to track from *what* or *where* they digress),

⁷⁰ Lugnani, p. 48.

thoughts, and episodes that proceed from the ante-fact of Palumbo's scandal to the only real event of the novel (that is meaningfully left incomplete). Still, the digressive technique, according to Rinaldi:

permette all'autore di perfezionare la sua solita scrittura per frammenti senza rinunciare perciò alla narrazione di largo respiro. Il risultato anche in questo caso è un allargamento prospettico, poiché la vicenda del figlio e della madre appare moltiplicata come da una serie di specchi, rifrangendosi in una miriade di altre tessere che vanno a comporre il mosaico caotico e mai completo della realtà.⁷¹

A narration that is built on such a process, with all its spatial development, cannot but result in incompleteness. Built on fragments, descriptions, and accumulations, together with the indeterminacy that they transmit with the effect of transitivity, narration is undetermined too.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen over the course of this chapter, in *La cognizione*, accumulation is the basic device. Owing to the effects of the cumulative strategies present within it, accumulation comes to emphasise the presence of indeterminacy.

Even if the three main narrative scenes take place in a handful of days, in the same setting, involving the same characters, they are offered to the reader through juxtaposition. At a linguistic level, these scenes are overloaded as a result of an adding and expanding syntax, and by means of other cumulative strategies. The effect of such is to leave the reader with very little information. At a structural level, and as we have seen, the reader faces the same experience of being overloaded; he is overwhelmed by moments, thoughts and perceptions, and finds himself with few, or no events to put together. All the reconstructions, and all the connections are left to him, and his difficult task is, at the end, left suspended by the absence of a real ending. This lack of final meaning is compounded by the way in which the reader is misguided in drawing his own conclusions by the information received. Nevertheless, this eventual suspension cannot be made to validate claims as to the supposed anti-narrativity of the text. As

⁷¹ Rinaldo Rinaldi, *Gadda* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), p. 78.

Lugnani reminds us, although ‘l’incipit della *Cognizione* costituisca una promessa di romanzo che il libro infine non mantiene’, nevertheless ‘si tratta di un testo esplicitamente ed indubitabilmente narrativo’.⁷² Alongside the effect of difficulty we have described, together with the omission of an actual ending, there is an overall sense of ungraspability that is produced by a complex dialectic between narration and description in which all the potentiality for indeterminacy is extensively augmented. This enlargement of indeterminacy can be mapped onto a clear intention: ‘l’incompletezza della *Cognizione* [...] ha certo anche un significato speculativo e conoscitivo, compendiabile (per congettura) nella definizione del senso della complessità e nell’imperativo etico che ne discende’.⁷³ That incompleteness does not so much coincide with the narrative’s lack of ending, or even merely with the novel itself. Rather, *La Cognizione*’s incompleteness and indeterminacy should be considered as representative of the unavoidable incompleteness of the act of cognition and of reality itself.

⁷² Lugnani, p. 43.

⁷³ Lugnani, p. 48.

VI. The iguana-novel of Anna Maria Ortese

1. Introduction

In this final case study on the phenomenon of indeterminacy in the Italian novel, I will conduct an analysis of *L'Iguana* (1965) by Anna Maria Ortese. On the one hand, this novel summarises the in-betweenness of this author's poetics: specifically, her preoccupation with the 'inscrutability of the self' and 'the unknowability of the world', deriving from a profound sense of uncertainty, which envelops the core of her very identity and her being in the world: "Non mi conosco" – she confesses in [an] interview – "non so che cosa sono; di nulla sono sicura".¹

But there is something more. And, indeed, indeterminacy concerns not only the themes present in the novel – some of which are constants in the author's works, like, for example: the relationship between man and nature; otherness; the marginality of the weak; and femininity, among others – but also, and primarily, the structure of the work. In *L'Iguana*, different strategies are at work in a manipulation of indeterminacy which ultimately results in a deconstruction both of the traditional novel and of the common cultural discourse.

This operation of deconstruction rendered Ortese's works something of a conundrum for critics, who, like in the case of the other novels in this study, struggled to label Ortese's poetics. Ghezzi reflects on this difficulty with reference to the author's deconstructive project:

Ortese thus deconstructs the ontological categories of the physical and the metaphysical, of identity and alterity, as well as those literary

¹ Flora Ghezzi, 'Introduction', in *Anna Maria Ortese. Celestial Geographies*, ed. by Gian Maria Annovi and Flora Ghezzi (Toronto Buffalo London: Toronto University Press, 2015), pp. 3-33 (p. 4). The interview quoted by Ghezzi is: Massimo Di Prisco, 'Anna Maria Ortese: A tu per tu', *Gli oratori del giorno: Rassegna mensile d'eloquenza* 12.1 (1938). Repr. in *Per Anna Maria Ortese*, ed. by Luca Clerici, *Il Giannone* 4.7-8 (2006), p. 41. Luca Clerici, with the publication of his biography of Ortese, gave us access to very rich material on the life and works of the author in *Apparizione e visione* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002). Clerici also mediated and made possible some of Ortese's last publications in life and *post mortem*.

“laws” that set mimetic representation up against fantastic and visionary imagination: rendering extremely difficult the task of the literary critic, who for several decades now has undertaken to define her undefinable writing.²

However, there are also a number of devices at work in *L'Iguana*, which leave its interpretation open and create an unsettling experience for the reader. Where does this sense of bewilderment come from?

The indefinability of Ortese's writing coincides with a literary practice that can only be described *ex negativo* insofar as it ‘compel[s] us – readers, critics, editors, reviewers – to jump from one epistemological system into another’,³ and therefore requires that it be analysed from the perspective of indeterminacy. It mandates a focus on the effects it generates on the reader, and especially in triggering their intervention.

The autobiographical aspects of Ortese's work have attracted a great deal of critical attention. Critics have focused on the author's attempts to re-construct her own identity through her works, whilst meditating on *topos* of, for example: difference and otherness (both from gender and social perspectives); ethical problems such as the environmental (man and nature) and politico-economical (in particular alienation and capitalism); a universalised post-colonial discourse (not referring to a specific historical dynamic of colonised versus coloniser, but to a universal tension between oppressed vs. oppressor); the poetics of the vision and of the gaze (and of perception); and the presence of the uncanny and the fantastic (as well as the influence of Bontempelli's *realismo magico*), and considerations of their metaphysical and symbolic meaning. These critical orientations show a critical predilection for the thematic and symbolic aspects of Ortese's writing. As Farnetti points out, then, we still need an organic investigation of her language and of the formal aspects of her works,⁴ beginning from the hybridism of her style that has been often noted but only superficially analysed.

² Ghezzi, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ See Monica Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).

With the exception of Daniela La Penna,⁵ who provided a more narratological-oriented analysis of *L'Iguana*, such critical approaches are symptomatic of the kinds of analyses undertaken in respect of this novel. Predominant approaches to the novel are those that focus on the *irrealtà* depicted through the lens of the fantastic mode (and in particular, in the form of the female fantastic), and postcolonial approaches owing to the novel's intertextual references to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and, in particular, the parallelism between Caliban and the Iguana.⁶

Giulio Ferroni summarised Ortese's literary aim as such in the review of 1993's *Il cardillo addolorato* – a novel that has many aspects in common with *L'Iguana*:

Di fronte al rumore della nostra vita collettiva, ha preferito arretrare: la sua scelta letteraria si è risolta sempre più in un nascondersi dall'esistenza, in un affidarsi a un' *irrealtà* che l'ha condotta al di là della nostra realtà devastata, vorticoso e apparente. La sua opera si è svolta in un singolarissimo nesso tra natura, ragione e irrealtà: partecipazione alla sofferenza che si dà nella vita naturale, commisurazione di questa sofferenza alla possibilità della ragione (quella ragione che ancora ne *La ginestra* leopardiana chiede che gli uomini siano 'confederati', lucidamente solidali contro il male), denuncia dell'irrazionalità della vita collettiva e rifugio nell' *irrealtà* della letteratura.⁷

In this chapter, I will explore what Ferroni terms a 'singolarissimo nesso,' which I suggest is triggered by indeterminacy. In focusing on how indeterminacy is produced in *L'Iguana*, we will consider its strategies and themes related to literary nonsense, thus distancing ourselves from the critical approaches described above. After an overview of the content of the novel, its complexity, and relevant strategies, in section 3, we will analyse the first, brief chapter of the novel ('La passeggiata in via Manzoni'). This is to be considered a framing situation that signals the

⁵ Daniela La Penna, 'An Inquiry into Modality and Genre'.

⁶ Notably, 'La Tempesta' is the title of the second part of the book ('Il compratore di isole' being the title of the first one). For an example of post-colonial-oriented reading of the *L'Iguana* see Gian Maria Annovi, "'Call me my name": The Iguana, the Witch, and the Discovery of America', in *Celestial Geographies*, ed. by Annovi and Ghezzi, pp. 323-55.

⁷ Giulio Ferroni, 'Il mare di Napoli', *L'Unità*, 19 July 1993.

entrance to a narrative dimension, and which introduces us to the *nonsense* element of the novel. In section 4, we will reflect on the genre of the novel and its hybrid nature that brings together fantastic elements, parody, reverie and philosophical reflection. These elements take the novel to the edge of literary nonsense, even though, as we shall clarify, it cannot be considered a novel entirely belonging to the literary nonsense *genre*. In fact, towards the end of the novel, the dreamlike, hallucinatory state of the protagonist is revealed; thus, in some measure, the tension created by the absurd content of the story is released.

In section 5, I will analyse the diverse elements of ambiguity in the character of the Iguana that coexist to create the unsettling and uneasy atmosphere and structure of the novel; among these, we can note her strangeness, her bestiality, her femininity and her wickedness. This will help us to consider how the Iguana works as a catalyst for, and a pivotal element of the novel's indeterminacy. In section 6, we will analyse the formal aspect of the novel and its relationship to the realist paradigm and contemporary social debate. I will start by considering its narrative level in connection with its play of literary tradition and intertextual elements, as well as parody and its widespread use of irony. I will then conclude by highlighting how the formal choices of the author are connected to her approach to reality and to the literary medium. This will lead us to discuss how the use of such a specific structure for *L'Iguana*, built on indeterminacy, can inform us on the author's poetical ideology as well as her more general conception of the role of literature for society and individuals. Indeed, I will finally argue that the character of the Iguana, alongside its many symbolic and allegorical meanings, is also a projection of the novel as a human device for knowledge and self-interpretation – a device that, especially in its twentieth-century manifestations, is as hybrid, mutable, and ungraspable as the Iguana itself. On this, I follow Cosetta Seno's suggestion that 'La piccola iguana è infatti una creatura davvero

mutante, ibrida, e in quanto tale rende mutante e ibrida anche la letteratura che la ospita'.⁸

2. Oddity and elusiveness

In the review of the first English translation of the novel by Henry Martin (1987), Lawrence Venuti empathised with the translator:

The complex fictional discourse of *The Iguana* poses many difficult problems for the translator, not the least of which is rendering the occasionally archaic sentence construction and the dazzling array of tones of voice assigned to the narrator. Modelled on 19th-century writers like Poe and Stevenson, Miss Ortese's prose abruptly shifts between direct addresses to the reader and more conventional third-person commentary on the characters, changing from cynical irony to righteous outrage to cool philosophical speculation often on the same page.⁹

This passage sums up effectively the array of narrative and stylistic strategies that produce the novel's complexity, as well as its hybridism, considered the most representative feature of Ortese's writing. The same complexity works at the structural level: though the story follows a relatively neat chronological order – as we are going see, it is on a different level of the story that the space and time constants go haywire – nonetheless, its plot appears extremely entangled.

As we will consider in greater detail themes and characters from the novel, we will need to dwell a while on its plot. *L'Iguana* narrates the adventures of a young Milanese Count – who makes his living as an architect – Aleardo di Grees (*detto* Daddo). He embarks on his yacht in pursuit of estates for sale (on behalf of his rich and authoritarian mother) as well as of literary manuscripts by unknown authors (on behalf of his friend and publisher, Boro Adelchi), possibly in the form of 'confessioni di

⁸ Cosetta Seno, *Anna Maria Ortese. Un avventuroso realismo* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2013), p. 71.

⁹ Lawrence Venuti, 'A Lizard for the Ages', *New York Times*, 22 November 1987 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/22/books/a-lizard-for-the-ages.html>> [accessed 6/08/2017].

un qualche pazzo, magari innamorato di una iguana'(p. 17).¹⁰ Just off the coast of Portugal, he finally makes landfall on an uncharted island. Here, live only three brothers of dilapidated, noble origins. Their only servant is named Estrellita, and they treat her quite brusquely. At the beginning, she looks like an elderly woman, who, however, speaks and moves like a seven-year-old girl. It takes a closer observation before Daddo – but not the reader, as we shall see – realises that Estrellita is neither a wrinkled, elderly woman nor a girl, but, rather, an iguana:

bestiola verdissima e alta quanto un bambino, dall'apparente aspetto di una lucertola gigante, ma vestita da donna, con una sottanina scura, un corsetto bianco, palesemente lacero e antico, e un grembialetto fatto di vari colori. (pp. 29-30)

The 'iguanuccia' was once the beloved of the youngest of the brothers, don Ilario, a seemingly sensitive marquis who also has literary ambitions. Now repudiated, however, Estrellita is considered by the three brothers as a "personification" of the Devil. Daddo, moved to pity and eventually himself enamoured by the Iguana, tries to pursue his three-fold plan, consisting of: taking the marquis's manuscripts to Milan to publish them, carrying the Iguana with himself to free her from the condition of servant and making a lady out of her, and buying the island on behalf of his mother. Daddo's plans are, however, impeded when an American family, the Hopins, land on the island. The Hopins' daughter is due to marry don Ilario, while it is decided that the Iguana will be sold to a circus. These already bizarre facts culminate in a sizeable confusion, manifest in Daddo's final delirium – an hallucinatory state in which he sees himself taken to trial and convicted for the death of God – and, eventually, in his death. Finally, all is revealed: everything was just a projection of the Count's delusional state, the size-changing house was in fact an inn, the brothers were just its owners, and the Iguana was simply a broken-hearted maid.

The final disclosure, nevertheless, is not sufficient to eliminate the ambiguity and hybridism at work throughout the novel. Venuti agrees:

¹⁰ All the quotations from the novel are from Anna Maria Ortese, *L'Iguana* (Milan: Adelphi, 1986).

The reptilian servant is only the first in a series of fantastic touches that transform the narrative into a satiric fable dense with echoes of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Ortese's targets include the commercialism of publishers, the deluded philanthropic impulses of wealthy Milanese and the class pretensions of parvenu Americans.¹¹

Not even the final epiphany can provide an anchor for the interpretation of the novel in which 'identities shift, merge, and metamorphose, while dream states, rather than functioning as a counterpoint to consciousness, serve to illuminate the unreality of consciousness itself'.¹² As a result [t]he reader is engaged, yet disconcerted, by the text's refusal to coalesce in a single set of meanings',¹³ and therefore the tensions between meaning and its absence remain still unresolved. *L'Iguana* is ineludibly a 'very odd and elusive piece of work'.¹⁴

The work's elusiveness – or its *indeterminacy* – is created at different levels by an array of diverse elements. In the following sections, I will consider the ambiguity of the novel's genre; the ambiguity of the character of the Iguana; the ambiguity of its fictional world in which purely linguistic utterances can become true, and can modify the fictional world; the ambiguity of the narratorial voice; and the ambiguity of the interpretative act required of the reader.

While they have usually been considered either in the perspective of the fantastic or through the lens of postcolonial discourse, *L'Iguana*'s elements of elusiveness and oddity need to be considered in a different framework that is able to clarify how its textual organisation is built on indeterminacy and generates a specific ethical message. Moreover, focusing only on the fantastic elements of the novel does not help in either accounting for its hybridism or in tackling completely the author's choice of the genre of the novel as well as the refusal of the realistic mode, both crucial issues in Ortese's poetics.

Referring to another literary modality, that of literary nonsense, will further help us to understand the importance of the issue of

¹¹ Venuti, 'A Lizard for the Ages'.

¹² Sharon Wood, 'Fantasy, narrative and the natural world in Anna Maria Ortese', in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, ed. by Billiani and Sulis, pp.141-49 (p. 142).

¹³ Ibid, p. 142.

¹⁴ La Penna, p. 160.

interpretation, of its function, and of the role of the reader, which are present and thematised in *L'Iguana* in a specific way. By using techniques of the literary nonsense mode, the novel not only presents an *impossible* world – a different reality, or, better, an *unreality* – but also a world that is continuously modified by language.

In *L'Iguana*, there is never interpretative certainty. In fact, its uncertainty is expanded as the story goes on: the level of the story is disrupted and confused, and the space-time setting goes awry, eventually culminating in the protagonist's delirium. La Penna speaks of 'fluctuations of the text'¹⁵ and argues that 'the symbolic surplus of the narrative [...] rather than standing in the way of a progressive "*fantasticizzazione*" of the text, cooperates with it and, to a certain extent, accelerates the process.'¹⁶ Instead of talking of *fantasticizzazione*, I would suggest that it is in this interpretative problem and in these fluctuations that indeterminacy and nonsense come to cooperate. Literary nonsense is not only an oppositional (or, parasitic) mode to realism – similarly to the fantastic – but it also represents its complete overturning, and its inversion. This is to say, while the fantastic interacts with realism, by contrast, and insofar as nonsense represents an *irruption into* realism, this genre completely *reverses* realism. Adopting such a point of view on the novel will enable us therefore to consider more productively how Ortese aimed to dismantle the traditional novel and common sense at the same time. In doing this, we shall also reflect on the idea of the novel as a tool with which human beings can interpret the world and themselves, as well as on literary communication as an ambiguous and disturbing practice.

3. 'Le confessioni di un pazzo innamorato di un'iguana': stepping through the door of the *as if*

Interestingly entitled *La passeggiata in via Manzoni*, the first chapter of the novel opens with a very Manzonian address to the reader: 'Come tu

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 163.

sai, Lettore' (p. 15).¹⁷ The reference to Manzoni is overt not only because Manzoni's direct addresses to the reader have become almost proverbial for the Italian readership, but also because Manzonian references are present all through the first chapter (in which irony is the predominant tone), and, in fact, continue to reverberate throughout the novel. The first chapter, besides introducing the situation and the characters of Daddo (whose full name Aleardo might be a reference to the romantic poet Aleardo Aleardi, too) and Adelchi (significantly another Manzonian echo), is mostly devoted to the discussion of *milanesità* and to a moral description of the *milanesi*. This is enacted through digressions (another Manzonian strategy),¹⁸ performed by a strong narratorial voice who comments and signals the beginning and the end of digressions (e.g. 'sia detto fra parentesi', p. 17; 'E a questo punto vale la pena di accennare a una strana confusione che dominava allora la cultura lombarda [...]. Per tornare ai nostri due giovani', p. 18; note also the patronising 'nostri', another Manzonian trait). Rondini invites us to reflect on the use of appeals to the reader in Ortese's works as a strategy in the direction of a 'ripresa e scardinamento' that also contributes to the making of *L'Iguana* as a traditional novel:

di questa dialettica fa parte la stessa strategia del colloquio col lettore, tesa a traghettare il destinatario dal visibile all'invisibile, confortarlo nel regno ambiguo del sogno nonché dargli qualche riferimento in una narrazione spesso sospesa, rarefatta e irrealista.¹⁹

Notably, in *L'Iguana* these appeals are not only used to mock Manzoni's style and to comment ironically on the characters, but also on the one hand to invite the reader to 'percepire simpateticamente il personaggio di Daddo', and on the other to invite him 'a percepire la sostanza della vicenda e a non appiattirsi sulla banalità'.²⁰

On the level of content, during the opening of the novel, we have the first tirade against the publishing industry (in particular, the Milanese

¹⁷ On the appeals to the reader see Rondini (see below, footnote n. 17).

¹⁸ See Santovetti, 'Alessandro Manzoni and the Art of Digression', in *Digression*, pp. 13-28.

¹⁹ Rondini, p. 102.

²⁰ Rondini, pp. 102-03.

one); the reflection on the contrast between the immorality of the *milanesi* and Daddo's pureness at heart; and the pretexts of the journey that will follow (the need to find a property and a manuscript). With reference to the style, meanwhile, we can say that this first chapter exemplifies the style of the entire novel, which we can define as baroque with a quite entangled syntax. An example of this is the aggregation of the keyword, *oppresso*. Significantly, this also serves as an anticipation of one of the most important themes of the novel, and the encounter with the oppressed iguana within slavery:

[...] e, insomma, i Lombardi avevano per certo che un mondo *oppresso* abbia qualcosa da dire, mentre, se l'*oppressione* è antica e autentica, l'*oppresso* non esiste neppure, o non ha più coscienza di esserlo, ma solo esiste, sebbene senza una vera coscienza, l'*oppressore* che a volte, per vezzo, simula i modi che sarebbero legittimi della vittima, se ancora esistesse. (p. 18) [my emphases]

Manzoni is not the only repertoire echo that we find in the novel. As summarised by Pietro Citati, *L'Iguana* is

un sapiente coacervo di libri: dietro la lieve aura manzoniana, omaggio al più grande di tutti i Lombardi da parte di un eroe Lombardo, si nasconde un racconto di avventure marine, che profuma di *Robinson Crusoe* e di *Isola del Tesoro*: Stevenson dà una mano esangue a fraterna a Leopardi.²¹

To Citati's *coacervo* of books, we might also add Dante, Umanumo and Manrique. Indeed, we seem to have here a kind of *genre pastiche* that juxtaposes different literary genres and repertoire strategies thus creating an ungraspable hybrid form. This hybrid nature of the narrative is the first indeterminacy element of the novel. Although many referential hints are given to the reader in the form of intertextual references and tones – suggesting, variously, that we are in front of a philosophical novel, now a moral one, now a fantastic story, now a fable and a reverie – it is impossible to decide which genre best accounts for the novel and the reading experience it promotes.

²¹ Pietro Citati, "La principessa dell'isola", in Ortese, *L'Iguana*, pp. 198-204 (p. 201).

If, on the one hand, the first chapter is axiomatic of the tone of the novel, on the other hand, it is also somewhat independent from the rest of the novel and serves as a kind of frame. ‘Ci vorrebbero le confessioni di un qualche pazzo, magari innamorato di una iguana’ is the reaction of Daddo when asked by Adelchi to go and search for manuscripts on a remote island. Although innocently whispered by the Count, it anticipates – like an ironic, self-fulfilling prophecy – the rest of the story and sheds a self-reflective light on the entire novel. In fact, we could say that this sentence is self-reflexive in two senses. On the one hand, it refers to what will *actually* come next; on the other, it plays with the ambiguity of the facts themselves. I mean to stress that, not only will Daddo meet don Ilario (who will be revealed as a madman who had been in love with a monkey first and then with an iguana, and who writes about his pains), but Daddo himself will also fall in love with the iguana and, eventually, at the end of the novel, will fall into delirium and, literally, lose the plot.

I consider this as the very first nonsense element of the work: we have a pure linguistic utterance that then becomes true – and therefore, a modification of the fictional reality by means of language. This is both one of the most typical strategies and themes of nonsense literature,²² and also a clear warning to the reader as to the purely linguistic nature of the world unfolded in front of his eyes and, as such, to the power of the narrator in manipulating that world. Furthermore, this sentence by Daddo can be considered as a sign of a stepping through the door of the ‘as if’.²³ As a

²² For introductory readings on literary nonsense see: Susan Stewart: *Nonsense, Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988); Eizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952); Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense* (London: Routledge, 1994); Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du Sens* (1969), trans. into English *The Logic of sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

²³ For a definition of the ‘as-if’ as the condition of game and fiction in human practices, see Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972). See also, Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As If’: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. by C.K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace & company, 1924). On the anthropological value of ‘as-if’ practices (including fiction), see also Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013).

consequence, we can interpret the whole of the first chapter as a kind of framing device for the self-contained nonsensical facts that follow, relating to the island. Daddo's sentence works like the casting of a spell. There is no irruption of the fantastic into the real but, rather, a total transformation of the real, metaphorically signaled by the journey and by the transfer of the action onto the island. Indeed, it is not an irruption, but a complete *translation*, in the etymological meaning of word from the Latin, *transferre*, i.e. to transfer, to bring over. Daddo's journey and this transfer onto the island (an uncharted place, whose name nevertheless echoes the *real* Ocaña, a Spanish region; significantly, the action begins in a very precise street, via Manzoni, of a precise city: Milan) are enough to create a kind of narrative frame that signals the crossing of a boundary and, therefore, the possibility of inversion and overturning, typical of literary nonsense.²⁴

According to one of the most influential theorists of literary nonsense, Susan Stewart,²⁵ whilst, in realistic genres, the narrative frame inhabits an undistinguishable continuum with the surrounding reality, overturning and inversion require that the frame be signalled such that it becomes the mark of an exact difference. Frames, with the purpose of the reorganisation of reality within a closed field (in this case, we can consider the island as a closed field), are adapted to the arbitrary borders of the content. The borders of the content might, nevertheless, be incongruous to those of the frame.²⁶ As Annovi points out:

In *L'Iguana*, the island is the "otherwise invisible" which literally emerges on the page thanks to writing, like a volcanic atoll miraculously reemerging from the depths of the ocean where it remained for ages after the eruption that created it. Referring to the expression coined by Homi Bhabha, one could conceive Ocaña as a "third space," a space of hybridity that "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation". Such a third space, I would add, is also an "intensity zone," a site in which representation

²⁴ On literary nonsense and boundary crossing see the chapter 'Play with Boundaries', in Stewart, pp. 85-115.

²⁵ Stewart, p. 48.

²⁶ Stewart, p. 48.

and control reach a maximum of intensity and thus become visible, a space of transparency.²⁷

The uncharted island represents the stepping inside a frame, precisely because of its being *uncharted*.

4. An hybrid novel on the edge of nonsense

In borrowing tones, strategies and atmospheres from different literary genres and modalities, then, *L'Iguana* makes use of several techniques to enhance its indeterminacy. Such techniques can be considered *nonsense* techniques. Among these, we find: the tension of different meanings; the island as a frame, within which linguistic utterances have the power to change the reality contained in the frame itself; a reflection on literary communication, the role of the reader, and ideas of language, meaning, and interpretation; an inversion of the category of human and animal; an overturning of space and time relationship; references to and inversions of elements of *common sense*: for example, the existence of God and the trial for his death and the liminal-taboo theme of the erotic experience with an animal; and other recurring themes such as philosophy, language, and lunacy.

If we compare the features of this novel to the following definition of literary nonsense by Wim Tigges,²⁸ we can observe how these elements position *L'Iguana* at least at the edge of literary nonsense. According to Tigges' definition, nonsense is reserved for a literary work that, first of all, presents an uninterrupted tension between meaning and absence of meaning. Further, in a work of literary nonsense, we find a play with language and logic, which results in the creation of a reality by means of

²⁷ Annovi, pp. 328-329. The quote by Bhabha is from Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 207-21 (p. 211). Also the anti-colonial discourse of the novel is triggered by *indeterminacy*. As Annovi again points out: 'the map of Ocaña reveals itself as unreliable as the narrator of her story: not merely inaccurate, but ever-changing, open, opposed to the supposed realism of the colonial cartographic accuracy and discourse of (imperial) power'. Annovi, p. 328

²⁸ Tigges, p. 47.

language. Finally, a direct relationship with the reader – invited to take part in interpretation, but also dissuaded on the possibility of success of such an activity – is crucial. The number of literary works that fully fall under this definition is relatively low, whilst we have many examples of texts that have, in a higher or lower degree, a certain level of nonsense. I suggest that this possession of nonsense elements, even if not strictly nonsense, is the case of *L'Iguana*, as the elements mentioned above can show. What happens in *L'Iguana* – its trajectory of development towards indeterminacy – fits indeed also with another interesting definition of literary nonsense provided by Tigges:

[Nonsense literature] balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning. This balance is effected by playing with the rules of language, logic, prosody and representation, or a combination of these. In order to be successful, nonsense must at the same time invite the reader to interpretation and avoid the suggestion that there is a deeper meaning which can be obtained by considering connotations or associations, because these lead to nothing. The elements of word and image that may be used in this play are primarily those of negativity or mirroring, imprecision or mixture, infinite repetition, simultaneity, and arbitrariness, a dichotomy between reality and the words and images which are used to describe it must be suggested. The greater the distance or tension between what is presented, the expectations that are evoked, and the frustration of these expectations, the more nonsensical the effect will be.²⁹

As we have seen also in the previous chapters and analyses, texts which present a high degree of indeterminacy tend to focus our attention on the solicitations that they offer to the reader, the reader's centrality in the performance of the text itself, and on the state of literary communication and on the human need for it. The use of literary nonsense strategies stresses more prominently this focus, insofar as they explicitly signal a reflection on the interpretative issue and on the interaction between text and reader, by requiring greater interpretative effort. Moreover, in *L'Iguana*, these issues also become themes of the story; although the novel conveys a strong moral message, its meaning refuses to coalesce in a coherent allegorical or symbolic reading.

²⁹ Tigges, p. 47.

L'Iguana, with its constant reflection on literary production (from every perspective: that of the audience, the author, and the publisher), as well as with its structure, challenges the idea of literary tradition, the sense of a hierarchy inside literary communication, and the notions of authorship and readership themselves (both of which are repeatedly dissected, negated, and re-constructed). Moreover, by challenging these relationships, it also brings them to the attention of the reader.

In order to understand better these aspects, I will now proceed to examine, with the support of textual examples, how the nonsense-like elements present in *L'Iguana* contribute to the generation of indeterminacy.

The first element we shall consider is parody, which is present in the novel in many *Manzonian* passages as well as in some parts that seem to mock the tone of philosophical novels. Parody produces indeterminacy because it produces an inversion and because, in a sense, it negates the source model or genre.³⁰ The text's meaning looks therefore "confiscated": although, on the one hand, it takes the form of a genre or model, on the other hand, its content is inverted thus generating a 'dispersal of any univocal meaning'.³¹ The continuous references to Manzoni and the mocking of a narratorial voice hinting at that of the *Promessi Sposi* is a disingenuous act of irony which, in the first place, warns the reader of the narrator's unreliability. But it also acts at other levels, such as the polemic targeting the book-publishing industry and Milanese society as well as attempting to draw the reader's attention to a specific issue (see above about the appeals to the reader).

Another important nonsense element is the figurative made *literal*, that we have already seen in the case of the 'confessioni di un pazzo innamorato di un'iguana' in section 3. Susan Stewart reflects on the effects of such a technique:

when the metaphorical is made literal [...] the reader is put into jeopardy. When discourse invents itself in either of these ways, the interpretive assumptions of the reader are inverted as well [...]. The

³⁰ See also chapter III on *La pietra lunare* by Landolfi for a discussion of irony as a textual strategy that allows for the mutually exclusive.

³¹ Stewart, p. 26.

interpretation must begin again and again, fragmenting its assumptions.³²

This technique, furthermore, leads the audience to question the nature of communication and, more importantly, the validity of representation. In this way, literary communication, by making blatant its *poietical* power, impedes interpretation and questions the reality of realistic representation. In simple terms, if literary language can make up reality, how can we understand reality or reify its distinction from fiction or literature?

Many strategies and references that make visible the scaffolding of the literary text, or that display the fictional status of a literary text make blatant the crossing of the borders between consciousness and unconsciousness, and between the real and the fictional world. Such borders are concerned with literary discourse, and their crossing has the effect of collocating the text and the reader in the undetermined and ambiguous hinterland of this border. In *L'Iguana*, borders are typically made clear in two situations: in the metanarrative comments of the narrator, and in the literary conversations of Ilario and Daddo. We can see this at work in the following quotes:

Questi ragionamenti che per forza di cose prendono, a narrarli, un certo tempo, Aleardo li fece con una sveltezza di sogno. (p. 55)

“Sentii parlare di realismo. Che cos’è questo?”

“Dovebbe essere” rispose il conte un po’ impacciato “un’arte di illuminare il reale. Purtroppo, non si tiene conto che il reale è a più strati, e l’intero Creato, quando si è giunti ad analizzare fin l’ultimo strato, non risulta affatto reale, ma pura e profonda immaginazione”. (p. 60)

In the first situation, the reader is repeatedly made aware of the medium of communication in which he is involved. The second situation, meanwhile, augments the indeterminacy of the text, insofar as Daddo points to the artifice of realism thereby legitimating the textual blanks and activating indeterminacy devices. La Penna agrees, stating: ‘In a text as consciously preoccupied with questions of representation and relationship between fiction and reality as this one, the implied reader’s set of literary

³² Stewart, p. 80.

expectations and preconceptions is continually activated'.³³ Of course, irony – often in the form of the narratorial voice – has a significant role in informing

the meta-literary-oriented sections of the novel [...]. The more the characters question the boundaries and limits of realism while in proximity to a strange reptilian servant, the more the reader is made aware of the implicit criticism of this mode of representation.³⁴

And, of course, *L'Iguana's* critique of realism is informed by a specific, ethical and moral message (see below).

Moving to the content of the text, we find a taboo element, firstly, in the form of the erotic relationship of the marquis with the monkey, Perdita and, then, with the Iguana and, later, in the form of the infatuation of the Count for the Iguana. The taboo element of these erotic relationships can be perceived to the extent that they are *suggested* but not explicitly expressed. As a consequence, they remain undetermined. The erotic attraction to an animal is a common taboo and a liminal phenomenon in *common sense* culture. Susan Stewart's *Nonsense, Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*, deals with the anthropological roots of literary nonsense as a social discourse in opposition to the dominant social discourse (*common sense*). We can observe that Stewart relates nonsense itself to a taboo behaviour – a kind of anomaly or aberration. Folklore nonsense is described as a marginal, or better liminal activity.³⁵ According to Victor Turner's definition of *liminality*, we can define as liminal something that is neither *this* nor *that* and, instead, that is *both* at the same time. For Turner, what defines liminality is the coincidence of opposite processes and notions in *one* representation.³⁶ Moving from Turner's definition, we can add that what is liminal is also, by its proper nature, undetermined; as such, the liminal and the taboo

³³ La Penna, p. 175.

³⁴ La Penna, pp. 179-80.

³⁵ According to Stewart nonsense is an anthropological 'necessity [...], a kind of taboo behavior' (p. 38). Similarly Tigges defines nonsense as a "threat" to society, holding up the processes of social interaction by making the discourse of everyday life conscious of its own procedures' (p. 139).

³⁶ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 28.

produce indeterminacy. In the case of *L'Iguana*, it is not only the ambiguity with which the taboo is employed to produce indeterminacy, but also it is the ungraspable and disturbing nature of the creatures involved (not only beast-like but also considered devil-like) and the reticence with which the characters refer to the creatures. Consider the opacity of the following passages:

[...] reggeva sulle spalle una minuscola e oscura creatura. (p. 44)

[...] quella scimmietta (“è dunque *una scimmietta*” si disse il conte, persuaso fino a poco prima, non sapeva bene perché, che si trattasse di un uccello), quella scimmietta, di nome Perdita, era molto cara ai suoi genitori, e cresciuta con lui come una sorella. (p. 45)

[...] era risaputo che, nell'isola, il marchese aveva avuto e pare avesse tuttora, una “fiamma”. Questa “fiamma”, purtroppo (il conte ascoltava con dolorosa attenzione), era una bestia, cara una volta alla famiglia del giovane, ma sempre una bestia, e stupida, per di più, come il demonio. [...] ogni volta che pronunciava la parola “bestia”, Salvato non poteva fare a meno, e il conte lo vedeva, d'inghiottire qualcosa, quasi a frenare uno scoppio più irresistibile d'ilarità, come se tale parola fosse solo un termine di comodo per rappresentare una più profonda e innominabile realtà; [...] “Una bestia – che intendi dire?”. “Il signor conte lo sa”. “No, che non lo so” [...] “Non è che la creatura in questione non sia una bestia... è una bestia come tutti siamo [...] ma è una bestia anche per un altro fatto, che, questo è grave... e mi sa che il signor conte, così istruito, dovrebbe afferrare...”. (p. 138)

This reticence surrounds the character of the Iguana not only because of the erotic relationships of which she is the centre, but also because she is treated by Salvato (the Count's sailor), by don Ilario's brothers, and by the Hopins family like the embodiment of evil, or better, the devil, whose name (here, we have another taboo) cannot even be uttered:

[...] queste battute, riferendosi a un personaggio che non occorre nominare, ebbero il potere col loro quieto sarcasmo, di far arrossire il conte. (p. 41)

Qualcuno stava ad origliare non visto... (p. 42) [my emphasis]

Reticence is again active in this passage where the Count is talking to the Iguana:

“Iguana,” disse il conte (non voleva chiamarla col suo nome, sentendone non so che vergogna, e vi era nei suoi occhi un che di amaro e supplichevole) “perché menti continuamente? perché...”; e si fermò, e non gli riusciva di andare avanti perché la domanda che aveva formulato nella sua mente era “Perché ti comporti come un demonio?”. (p. 146).

Only the detached narrator makes explicit the devil-like nature of the Iguana: ‘la personificazione del Male, o servetta, o Iguanuccia’ (p. 103), and with an ironically affectionate tone: ‘la nostra diabolica iguanuccia’ (p. 129).

Another aspect that concerns the content of the novel is the thematisation of size and dimensions. In this respect, we shall first consider all the diminutives and hypocorisms that are used to refer to *L’Iguana* – or to her *equivalents* (such as the *scimmietta*, Perdita) – and reflect on how they produce ambiguity in different ways. Firstly, the use of affectionate forms contrasts with the bestiality of the creature whilst also confusing the perception of her age, with effect that she is paradoxically treated like elderly, small woman and a little girl (compare below section VI.5). Every time the Iguana occupies the scene, we encounter terms such as ‘zampine’, ‘bestiola’, ‘iguanuccia’, and ‘la servetta’, and we also find ‘animuccia bestiale’ [*sic*]. The use of these affectionate forms is a projection of two important themes of the novel: pity towards the oppressed, and the taboo erotic love. But the theme of size and, especially, change of size is also a typical nonsense theme, together with that of the body – a literary nonsense obsession (to which testify the many miniaturisations and gigantisms in classics of literary nonsense, such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*). In *L’Iguana*, too, we can observe changes in size of the house (thus playing with another nonsense *topos*, that of the “impossible house”)³⁷ which, from its very first description, provokes a sense of uneasiness in Daddo and in the reader. I have chronologically traced the mutations of the house, as charted in mutating descriptions, below:

³⁷ Discussed by Stewart, who lists the the image of the ‘house’ and of the ‘impossible house’ as a typical circular and framing nonsense device, cfr. Stewart, p. 129.

[...] parve al conte più l'indicazione di una casa, come usa nel teatro moderno, che una vera abitazione, e ne provò un senso di incertezza (p. 28);

[...] all'interno appariva molto più grande e bella, nella sua tristezza, di quanto si notasse da fuori [...]... tutto ciò che si mostra nelle case abbandonate, là era in gran copia, e questo faceva uno strano contrasto con l'affermazione del marchese, che la Iguana pensava a tutto, e teneva ordine. No, non vi era ordine; qualcosa lo rendeva impossibile, e solo apparentemente l'iguana era destinata a questo. E sempre più, di fronte a tali contraddizioni, che andavano prendendo un significato abbastanza sinistro, il conte si domandava quale fosse il mistero di quella casa (pp. 34-35);

[...] fosse perché il mutismo dell'ora rendeva stranamente viventi tutte le cose, provò una inquietudine, il conte, che lo fece alzare e andare dritto verso quell'armadio, che aperse per vedere se non contenesse (ormai non si sarebbe meravigliato di nulla) qualche uccello incatenato, o una piccola tigre intenta a pettinarsi (p. 54);

La casa del Segovia, che tu hai visto Lettore, nelle tristi condizioni da noi descritte, era infatti profondamente mutata, lucida, splendida, la stessa casa patrizia dei Hopins. (p. 158)

Another element, a temporal and spatial one, involves both the content and the structure of the literary work. At the beginning of the novel, the island is only roughly described as 'un punto verde bruno, a forma di corno, o ciambella spezzata, che non risultava sulla carta' (p. 23). Although, towards the halfway point of the novel, the narrator provides us with a (not very detailed) map of the island (p. 82) – and, although the plot follows a chronological order of events, we can observe many phenomena of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding space and time, which ultimately culminate in the delirious final part. Borri provides a succinct account of the spatio-temporal terrain of the novel, suggesting it consists of:

improvvisi e inattesi riferimenti a situazioni e aspetti della nostra attualità, inseriti nel contesto di una trama svincolata da ogni riferimento a tempi precisi e dirette realtà. Si susseguono, volta a volta, numerosi accenni alle leggi economiche più conosciute, alle attuali imperanti regole di mercato, all'industria turistica di massa, all'andamento dell'attività editoriale, ai compensi per gli autori e simili.³⁸

³⁸ Giancarlo Borri, *Invito alla lettura di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mursia, 1988), p. 59.

Though the time of the journey is explicitly defined by the narrator as May (of a year more or less contemporary to the publication of the novel, in the context of the Cold War), we have references to April: ‘quasi in un dormiveglia quando aprile incomincia’ (p. 35). Moreover, the island seems dominated by its own temporal and spatial rules: ‘Qui la notte non è breve’ (p. 65) and, for a while, it appears to have two moons. Further, the manuscripts of the marquis are dated, ‘Ocaña, addì 37 ottobre. Secolo attuale’ (p. 46). The collapse of space and time produces indeterminacy in as much as it negates the novel’s continuity with reality and results in the suspension of daily life and – as a consequence – a suspension of common sense. Compare the following examples:

Don Ilario non rispose subito, come accade nei sogni, che talora, anzi, passano due o tre anni. (p. 70)

[...] e gli parve che il colore della notte mutasse [...] come per una seconda levata della luna. (p. 71)

[...] gli pareva che durante la notte la *Luisa* si fosse allontanata, per non dire che l’isola di Ocaña si fosse allontanata dalla *Luisa*. (p. 133)

[L’isola] sembrava ora disabitata, se non fosse che le querce, inquietate da un invisibile veleno, da rosse erano diventate nere, e poi, a tratti, ancora rosse, come se stessero bruciando. (p. 141)

Ecco che, ora, [l’iguana] aveva una mano, con le sue cinque ditine scure che si muovevano, e gli faceva cenno ch’erano cinque – cinque anni – che si trovava laggiù [in fondo al pozzo], e molto soffriva. (p. 157)

As La Penna highlights: ‘The initial precise chronology gives way to an internalised perception of time’.³⁹ We can observe this subjectivization of time in a passage that precedes the delirium of the Count in which he says to don Ilario,

“[A]nanzitutto, mio caro, perdonami se nel nostro colloquio di *alcuni anni fa*, mi permisi di mostrarti amicizia”. (p. 151)

To which the marquis replies,

³⁹ La Penna, p. 167.

[s]enza badare a quello straziante sbandamento del conte circa l'entità del tempo passato (poche ore appena!). (p. 152)

Finally, we need to consider all the changes and mutations that involve the setting of the story as well as its characters. They generate indeterminacy while attaching uncertainty both to the scene and the actors. It is worth noting that the occurrence of transformations is often temporary; for example, in the case of don Ilario, his identity is continuously shifted, almost schizophrenically, to his evil alter ego, don Jeronimo. Described as a pinched young man whose sufferance has made him look wrinkled and run down, all of a sudden, in the light of the moon, don Ilario appears with:

un volto di una grazia e luminosità meravigliose. Le rughe, e gli affanni che le avevano causate, completamente cancellate, sparite. [...] Più nessuna traccia della sua tremenda vecchiezza. (pp. 69-70)

It is, again, abruptly that the new (or better, parallel) identity of don Ilario becomes clear to Daddo:

DON JERONIMO (ché tale, al conte, si presentava ora Ilario). (p. 110)

We can further observe the abruptness of don Ilario's alteration in the following examples:

“Parti presto” continuò Ilario, che adesso sembrava Jeronimo. (p. 119)

Aggrottando appena la fronte, don Ilario-Jeronimo aveva seguito il volo della pietra. (p. 120)

[I]l sorriso del Mendes [don Jeronimo] (perché non era altri che il vero Mendes, ora), pericolosamente mutava, deformandosi in aperta impazienza. (151)

To the extent that, ‘[i]n *L'Iguana*, “identity” seems to be fatally intertwined with the very discursive nature of our apprehension of reality and therefore itself a fictional fallacy among others’,⁴⁰ the three main characters are accordingly all subject to a certain instability of their forms. The iguana's composure, as we are going to see in the next section, is

⁴⁰ La Penna, p. 177.

constitutively unstable; don Ilario is presented in a split identity with his alter-ego don Jeronimo; while Daddo's transformation is produced by the later condition of a mental disorder. Both in the case of the marquis and of the count, we are confronted by lunacy and mental instability, a theme which is typical of literary nonsense, and which epitomises the framing statement of Daddo in the first chapter: *le confessioni di un pazzo*.

Lunacy and transfiguration escalate before ultimately culminating in the trial for the murder of God (in the form of a white butterfly), the hallucination into which Daddo falls before dying. We should note how this episode combines two other typical themes of literary nonsense: the obsession with God (and the taste for blasphemy), and the trial. Famous examples of these two themes are the finding of the equation that expresses God's surface in *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, 'pataphysicien'* by Alfred Jarry, and the trial in *Alice in Wonderland* in which, as she significantly undergoes the umpteenth change in her size and refuses to comply with the trial's proceedings, Alice begins her exit from the fantasy world (just as it happens in *L'Iguana* with the disease and the death of Daddo).

Just like for the other events of the novel, the circumstances of the trial in *L'Iguana* are initially unclear (especially to Daddo) as '[i]l processo non era chiaro, in quanto non si sapeva ancora il nome di colui che aveva ucciso Dio, e nemmeno se Egli era veramente morto' (p. 163). This is the case until it becomes evident that the culprit is the Count himself. The temporal and spatial settings have now lost any coherence, as the following passage demonstrates:

[p]rima di inoltrarci col giovane gentiluomo nella sala dell'udienza, situata in qualche parte dell'isola non visibile, probabilmente tra le radici di un ulivo o di una quercia, siamo tenuti a testimoniare di alcune deboli grida che si udirono LASSÙ (segno che il viaggiatore era in qualche GIÙ). (p. 162)

After all, the narrator had just a few pages before asked the reader to be patient:

Dove fosse realmente il conte [...], noi, Lettore, se pure ciò ti parrà strano, non possiamo dirti. Ma tu, se di questi continui passaggi da un luogo all'altro, di mutamenti di scena, e spezzati dialoghi, e rapido inserirsi di un luogo in un altro; se di questi intarsi di casa, di vento, di pozzo, di sentieri frementi e muti interni [...] sarai portato a chiedere spiegazione, rifletti, in attesa che possiamo dartene una (ammesso che vi sia una spiegazione a questo mondo di imperscrutabili fenomeni, dove tu anche vivi), rifletti, pensieroso Lettore [...]. E cos'è il tempo [...]? cos'è lo spazio, se non un'ingenua convenzione? e un'isola, una città, il mondo stesso con le sue tumultuose capitali, che altro sono se non il teatro dove il cuore, colpito dai rimorsi, pone i suoi ardenti interrogativi? (p. 161).

All the elements of the story that we have just considered produce indeterminacy in different forms: by creating ambiguity and contradictions, by inverting or transforming the fictional world continuously and, as such, by generating impediments for the reader to come to a closure of the interpretation.

We must consider, moreover, the “trespassing” and the flaunting of literary borders, as well as negation and the overturning of common sense. Both in the dialogues between the characters and in the comments of the narrator, we have a layer of philosophical discourse. As La Penna perceptively remarks, at the same time as being ‘an experiment with form and language as an ironic post-Cartesian take on time and space, *L'Iguana* is also a powerful philosophical meditation on identity, subjectivity and perception’.⁴¹ Often referring to ethics – and especially to the evil nature of human beings and their relationship with the natural environment – the philosophical dialogues and comments also contemplate the theme of the real and of the possibility of its representation – a recurring issue, either explicitly or implicitly, in all the novels that we have analysed thus far. We can best observe these philosophical ruminations in the following dialogue, led by the marquis:

“Sì, vi è del vero in quanto asserivi tu, poco prima, Daddo, sulla inesistenza di un vero tratto di demarcazione tra reale e irreale”. (p. 71)

He continues:

⁴¹ La Penna, p. 167.

“Ogni cosa, anche appena pensata, subito è reale. Ciò che ci abbisogna, ecco ciò ch’è reale; e per ciò possiamo anche morire, o permettere ad altri di morire. La morte nostra, o altrui, più non importa”. (p. 71)

Apart from their philosophical content, and their implications on the reality and the indeterminacy of the novel, we ought also to emphasise that these difficult conversations, recalled in Italian in the text, are reported to be in Portuguese – the language spoken on the island and by the marquis, but that Daddo does not fully master.⁴² Nevertheless, there appears no impediment to him in conducting highly speculative, complex confirmations in a language he hardly speaks. This, once again, brings to our attention the artificiality of literary communication.

The elements discussed in this section jeopardise attempts to counterbalance the fictional dimension, insofar as they prevent the reader from relating to the text with his own everyday experience and from projecting onto it his common sense standards. This is, furthermore, emphasised by the central impulse of the ambiguity of the novel, the character of the Iguana, which as we will see in next section, increases the indeterminacy of the novel.

5. The iguana as an indeterminacy impulse

Much more than just the co-protagonist of the novel, the eponymous Iguana is, rather, its pivot and the catalyst of all the socio-philosophical themes conveyed by the book (for example, the theme of oppression and the relationship between man and nature). But also, I suggest, she is the very impulse of the indeterminacy of the novel. She is a liminal and undetermined “clump” in the dynamics of the narrative. The Iguana, Estrellita, and her alter egos (the monkey, Perdita and, at length, the maid, Perdita) represent the act of trespassing borders (literary, ethical, ontological and human) and, further, the inversion of different categories (the human, the animal, the sexual, and the chaste). The very labelling of

⁴²Although, even the linguistic skill of the Count is in some way ambiguous as we are at first told that Portuguese is a ‘lingua che conosceva benissimo’ (p. 27) and then that he had a ‘non raffinata conoscenza della lingua’ (p. 52).

the character as Iguana, whose existing counterpart is a herbivorous lizard that changes colour with the seasons, indicates her unstable and temporary nature; this is complemented by Annovi's notion that Iguana is 'a polyvalent label to give to a subject [...], a multilayered one: shifting from identity to identity and thus refusing ontological stability'.⁴³ To account for these inversions we could refer to different patterns like, for example, Freud's theory of the *Unheimlich*, or Merleau-Ponty's theory of the *chair du monde* relating to the fluctuation of the human and animal.⁴⁴ Though these theoretical perspectives offers a fruitful pattern for reflection, they fail to account for the comic or grotesque effect that "animality" produces in this case (alongside the sense of uneasiness and pity). Further, they cannot accommodate the way in which such effects generated by the Iguana's appearance are augmented by the presence and interventions of the third-person narrator.⁴⁵

In what follows, I will give account of the way in which the Iguana is the impulse of indeterminacy of the novel. I shall start with the very first

⁴³ Annovi, p. 339.

⁴⁴ Compare Marianna Deganutti, 'Chair du monde in Landolfi and Ortese: The Fluctuation of Gurù and Estrellita between Human and Animal (and Stone)', *The Italianist* 36.1 (2016), 74-88, in which Deganutti accounts for the uncanny character of l'iguana (and of Gurù in Landolfi's *La pietra lunare*) by referring to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation of the so-called chair du monde – a common ground that removes the boundaries between beings, as expressed in his last incomplete work *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), in which Merleau-Ponty emphasised the role of the body as the primary site of knowing the world.

⁴⁵ Of a similar opinion is Flora Ghezzi, who defines the various theories of the fantastic and of the *Unheimlich* 'unsatisfactory in defining her [Ortese's] poetics' since '[t]here is an inescapable binarism (Self/Other) inherent in the Freudian of the *Unheimlich* (Uncanny) on which the literary Fantastic is founded' that seems 'profoundly inadequate to explain the work of a woman writer who, to the contrary, wants to affirm through her fictional fantastic creatures the ontological *irreducibility* of the Other' by '[a]bandoning all philosophical binarisms and logocentric metaphysics'. Ghezzi, p. 9. See also Monica Farnetti, who in 'Anxiety Free' discusses the female tradition of the Fantastic and highlights how 'women writers tended to establish an empathetic relationship with the "strange"'. In particular according to Farnetti, Ortese's work 'spilling from the fantastic into theory, ethics, and prophecy, compels us to renounce the ultimate goal of distinguishing between reason and imagination, and proves conclusively that the experience of the uncanny does not necessarily have to take place and be narrated in the sphere of anxiety'. Monica Farnetti, 'Anxiety-free: Rereadings of the Freudian "Uncanny"', in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, ed. by Billiani and Sulis, pp. 46-56 (p. 47)

appearance of the creature, which invokes the complete uncertainty of Daddo: ‘all’ombra di quelle querce sedevano alcuni signori e una vecchia (tale sembrava), intenta a far la calza’ (p. 24). Although the image of the elderly woman is repeated during her second appearance, appearing in brackets just the same, this image is cast under suspicion in the third description by the use of the inverted commas enclosing the phrase, ‘old woman’: ‘c’era un pozzo: e presso di questo si affanava la “vecchia”’ (p. 29). In fact, the reader has already received a clue as to the bestiality of the servant via the subtitle of the chapter, *Il buon marchese. La bestia. Effetti di una sciarpa*.⁴⁶ Uncertainty and new elements of contradicting humanity, bestiality, affection and evilness continue to be given with every appearance of the Iguana; even if Daddo often finds himself questioning the true nature of the Iguana, he passively accepts all these contradictions. This is the significant passage in which the servant is presented like a talking being (eminently, a human trait), while Daddo helps her at the water well:

[Daddo] senza perdere tempo a chiedersi, come avrebbe voluto la religione che professava, se quella creatura era cristiana o pagana (come più sembrava), si precipitò accanto alla bestia, che gli levò in volto due occhietti supplichevoli e fantasticanti, mormorando – mentre il conte prendeva lui il secchio: “Grazie *o senhor!* Grazie!” [...]. [don Ilario] non appariva affatto preoccupato dall’impressione che una tale servente poteva fare su un forestiero; e bastò [...] a persuadere il Daddo che non vi era in quella ‘vecchietta’ nulla di meraviglioso; o se per caso vi era, faceva parte della normalità del mondo. (p. 30)

The Iguana is not only endowed with conventionally human features, she is also *feminine*. This adds another layer of uneasiness (insofar as it introduces the erotic impulse), especially because it is the only trait of the ambiguous creature that is never doubted (‘quella creatura era dopotutto un essere femminile’, p. 33). When she is given a scarf as a gift by the Count, the narrator describes her as follows:

⁴⁶ Every single chapter has a title and a subtitle which summarises (not always perspicuously) the content of the chapter that follows. Often these subtitles play with the reader; for example, chapter V of the first part is entitled *L’involontaria indiscrezione*, and the subtitle reads *Un pazzo. Ipotesi*. It soon becomes unclear whether ‘pazzo’ refers to the marquis, or in fact to Daddo.

Con certe mossetine che a qualsiasi spettatore, meno che al tenero conte, sarebbero parse grottesche, per non dire orripilanti, la creatura si aggiustò la sciarpa sul capo, inclinando, mentre ne annodava i capi, qua e là la lunga e paurosa testina, proprio come una donna davanti allo specchio. (p. 32)

However, just a few pages after this tender moment, the Iguana is described in all her most trivial bestiality during the dinner: ‘subito dopo andava ad accucciarsi, come annoiata, sotto il tavolo medesimo. Là, don Ilario più volte le gettò un osso’ (p. 36).

As we have seen during our discussion of the element of taboo in the novel, reticence accompanies every appearance of the Iguana. As Seno confirms:

La rappresentazione della piccola iguana, protagonista del romanzo, è, infatti, tutta giocata tramite atti narrativi densi di reticenza: una reticenza che segnala l’esplosione a livello dell’immaginario della mostruosità con cui viene percepita questa figura femminile che non è inscrivibile in nessuna immagine tradizionale e rassicurante.⁴⁷

Her plural nature produces even greater ambiguity when it comes to refer to her feelings, emotions or intellectual activities, as we can observe in the following quotes:

[...] quella paurosa e infantile creatura. (p. 53)

Benchè fosse una Iguana, e della specie più cupa, delle notti di luna provava una forte paura. (p. 93)

Le era venuta nella testina una immagine (non osiamo dire un’idea, in quanto ne aveva ben poche). (p. 130)

“Sono raffreddata, *o senhor*” la cui palese mendacia era corretta solo dalla sua insensatezza, tipica dei fanciulli, così incapaci, fino a una certa età, di senso del ridicolo. (p. 146)

In these quotes, we can also witness how, unlike her *femininity* (which is never doubted), the age of the Iguana is continually questioned. At the very beginning of the novel, she is confused with a wrinkled, elderly woman, at the same time as she is continuously addressed as a child or described in child-like behaviours whilst nevertheless usually engaged in adult activities. The paradoxical and ambiguous age of the Iguana is best

⁴⁷ Seno, p. 70.

exemplified in the moment in which Daddo, at night, notices the Iguana playing hopscotch:

Gioco ingenuo, se non bizzarro, se giocato durante la notte da una creatura come l'Iguana, che egli aveva già visto patire e sospirare e contare denari, con tutta la soffocazione e il tremendo silenzio di un'adulta. (p. 77)

Uncertainty and ambiguity generated by the ungraspable nature of the Iguana, and more generally, by her *otherness*, call for a reflection about identity that has many links with postcolonial discourse. As La Penna reflects: 'The progressive anthropomorphism of the Iguana is coupled with a parallel accentuation of the glaringly evident political overtones of the reptilian metaphor: the iguana stands for the oppressed "popolo"'.⁴⁸ I would like to emphasise, however, that, in the case of *L'Iguana*, this allegorical reading is made possible not simply by the use of animal representation. In fact, it is precisely her own natural *indeterminacy* and ambiguity which allows this "character" to become a fitting symbol and ideological message; as La Penna puts it: 'Estrellita is both the catalyst of an excess of attributions and definitions and the "oggetto non nominato del discorso"'.⁴⁹ I suggest that we need to emphasise that it is not only her unsettling presence but, more accurately, her interpretative *openness* as well as her protean hybrid nature, each of which culminate in a "contradictory zoology", that ultimately 'permits the reader to understand the reductive materialism underlying the politics of representation in colonial discourse'.⁵⁰

Finally, another indeterminacy feature of the Iguana is that, although endowed with the ability to talk, she speaks very rarely and her utterances are fragmented and elliptical, more similar to animal cries or to childish stammering, than to actual human speeches. The following extracts testify to this effect:

⁴⁸ La Penna, p. 169.

⁴⁹ La Penna, p. 170.

⁵⁰ La Penna, p. 170.

“*Não... Não... Não...*” e altre confuse interiezioni della lingua di Camoões, nel balbettio di quell’essere avevano un che di miagolante. (p. 32)

[...] venivano di là, ancora, ma soffocati, certi “*não... não... não...*”, ch’erano la voce di una disobbedienza cronica, non lontana dal pianto. (p. 33)

For La Penna:

her language, or the lack of it, becomes one more among Estrellita’s already numerous markers of difference. If the implied reader cannot rely on the main character’s words of self-expression, then he or she has to extricate Estrellita’s reality from other characters’ perception of her.⁵¹

The Iguana’s inability to self-signify, coupled with the diversity of points of view through which the reader can grasp a perception of the Iguana, thus contributes to the creation of greater indeterminacy, as derived from the unreliability of the narrator and from his ‘ironic exposure of what lies behind Daddo’s and other characters’ perception of Estrellita’.⁵²

The theme of perception gains greater importance over the course of the novel; nonetheless, there is never an end to the way in which uncertainty and doublings are attached to her and for the way in which Daddo, incapable of solving this puzzle, simply accepts it. He withdraws from the question of her identity:

[...] lo feriva il dolore per personalità così doppia (a giudicare da quanto aveva udito) della Iguanuccia. Dunque, essa non era una così semplice bestiolina, come aveva finora creduto, e anzi si poteva paragonare a una vera, per quanto decaduta, creatura umana [...] e del resto solo alti filosofi e studiosi possono dirci (seppure) dove finisce l’animale e comincia il vero essere umano. (p. 111)

This confusion is described like a sufferance, a painful failure, or as La Penna puts it, a tragedy:

Estrellita’s last transformation occurs when Daddo is approaching his end: he meets the servant once again and calls her “Perdita”. In this

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 175.

⁵² Ibid., p. 169.

name, the semantic halo of the Iguana is [...] annulled as an unredeemable “loss” of meaning,⁵³

so that

Daddo’s tragedy ultimately consists in the fact that he fails to recognize the Iguana as a real human being.⁵⁴

Thus, La Penna concludes:

Daddo’s failure to acquire access to intersubjectivity is the story told in Ortese’s novel. In like manner, we as readers share Daddo’s failure.⁵⁵

Even when a key for the puzzle seems to have been provided, there is no ultimate certainty. In other words, even when, eventually, the real identity of the Iguana is revealed, and we are told that she is a maid, this latter maid is not called by the name of Estrellita but “Perdita”, the name that belonged to the first animal loved by don Ilario, *la scimmietta*. This signals, unequivocally, a loss and, therefore, a lack. In this way, indeterminacy is prolonged and the tension between meaning and its absence is continuously renewed.

6. Against the common sense novel

As we have seen in this chapter, alongside other textual strategies, indeterminacy works at *L’Iguana*’s structural level by means of an unreliable extra-diegetic third-person narrator, who plays with literary tradition and with intertextual elements, and who uses parody and irony. This makes the relationship between the reader and the narrator ambiguous, because, as La Penna notices, ‘in the controlled environment of the fictional text, our perception of the story is constantly shaped by the ambiguous relationship between the internal focalizer [Daddo] and the narrating voice’.⁵⁶ This ambiguous relationship is borne out of the ‘narrator’s dualistic attitude toward the internal focalizer’s perception of

⁵³ La Penna, p. 173.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁶ La Penna, p. 173.

reality, oscillating between the endorsement and ironic questioning' and the effect is such that 'the narrator actively impedes the identification between reader and character and, as a result of this, the implied reader detaches himself or herself from the narrative'.⁵⁷ As we have seen in analysing the very first chapter of the novel, the narrator constantly intervenes with digressions, ironic comments about the characters, metanarrative and meta-literary comments, and makes direct addresses to the reader. Moreover, he often seems to alert the reader to the unreliability of fictional narrative, if not to its complete arbitrariness, thus discouraging the interpretative act. This is often conveyed through the meta-literary and metanarrative reflections of which I gave some examples above. Placed in the context of a questioning of literature as a means of communication, the many intertextual references, instead of legitimating literary expression with the quotation of classic authorities, result, instead, in parody, whose ability to create indeterminacy through inversion we have considered in section three.

This complex system of layers is further complicated by the use of baroque, and a difficult language – rich in oxymorons, synesthesias, anacoluthons – that permeates the entire novel and that is consistent with Ortese's poetic intention: 'tutta organizzata attorno al conflitto fra realtà e irrealtà'.⁵⁸ It is my argument that, unlike in realistic works (where characters are endowed with idiolects), here, language is completely in the control of the narrator. The dialogues of the marquis and the Count make use of the same complex syntax and vocabulary, alongside the use of digressions, addresses and parentheses. In this context, the Iguana's *multilingualism* (if we can call that mixture of beastly sounds and fragments of Portuguese words, often transcribed into Italian, such) stands out, thus contributing again to the character's *oddity*. But as it emerges from this, and from the dialogues of the two men (which use largely meta-narrative and meta-literary strategies), we also have, here, a self-reflexive approach as well as a *mise en abyme* of the interpretative act. Unlike realistic modalities – which *attempt* both to create the illusion of a

⁵⁷ La Penna, p. 174.

⁵⁸ Farnetti, p. 71.

continuity with reality and to soften the breach between the real and the fictional premises – the fictional devices of irony, parody and nonsense overtly signpost the paradox of such a breach. As Stewart summarises: ‘nonsense operations make apparent other paradoxes that common sense smooths over in everyday life. While common sense minimizes contradiction nonsense makes it gigantic’.⁵⁹

To conclude, I would like to propose an interpretation of Ortese’s novel as a twofold polemic. On the one hand, the novel raises a polemic against the dominant social discourse of the time (especially in addressing the problem of oppression and the ethical relationship between man and nature) that we can call *common sense*; on the other hand, it stands against the counterpart of common sense in the literary domain: the bourgeois realistic novel.

It will be useful to consider briefly what we mean by *common sense*, as this will help to clarify why it is crucial that we have such a consistent presence of literary nonsense techniques in the novel. We have suggested above how, as a social discourse, *nonsense* lives parasitically or in opposition to common sense. The investigations on the notion of common sense started with the forefathers of modern philosophy (dating back with Aristotle, before it was picked up by Cicero, Seneca and Vico, moving to the Scottish School of Common Sense and, finally, to Dewey and Kant). For Stewart, *common sense* and *nonsense* are both interpretative procedures that men use to come to grips with the surrounding world. The domain of common sense coincides, according to the American philosopher, with the domain of daily life and it is therefore an interpretative process geared toward providing an organisation of the world (a sort of *constructive* process). On the other hand, *nonsense* is a way of interpreting the world by *disorganising* it, sometimes in order to *re-organise* it in a different interpretative scheme or just to emphasise the necessity of a change in perspective. The way in which this act of deconstruction (and in a way of *reversed reconstruction*) works is, as we have suggested, parasitic, since the *nonsense* inverts the procedures used

⁵⁹ Stewart, p. 50.

by common sense. As such: ‘Our ways of making nonsense will depend upon our ways of making common sense’.⁶⁰ Irony is a typical example of what is produced in a narrative work (not necessarily fiction) when the two domains of reality are contemporarily presented as two conflicting voices. Irony also represents a threat to common sense in as much as it calls for a reflection on communication and is, in fact, meta-communicative. This is consistent with Stewart’s view that, ‘Irony emphasizes the textual, the interpreted, and the cultural, rather than the natural, status of social interaction’.⁶¹

In *Corpo celeste*, Ortese describes her aim in writing *L’Iguana*, as such: ‘scrissi una fiaba, un romanzo-fiaba, e lo volli difficile per reazione all’atroce linguaggio corrente. Una creatura mezzo bestia, mezzo umana (come io vedevo buona parte dell’umanità) era al centro – e parlava in modo umano, ma infantile, compassionevole’.⁶² The reaction to ‘l’atroce linguaggio corrente’ is made possible precisely through the manipulation of indeterminacy by means of strategies typical of literary nonsense, which allows Ortese to pursue a two-fold effect. On the one hand, she argues against, and deconstructs both the dominant social discourse, and its literary product (the realistic bourgeois novel). On the other hand, she proposes a different expressive and narrative pattern and re-constructs reality with a deeper grasp. But Ortese’s attempt to overturn the realistic mode and her rebuttal of realism do not have any avant-garde purpose; in fact, they rather arise from the author’s desire to gain a better appreciation of and grasp on reality. Her technique amounts to providing the reader with, to use Cosetta Seno’s words, ‘una sorta di diseducazione al romanzo’.⁶³ Moving to a hybrid form – because of the indeterminacy it offers – allows Ortese to ‘esplorare molteplici e, apparentemente contraddittorie, esperienze narrative’,⁶⁴ in a domain of confinement and ambiguity which permits the co-presence of the mutually exclusive. The process of overcoming the realistic model in *L’Iguana* involves three

⁶⁰ Stewart, p. 14.

⁶¹ Stewart, p. 17

⁶² Anna Maria Ortese, *Corpo Celeste* (Milan: Adelphi, 1997), pp. 48-49.

⁶³ Seno, p. 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

different subjects: ‘Ortese fa compiere alla sua protagonista, a se stessa e ai suoi lettori, un percorso di superamento’.⁶⁵ This is an overcoming that takes place both within and outside the literary premises: *superamento* of the literary tradition and *superamento* of common sense. Both are made possible by the array of inversion strategies that she uses in the novel.

As I have suggested above, the choice for this crossing and overcoming represents Ortese’s profound, ideological dissatisfaction with contemporary cultural discourse (social, political, literary) and, in particular, it represents her ‘political dissent from orthodox Marxism’.⁶⁶ Indeed, echoes of such dissent resound in the ironic layers and the core themes of *L’Iguana*. But this choice also comes from Ortese’s awareness that realism does not supply a successful representation of reality. Aware, instead, of the “error of realism” (La Penna highlights the influence of Sartre’s existentialism on Ortese), with *L’Iguana*, Ortese not only ‘interrupts the engagement with the chronicle and reality’ but also seeks ‘to explore, both stylistically and thematically, the twilight zone between consciousness and dream, and ideologically to dismantle the comfortable tenets of realism by exposing them as an incongruous, misleading fictional paradox’,⁶⁷ as we have seen in the meta-literary comments both of the characters and of the narrator.

7. Conclusion

Ortese’s project of dismantling realism pursued a literary expression that was not trapped in an univocal perspective. We can see how the use of nonsense-like indeterminacy strategies and the centrality of the figure of the Iguana map onto this trajectory of authorial intent, insofar as the specific literary modality chosen is able to supply a *plurality* of meanings. Ortese sought a modality that allowed her to ‘accogliere nella sua prosa ciò che è diverso, ciò che è invisibile, ciò che non si dice’,⁶⁸ and that which, according to Seno, aims to develop a new type of realism, which relies on

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁶ La Penna, p. 161. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*.

⁶⁷ La Penna, 165.

⁶⁸ Seno, p. 57.

imagination as a ‘qualità morale e conoscitiva indispensabile’.⁶⁹ Manipulating indeterminacy, though, does not negate the fact that literary representation is destined always to fail – even if it is a way of recognising, and resigning oneself to the difficult relationship between language and representation. Nevertheless, as human beings, we cannot help relying on fictional devices in our attempts to map the world around us, and more importantly, in our unsuccessful attempts to gain an understanding of ourselves.⁷⁰

Regarding issues such as the perception and interpretation of reality from the perspective of the self, I suggest that *L’Iguana* deals with the difficulty not only of mapping reality through fiction but also of interpreting our position in the world. Manipulating indeterminacy means reflecting on the way in which reality and representation fail to align and, as such, being aware that the latter is doomed to failure. More optimistically, the manipulation of indeterminacy also amounts to the elicitation of the reader’s active participation in this reflection and in this attempt. The meta-reflexive layer of the novel is not just a gloating trick to play with the reader and with literary tradition, but, in fact, it carries an important ethical message.

If the *iguanuccia* of the novel is such a disturbing catalyst of themes regarding interpretative anxiety and identity, it is because she does not only symbolise *oppression* and the ethical evilness of man towards nature, but also, I propose, because she is the epitome of indeterminacy and of the use we make of literature as a self-poietical, self-hermeneutic means. The Iguana is as undetermined as the novel, and as our understanding of reality; the novel itself *is* the Iguana.

Ortese’s work does not only represent the difficult – if not impossible – attempt of a quest (for identity, a deeper grasp of reality, and an understanding of relationships), but also the way in which we are always drawn to this delusive attempt. We cannot help relying on fiction in

⁶⁹ Seno, p. 104.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of literature as a tool for self-interpretation see Iser, *Prospecting* and *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

the endeavour to map the world around us, and more importantly, to gain understanding of ourselves. Daddo's tragedy is not only, therefore, the failure to recognise intersubjectivity, but also the failure to place himself as a subject, and the failure of self-interpretation. His folly was, after all, that he trusted imagination and his own perception of reality. Unsurprisingly, in the trial he is convicted for: 'il suo idealismo, privo di un vero senso del reale' (p. 169).

Nevertheless, if the smallest glimmer of (self)interpretation can be grasped, this is possible only by refusing realism and its univocal modality. We can content ourselves only with the flickering unfolding of different, temporary and unstable – or, in a word, *undetermined* – interpretations.

VII. Conclusion

This research analysed indeterminacy as a feature of literary works and the possibility of its manipulation through the use of different textual strategies in novels. Firstly, I have presented what is meant by indeterminacy and textual strategies from a theoretical point of view, building mainly on the two concepts as they were elaborated by Wolfgang Iser in his theory of the aesthetic response, and as they were later used in other reader-response models. These methodological remarks were followed by the analysis of the manipulation of indeterminacy in five case studies. In the investigations of the case studies, I have attempted to explore the following research questions: 1. can the openness, ungraspability, or difficulty detected in a novel be explained using the concept of indeterminacy? 2. how do different strategies convey indeterminacy, and how do the different textual levels interact? 3. is there a group of strategies that can be defined as properly “indeterminacy generators”? 4. and how do the intratextual and extratextual poles interact?

In each of the chapters dedicated to the five case studies, we have highlighted how they not only unavoidably contain indeterminacy insofar as they are literary works, but also that each of them deals specifically with the presence of indeterminacy and its potential manipulation in different ways. The main part of this research therefore concentrated on the ways in which the different textual strategies that each text contains are used, both in correlation with the specific novel analysed and with the poetics of each author. Evaluating the presence, the manipulation, and the effects of indeterminacy in these novels has allowed us to better understand the questions related to their critical reception. Ultimately, our exploration has enabled us to go beyond the labelling of these novels as *strano*, *vago*, *inafferrabile*, and to locate from where these indefinable or indeterminacy features arise.

In chapter II, I have analysed the effects of rhetorical-linguistic, structural, and narratorial strategies in the framework of Tozzi’s poetics of the ‘pessimo lettore’. This has allowed us to highlight how the cooperation

of the reader is required in *Con gli occhi chiusi* in order to make sense of its unusual structural layout as well as its uncommon use of verbal tenses and other stylistical choices. Within my analysis, I have reflected on the critical labelling of Tozzi's works and on his so-called modernity. Some comparative remarks with two other works by Tozzi (*Tre croci* and *Ricordi di un impiegato*), have helped us to appreciate how, despite the fact that similar textual strategies recur also in the other novels, the way in which they are used and interwoven in *Con gli occhi chiusi* is what ultimately influences the particularly high level of indeterminacy of the book.

In chapter III, I have discussed how, in *La pietra lunare*, indeterminacy is generated by Landolfi's play with, and manipulation of the fantastic elements used in the novel, in a way that goes beyond the fantastic to maximise indeterminacy. In particular, I have highlighted how the contrast between everyday life and the unreal as well as hesitation are, on the one hand, used to build on the fantastic atmosphere of the novel. On the other hand, I have noted how such elements undergo a manipulation with the effect of jarring, and encouraging the participation of the reader. In this respect, I referred to the role of the narrator and his use of irony, but also to Landolfi's meta-literary reflection on the limited power of language. As a consequence, at the stylistical level of the work, indeterminacy is enhanced by reticence and related textual strategies.

Of a completely different tone is Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*, analysed in chapter IV. Here we tackled a novel that has an allusive character, which cannot however be limited only to its semantic or symbolic layer. As we have seen, many textual strategies (like for example, the representation of the characters, the specific use of dialogues, reticence, and repetition) contribute to generating an overall *open work*, which is available to an outward conversation with its readers and which responds to Vittorini's poetic agenda. More specifically, we have seen how the work's openness allows the message of the novel – borne out of a specific, historical moment – to acquire a universal meaning, accessible and meaningful to different readers in different times.

In chapter V, which considered Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore*, we have encountered a different way in which textual strategies can manipulate indeterminacy. Here, rather than by omission and reticence, indeterminacy is generated at different textual levels (rhetorical-linguistic, structural, and narrative) by means of accumulation and cumulative devices. The case of *La cognizione* was crucial in understanding how indeterminacy is not merely a matter of subtraction or omission, as it can also be enhanced by addition. In short, we have seen how more information does not necessarily correlate with more meaning, or more determinacy. Furthermore, analysing how indeterminacy is produced by cumulative strategies proved helpful in appreciating how *La cognizione*, far from being anti-narrative (as many critics have suggested) rather proposes a different type of *narrativity* that is built precisely on the cumulative strategies analysed in the chapter and that, once again, rests on the reader's intervention.

In the final chapter, we have considered Ortese's *L'Iguana*, whose indeterminacy is first of all manipulated by its hybridism of genres. Departing from conventional (and reductive) readings of the work in relation to the fantastic, we have focused on a group of strategies akin to literary nonsense. Specifically, we have investigated how indeterminacy permeates themes and characters of the novel (such as madness, the house, and the Iguana), and is visible in the use of reticence and in the mediation of the narrator between the characters and the reader. In this novel, the need to provide a better understanding of reality through literary fiction – which is a crucial point in Ortese's poetics – is stated explicitly. Not only have we related the use of these strategies to the indeterminacy present in the novel, but we have also drawn a parallel between the unstable and undetermined figure of the Iguana, on the one hand, and literature, on the other insofar as both the Iguana and literary works at large bring to the fore the human effort for self-interpretation and revelation.

These five case studies therefore offered to us five different examples of how indeterminacy can be manipulated in a novel. It was clear by this analysis that, although they are very different to each other, these five novels share a common attitude in coping with the

representation of reality in literary fiction as affected by an interaction with the reader. Whether they are manipulating indeterminacy by generating a sense of textual vertigo (Tozzi), by overwhelming the reader (Gadda), by summoning his intervention (Vittorini), or by playing with specific literary modalities such as the fantastic or literary nonsense (Landolfi and Ortese), each of the authors considered appears to be attempting to come to terms with the problem of the representation of reality in a literary work. This attempt manifests itself in the way in which all five authors strive to overcome realism in order to obtain a greater grasp of reality, and the way in which, to do so, they maximise the reader's intervention. The common purpose and the common result that the five novels share should not surprise us. Manipulating indeterminacy cannot but result in attending explicitly to the question of rendering reality in a literary work. Indeed, indeterminacy is tightly bound to both ends of this rope: it describes the limitedness of literature in representing reality and, at the same time, explains how the reader can intervene in the literary work. Although they do not provide a complete taxonomy, in showing us five different ways of dealing with the indeterminacy of a literary work, the five novels also displayed five ways to tackle the representation of reality in literature and how to trigger the reader's interaction.

Then again, the problem of representing reality can be seen as *the central question* addressed both by critics and authors of fiction in the first half of the twentieth century, and beyond. The important aspect to observe here is that, in our five novels, this problem is evidently associated to indeterminacy and its manipulation. The way in which the five novels considered deal with the problem results eventually in the opening of a space for the reader to enter. This takes various forms, such as: an explicit appeal to their intervention (Vittorini, Ortese); an attempt to trick them (Landolfi); or an implicit request for an extra effort to make sense of the narration (Tozzi, Gadda).

Since reflecting on indeterminacy means reflecting on the possibility of transferring the determination of reality onto the literary page as well as pondering the need and the possibility for realism in literature, it is no surprise that, in one form or in another, all the five novels searched

for a different (deeper, more accurate, or more poignant) level of reality. In Tozzi, we observed the effort to overcome naturalism and the limitations of the traditional novel in order to make some epiphanic moments available to the reader. In Landolfi, the play with literary genres and with the reader, as well as his choice of a difficult language, explicitly raises the question of the reliability of both language and literature, a question stated clearly by the pessimistic view intimated by the *Leopardian* appendix to *La pietra lunare*. In the case of Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, as well as conveying a crucial ethical and political message, appears as a project planned to solve crucial problems for the author of how to bring something *doppiamente reale* onto the literary page, and how to overcome some stylemes required by previous and current literary paradigms (such as a more traditional temporal and spatial development of the novel and psychological introspection). In Gadda, the question of realism acquires, instead, a cognitive and gnoseological perspective, as is well-documented in his critical and philosophical production. In *La cognizione del dolore*, we can see the effects of his attempts to put reality, *as it is phenomenologically available* into the literary text, with a series of solutions that prove to be entirely different from the ones used by the other authors considered, but which eventually reach analogous results. In *L'Iguana*, finally, the question of realism is overtly thematised in the many meta-literary comments both of the characters and of the narrator, but also through the use of a narrative frame, as well as nonsense and fantastic elements. Moreover, as we have discussed, the need for literature to provide a deeper grasp of reality was one of Ortese's main concerns, alongside that of the ethical messages of her works.

Significantly, the way in which these authors manipulate indeterminacy to cope with reality and its representation results, in all five cases, in a kind of anti-realistic twist. In each of the five novels, none of the authors uses language mimetically, as none of them is concerned with constructing characters with mimetic, linguistic features: in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, both the characters and the narrators share the same language (a regional, but not dialectal, Tuscan); Landolfi plays with literary and erudite language; in *Conversazione*, the characters talk through formulas

similar to musical refrains; in Gadda, we often have pastiche (used without mimetic intentions), and the narrator mingles the languages of the different characters by continuously shifting between the consciousnesses portrayed in the novel (those of Gonzalo and his mother); in *L'Iguana*, the characters allegedly converse in erudite Portuguese (although it is reported in Italian by the narrator), while the only character that is linguistically denoted is the Iguana, with the narrator playing with irony and the different literary parodies included in the work. The fact that we can notice an overall *anti-mimetism* tells us that, in their refusal to imitate real language, these authors show no discomfort with the literariness of the linguistic medium and with the unveiling of its conventions. This is the reason why they can effectively augment indeterminacy, which, according to Roman Ingarden, is the crucial character of literariness of the literary objects (cf. Chapter I).

The confidence with which these authors play with *literariness* and literary conventions is also reflected by the widespread use of meta-literary strategies in the novels. Apart from *Con gli occhi chiusi* (in which, however, as we have seen, we can read meta-literarily the last image of the book, the one of the vertigo, as well as the sudden irruption of a voice and verbal tense change), the other four novels contain, more or less explicitly, meta-literary signs directed to the reader. This is overt in the cases of *La pietra lunare* and *L'Iguana*, which are incidentally also the two novels that play with literary genres and modalities. In the former, we have the intrusions of the narrator and, more importantly, we have the appendix from Leopardi's *Zibaldone*. In the latter, we have the frequent addresses to the reader, the conversations about the literary industry and realism, and the framing situation of the *as if* generated by the setting on the island. However, meta-literary signs are also present (if less explicitly) in *Conversazione in Sicilia*, whose dialogic openness and continuous addressing of questions cannot but hint at a dialogue *outside* the book's domain. The same is true for *La cognizione del dolore*: the narrator often intrudes with comments and manipulates the language within the chain of thoughts of the two protagonists, thus making patent the literariness of their accounts. The meta-literary strategies that we have encountered in these novels certainly have the secondary aim of playing with literary

conventions and traditions. However, in their orchestration with the other textual levels, metaliterary strategies are used primarily to increase the text's indeterminacy. Thus, they have a significant role to play in opening a space for, and calling for the reader's interventions (which often have an ethical purpose). This is certainly evident both in the case of *Conversazione in Sicilia* and *L'Iguana*. The first aims to convey a universally valid message, and the latter strives to involve the reader in a deeper appreciation of reality that passes through questions of identity and self-interpretation. Far from implying only a playful and disenchanting attitude towards the practice of writing and reading literature, summoning the reader is a means to enhance the power and message of the work, with a movement that is never entirely from the outside to the inside or *vice versa*, but which takes place owing to an interaction that takes place in a liminal space within the literary borders.

The mediator of this interaction inside this liminal space *within* the text, as we have seen, is the narrator. As our analyses prove, the narrator as a formal feature of the novel is crucial in the manipulation of indeterminacy. It is thanks to his/her reliability and attitude toward the audience, the characters and the events, that the overall meaning of the work is perceived as more or less determined, precise, stable or reliable. For example, in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, the selection of events and the many omissions made by the narrator contribute to the generating a feeling of incompleteness and of a partial knowledge of the events, thus making vague the narrative outline of the story. The use of confusing verbal tenses, moreover, forces the reader – deprived of the narrator's guidance – to provide a hierarchical order to them. Similarly, the insistent use of irony and intrusive comments in *La pietra lunare* makes the fantastic content of the novel unstable and inconclusive, as the reader struggles in deciding which of the conflicting meanings is most appropriate or most accurate. In *La cognizione del dolore*, the narrator indulges in descriptions, digressions and comments that, with their verbal accumulation, overwhelm the reader with such a significant amount of details that they generate vagueness. Moreover, in shifting between the voices of characters, from time to time, the narratorial voice “mingles” the narrated monologues of the

protagonists, making unclear which one is foregrounded and thus generating uncertainty. In *L'Iguana*, the ironic narrator has a decisive role in producing the meta-literary outset of the novel, as discussed above. Even in *Conversazione in Sicilia*, the only novel of the five that has a first-person narrator, the narrative level plays an important role to the extent that the reader is called to take the position of the narrator-protagonist and to become the interlocutor of the conversation generated by the literary work.

The way in which the novels deal with the problem of realism through the manipulation of indeterminacy is furthermore evident in the similar ways in which they dismantle the traditional representation of time and space. In *Con gli occhi chiusi*, the many ellipses and the internally-focalised narration contribute to generating the feeling that we are facing a subjective, temporal development (at least until the last third of the novel, in which the temporal outline is made clearer). In *La pietra lunare*, we have a complete overturning of time in the magical nights in the mountains, generated by the dilated flow of time in the dreamlike, unreal context. In *Conversazione in Sicilia*, the journey of Silvestro through the places of his childhood soon becomes an itinerary in time and memories, wherein the geographical certainty of the rail journey is transformed in a mostly vague setting of Sicily that coincides with the whole world. Even in *La cognizione del dolore*, time is somewhat suspended: the events take place in a handful of days without clear signals, and time perception is conveyed through the characters' consciousnesses. Finally, in *L'Iguana*, after the setting is moved to the island of Ocaña, temporal and spatial coordinates begin to flout our expectations (or the expectations of common sense) until they lose any rationality.

Spatial representation has an equally important role in generating indeterminacy. In fact, as we have suggested in chapter V, descriptions (and, in particular, descriptions of space) can be considered as indeterminacy *loci par excellence*. In *Con gli occhi chiusi*, the descriptions of Siena's countryside, in their vagueness and lyrical value, are often the moments in which some other indeterminacy phenomena take place. For example, it is during spatial representations that we encounter: the

abruption of narratorial voice, the change in tenses and focalisations, and an increased use of punctuation. Everything becomes extremely confused and (literally) undepictable in the settings of *La pietra lunare*, which are dark and deprived of light. The actual Sicily of *Conversazione* soon gives way to another fictional and dream-like Sicily, with changing and uncertain features. *La cognizione del dolore*, meanwhile, is set in a fictional South America that is actually more similar to Lombardy, and could not be less determined. Finally, Ocaña and the house in which action is set in *L'Iguana* are both unstable and unrepresentable on a map.

Alongside the behaviour of their narrators, the fact that the temporal and spatial outline is manipulated by means of different strategies (discussed above) often led critics to consider some of these novels as anti-narrative or as narratively unconventional. This is the case, in particular, for *La cognizione del dolore*; its supposed anti-narrative character is a topos that has held significant critical attention through the decades. By contrast, in chapter V, I have demonstrated how the cumulative process at work in the different layers of the novel opens up a space for the reader's intervention that involves him in the narrative movement of the two vortexes of the mother and of Gonzalo. Therefore, we can say that it is precisely because of the novel's unconventional narrative and indeterminacy that the reader is summoned to make sense of the narrative content through indeterminacy strategies. The same happens in *Con gli occhi chiusi*, whose anti-traditional narrative outline has often been described as the main feature of its *revolutionary* operation. Similarly to in *La cognizione*, it is the reader who must intervene, particularly in the first two thirds of the novel. Because of its symbolic and allusive vocation, *Conversazione* has also often been defined as anti-narrative, especially because its symbolic and stylistic features have been emphasised over and above its narrative content in the critical analyses. The difficulty in identifying a conventional narrative outline is both a consequence and a symptom of the way in which indeterminacy is particularly triggered in these novels, as the reader is required to take a focused participation in the unfolding of their narrative contents. Our analyses highlighted, therefore,

that there seems to be a close link between indeterminacy and narrativity in the novels analysed, a link that potentially calls for further research.

As the discussion above reveals, in our five case studies, indeterminacy, realism/anti-realism and the reader's intervention are bound together. The role of the reader is augmented and emphasised during those moments in which he is summoned as the mediator between the text and reality; the text shows to the reader an attitude and, through its indeterminacy, allows him to reach out for reality. In the five novels, this summoning results in the gnoseological, hermeneutical, ethical, and anthropological reflections that they project on the reader's intervention.

With reference to the linguistic-rhetorical level of the texts, although each novel quite specifically pursued indeterminacy in an individual way, *reticence* is the stylistic technique that we can see at work in many places in the novels analysed. It represents a major indeterminacy strategy in *L'Iguana*, *La pietra lunare* and *Conversazione*, as we have seen in detail in our close readings, but it is also present in *Con gli occhi chiusi* (and takes the form of a difficulty in nominating feelings) as well as in *La cognizione* (where, at times, the verbal accumulation generated by cumulative strategies actually amounts to the avoidance of a more direct expressions – like, for example, in the case of some long periphrases). Reticence, dealing with the problems of what is *sayable* and *unsayable*, invokes once again the problem of *reference* and therefore of how to deal with reality (this is especially evident in *La pietra lunare* and *L'Iguana*). At the same time, it generates practical gaps or blanks in the texts, which the reader must actively fill (like in *Conversazione in Sicilia* and *Con gli occhi chiusi*).

We can therefore conclude by stressing that the strategies used by these texts to manipulate indeterminacy at the linguistic-rhetorical, structural, narrative, metanarrative, and repertoire level, involve both the relationship between text and reality, and the reader's interaction.

In presenting this research and the five novels analysed in it, I had initially insisted on the fact that their common feature is first of all their *eccentric* character; each of the novels had been described as an eccentric work that cannot be ultimately labelled or categorised. In the light of the

phenomena observed in this research and of the comparative remarks drawn, we might be tempted to group these five novels together and to appeal for a new category, a sort of *poetics of indeterminacy*. It is true that, ultimately, they all resulted in open, vague, uncertain, and overall ungraspable pieces of works (or, perhaps, now we can confidently call them undetermined, i.e. requiring extra determination); however, it should be noted, indeterminacy was never *per se* the objective of these five authors. Quite the contrary, the strategies used to manipulate indeterminacy in these five novels were in pursuit of different poetical goals. Even so, they shared one common imperative: the necessity of a strong intervention of the reader during their interaction with the text.

Indeed, it was his famous *pessimo lettore* that Tozzi had in mind in designing *Con gli occhi chiusi*, a reader able to move back and forth through those pages and grasp those moments of *misteriosi atti nostri*, a feature of the character, a flash in the blinking of the eyes. Also, the diversionary and sarcastic attitude of Landolfi's narrator, his challenge to the reader, and his play with the requirements of genre as well as literary language *tout court* is, in fact, a thorough poetical reflection. For Vittorini, the stylistic and structural choices made in *Conversazione* responded to specific needs and aims (to encourage the participation of the reader in a conversation regarding a doomed humanity); for Gadda, indeterminacy is the only possible result of the process of *cognizione*, and the strategies used are the best way to make the reader experience that very process; for Ortese, reflecting on the representation of identity, and the interpretation of the self and the other – with all the indeterminacy that this implies – is the only way to access a truer reality. To conclude, investigating the use of indeterminacy strategies did not serve in providing a more certain label or category for these five novels. This was never the purpose and, indeed, a new label is certainly neither necessary nor productive. This is especially the case considering that the act of naming or designating these indeterminate novels would mean determining them. Our enquiry as to what generates their undetermined quality is nevertheless useful because it allows us to better understand the resources that they used and their effects.

Returning to the research questions we sought to answer, we can conclude that, in all the five novels analysed, the investigation of indeterminacy can help us in tackling their ungraspable character. Although there does not seem to be a specific group of strategies that we can define as “indeterminacy generators”, we have discovered that, in all the five novels, indeterminacy is manipulated in a multi-layered way (by which I mean, that it is manipulated at more than one textual level at a time), through the interweaving of multiple textual strategies. We have also learnt that reticence (from the group of linguistic-rhetorical strategies), the narrator (in the form of the different techniques related to it), metanarrative elements, and the spatio-temporal outline have a particularly decisive and recurring role in generating indeterminacy. Finally, we have seen that indeterminacy is crucial in allowing and directing the interaction between the text and the reader, and that this is done in the five novels in different ways and with different purposes, according to the types and the interweaving of the strategies used.

A further exploration could also compare the results of this research with Iser’s claim that indeterminacy is the very mark of modern and contemporary fiction.¹ Such a provocative and strong statement would require, first of all, a diachronic and more extended study of indeterminacy in novels. Perhaps, a more cautious way to develop this research would be to move from the assumption that indeterminacy is the crucial feature of *every* literary work, and, from there, instead explore whether *a manipulation* of indeterminacy is the main feature of the twentieth-century novel. With regards to the five novels here analysed, however, we can certainly say that the way in which they manipulated their indeterminacy in a specific context was a response to the problem of rendering reality effectively in a literary text and, in effect, a manifestation of their coming-to-terms with such. A manipulation of indeterminacy and the opening of a greater space for the reader were their individual solutions. Even if their ultimate effects were similar, indeterminacy and, in particular, the manipulation of indeterminacy appear in differing degrees across all five

¹ Cf. Iser, *Prospecting*, p. 5.

novels. From a diachronic perspective, we can note the way in which the manipulation of indeterminacy becomes more overt: for example, in Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, there is a more disguised manipulation, whereas, progressively, and by the time we reach Ortese's *L'Iguana*, we have a more blatant type of manipulation.

The research here documented finally suggests that analysing the manipulation of indeterminacy in different sub-genres of the novel could be a useful investigation. For example, more research could be conducted to chart how, and to what degree indeterminacy is manipulated in the naturalistic novel, in the psychological novel, in the fantastic novel, and so on. Moreover, this model can potentially be developed and systematised in further research projects. Understanding indeterminacy means understanding the role designed for the reader in the liminal space of interaction with the text. It therefore also means understanding the function of literary works as devices available to human beings, given to us as tools for interpreting reality and interpreting ourselves. These tools cannot, however, avoid or negate indeterminacy, precisely because of their dialogic character and because, otherwise, our access, via literature, to the interpretation of the world, and to self-interpretation, would be irreparably denied.

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