

**Community, Women and Selfhood in the Writings of Michel  
Leiris and Carlo Emilio Gadda**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## SHORT ABSTRACT

### **Community, Women and Selfhood in the Writings of Michel Leiris and Carlo Emilio Gadda**

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This study sets out to uncover the thus far unexplored affinities between the works of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Michel Leiris, two key figures of twentieth-century literature whose place within the broader European literary panorama has been largely overlooked. Through an inquiry into three interconnected areas – the question of ‘community’; the relationship between male self and female other; and writing as a space in which a fractured experience of subjectivity is both played out and exposed – I argue that their works are underpinned by a parallel tension, between a nostalgia for a lost experience of unity and a recognition of its impossibility within a fractured modernity.

Chapter One examines the relationship between the individual and the communal. With a focus on Gadda’s *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, and Leiris’s involvement in a series of key intellectual, literary and political societies of the 1930s and 1940s, it argues that while both authors were drawn to a form of communal integration, both were ultimately thwarted in their attempts to reinstate it. Chapter Two continues this inquiry into the relationship between self and other through an examination of the dysfunctional relationship between individual (male) self and (female) other. With a focus on Leiris’s *L’Age d’homme* and Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, it questions the extent to which any authentic relationship between male self and female other is ruled out, and examines the association between sexuality and fear that underpins their approach to the sphere of the female at large. The final chapter examines the implications of the authors’ shared loss of faith in the notion of a unified, authentic experience of selfhood for their approach to the literary act itself.

Through a study of these three key areas, this study thus sets out to respond to the need for further contextualisation of these two key figures of the twentieth-century European literary panorama, in the conviction that a comparative examination will shed new light both on their individual works and on their shared affinity with a number of key tenets of twentieth-century European thought.

## LONGER ABSTRACT

### **Community, Women and Selfhood in the Writings of Michel Leiris and Carlo Emilio Gadda**

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This thesis sets out to examine the thus far unexplored affinities between two central figures of the twentieth-century European literary panorama: Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) and Michel Leiris (1901-1990). For while their individual importance has been well-recognised and established within the scholarship of their respective national frameworks, the significance of their works is rarely considered within the context of a broader European framework. In response to the lack of any comparative study of their oeuvres, this thesis aims to uncover Gadda's and Leiris's shared affinity with a number of the key tenets of twentieth-century European thought. Most notably: a central tension between nostalgia for a lost unity and order characteristic of an idealised, irretrievable past; the demise of community within a fragmented modernity; the fractured relationship between individual (male) self and (female) other; and, lastly, a loss of faith in the literary act itself as a means of imparting order and meaning upon subjective, social and external reality.

While it will be primarily directed at exploring the analogies that draw them together, this study will also draw attention to a number of the important distinctions that set them apart. A key example lies in the disparate influences that came to shape their respective literary and intellectual formations. For while Leiris was strongly influenced by his involvement in a series of key literary, intellectual and political groups of contemporary

France – from Breton’s Surrealism to the Bataille communities of the 1930s and 1940s, and from Sartre’s *Les temps modernes* to the ethnographic practices of Marcel Griaule – Gadda occupied a relatively isolated position in relation to the intellectual movements of contemporary Italy. Equally, while Leiris’s work presents a strong element of mysticism – as illustrated by his life-long interest in the interconnected issues of the sacred, death and eroticism – Gadda’s thought is prevalently rooted in the more practical tenets of the Lombard enlightenment. Lastly, if Leiris is arguably best-known for his innovative contributions to the field of autobiographical representation, Gadda elected to represent his experiences through an extended series of fictional (albeit overtly autobiographical) doubles.

This thesis argues that, in spite of these differences, Gadda’s and Leiris’s thought is underpinned by a parallel tension, between a nostalgia for a long-lost experience of unity and a recognition of its impossibility within a fractured modernity. The examination is structured around three broad, interconnected thematic areas of inquiry: the question of ‘community’ and the implications of its demise within modern society; the problematic relationship between male self and female other; and writing as a space in which a fractured subjectivity is played out, defended against and exposed.

After a broad examination of the key stages of each author’s biographical and intellectual formations, the introductory section examines the lack of efforts to contextualise Gadda’s and Leiris’s position within the wider intellectual currencies of their time. For while scholars have elaborated on the associations that connect each of them individually to a number of the key figures of their respective national frameworks, there has been little attempt to identify broader congruencies outside of these contexts. In the case of Gadda, the trend towards broader contextualisation does now appear to be gathering pace. This is illustrated, for example, by Federica Pedriali’s recent introduction to the author’s work,

presented in the form of a complete “Gadda starter-pack”,<sup>1</sup> the central aim of which is to open up the Gran Lombardo to a wider Anglophone readership. Moreover, one important parallel that has received considerable attention within scholarship relates to the congruencies between Gadda and his Irish contemporary, James Joyce (1882-1941). The importance of this affinity has been well-established thanks to the efforts of such critics as Gianfranco Contini,<sup>2</sup> Gian Carlo Roscioni<sup>3</sup> and, more recently, Loredana di Martino. Other significant comparative efforts have been made by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, whose recent book, *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture*,<sup>4</sup> draws a convincing parallel between the Milanese author and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), as well as by Norma Bouchard, whose comparative study of Céline, Gadda and Beckett - *Céline, Gadda, Beckett: Experimental Writers of the 1930s* (2000)<sup>5</sup> - establishes a direct correspondence between these writers on the basis of their shared anticipation of a number of key aspects of the postmodernist movement. Besides these important contributions, however, Gadda’s name remains surprisingly unknown outside of the sphere of Italian scholarship. The lack of comparative study is even more apparent, however, when it comes to Leiris. Indeed, besides Seán Hand’s full-length study of Leiris’s position within the thought of contemporary France and his important contribution to our understanding of autobiographical representation – *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*<sup>6</sup> (2009) - Anglophone scholarship has to a certain extent overlooked the importance of this key figure of twentieth-century literature. Apart from Thomas Wilk’s recent comparative study of Leiris

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<sup>1</sup> Federica Pedriali et al., *Gadda Goes to War: Translational Provocations Around An Emergency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *La letteratura italiana*. Florence-Milan : Sansoni-Accademia, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Gian Carlo Roscioni, *La disarmonia prestabilita* (Turin : Einaudi, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Norma Bouchard, *Céline, Gadda, Beckett: Experimental Writers of the 1930s* (Florida University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Seán Hand, *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

and Michel Fichte (2006),<sup>7</sup> efforts to contextualise the author within the wider European context remain almost entirely lacking.

In relation to the first of the three areas of affinity identified in this study – the question of community – Chapter One will explore the importance of the relationship between the individual and the communal within the early stages of both authors’ careers. With a focus on Gadda’s *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, and Leiris’s involvement in a series of key intellectual and political societies of the 1930s and 1940s, it argues that while both authors were drawn to a form of communal integration characteristic of an idealised, classical past, both were ultimately thwarted in their efforts to reinstate it. From Breton’s Surrealism to the Bataillean communities of the 1930s and 1940s, Leiris partook, albeit from a somewhat marginal position, in a series of intellectual societies during the early years of his career. From the Surrealists’ attempt to locate that critical point of “non-contradiction” at which society’s structure of binary opposition might cease to hold sway, to the *Collège de sociologie*’s search for the communifying ‘sacred’ of so-called ‘primitive’ societies, each of these movements were engaged, I will argue, in a shared quest to reinstate an experience of the communal perceived to be critically lacking within a fragmented modernity. I will argue that, in each case, Leiris’s participation was motivated by an on-going quest to enter into what is conceived as a form of ‘sacred’ bond with the collective other. In line with this celebration of collective integration, Gadda’s early writings illustrate a positive vision both of war and of the theory of group psychology underpinning Fascist thought. For Gadda, war was initially perceived as a unique opportunity to escape the limitations of individual selfhood through a productive, transformative moment of communal integration. Equally, while he later goes on to fiercely repudiate such views, his early comments on Fascist philosophy

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Wilks, *Experimentation and the Autobiographical Search for Identity in the Projects of Michel Leiris and Hubert Fichte* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

testify to a celebration of the movement's prioritisation of the group over the individual, action over thought, as a means both of escaping the form of narcissism perceived to be at the base of the failings of society itself and of engaging in a transformative experience at the individual level. Following the bitter realities of his actual military experience, however, as documented in detail in the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, as well as his fierce denunciation of Fascism for its basis upon a destructive state of unsublimated narcissism, Gadda ultimately denounces the possibility of initiating any such a form of collective integration as a result of man's inherent narcissism and society's inescapable fixation on a form of unethical, erroneous model of isolated identity.

Moreover, far from an isolated case, this interest in the question of the communal and quest to reinstate it might be seen to stand in line with a number of the key theories of group psychology in circulation at the time. These include, notably: Freud's *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* (1921); Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (1895), and Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933). Equally, Roger Caillois's controversial comparison of the ritualised practice of the festival to the modern phenomenon of warfare provides an interesting basis for considering Gadda's and Leiris's shared celebration of mass collective integration as a means of initiating a positive moment of both individual and social transformation.

Chapter Two will continue this inquiry into the fractured interaction between self and other through a detailed examination of the problematic relationship between individual (male) self and (female) other. With a focus on Leiris's *L'Age d'homme* and Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*, it will question the extent to which any authentic relationship between male self and female other is ultimately ruled out by the authors' shared recognition of the essential dysfunctionality of the experience of human desire itself. Taking my cue from Freud's theory of abnormal love – as set out in the essay 'The Most Prevalent

Form of Degradation in Erotic Life' (1912) - which describes the experience of "male psychic impotence" that results from any attempt to separate the poles of 'sensuality' and 'affection', I will argue that both authors experience a fundamentally dysfunctional relationship with women that goes hand in hand with what Albert Sbragia has described as a "pervasive male inferiority complex".<sup>8</sup> This is demonstrated not only by their shared, debilitating sense of their own gendered inadequacy, but also by a fundamentally flawed relationship with their bodies, which Peter Poiana, drawing a link with Lacanian theory, has described in terms of an experience of the "corps morcelé".<sup>9</sup> While this experience is openly confessed within Leiris's autobiographical writings, it is in the overtly autobiographical figures of Gonzalo Pirobutirro, Commissario Ingravallo and Commendator Angeloni that this overarching experience of gendered disempowerment finds its clearest expression within Gadda's works. The erotic relationship is thus based for both authors not on an experience of unity, but rather on a debilitating moment of individual fragmentation and combative confrontation. Woman comes to stand, within both authors' thought, not as a simple "objet aimé", in Leiris's words, but rather as a complex, inherently unknowable "*substance de mélancolie, image*", the author explains, "de tout ce qui [leur] manque" (AH 156).

In line with this breakdown in the relationship between self and other (both collective and individual), the third and final chapter will be dedicated to an examination of both authors' loss of faith in the literary act itself as a means of imparting 'unity' and 'order' on a fragmented, inauthentic subjective reality. As described in detail by Pirandello in the theoretical text *L'Umorismo*, twentieth-century thought gave rise to a radical reconceptualisation of the notion of the unified subject, leading to what Leiris describes in

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Poiana, 'Aggressivity in Self Writing: Colette's *Etoile Vesper* and Michel Leiris' *Fourbis*', *French Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2005), 121-136 (p. 121).

*L'Age d'homme* as a debilitating sense of self-dissolution and fragility in the face of a threatening other: “ma faiblesse interne et l’effritement dont je me sentais menacé” (AH 185). Faced with this experience of self-dissolution, writing comes to be conceived by Leiris as a potential means by which to forge a form of self-defensive shield or protective screening device. Drawing an extended analogy between the acts of writing and dressing, he highlights, in *Frêle bruit*, “L’affection fétichiste que j’ai pour mes vêtements, qui représentent comme mes écrits un constituant de ma personne telle qu’elle apparaît aux autres” (FB, RJ, 980). In line with this conception of writing as a form of self-defensive shield, Gadda’s decision to construct a long series of fictional doppelgangers has been interpreted by a number of critics as an attempt on the author’s part to establish what Sbragia describes as a self-defensive “transparent mask of autobiography”,<sup>10</sup> or “a form of baroque objectification meant only to disclose some traces of what is claimed to be the subject’s extraordinary experience”,<sup>11</sup> to quote Robert Dombroski. Contrary to such interpretations, which are based on the existence of a clear-cut divide between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’, I would argue that what unites the negative vision of subjectivity set out in both authors’ writings is the ultimate *inseparability* of these two seemingly contradictory poles. Hence while the tragic reality embodied by Gadda’s Gonzalo relates to the recognition that even if society is made up of no more than an empty series of “parvenze non valide” or “menzogne salvatrici”, any attempt to exist outside of it would result in the destruction of not only social reality but also of the subject himself, Leiris too remains riven between two equally untenable solutions. For, if he fails in his attempt – as set out in ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’ – to forego the realm of the ‘imaginary’ for a more valid, courageous engagement with his own ‘reality’, he at the same time remains incapable of reconciling himself to an autobiographical project

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<sup>10</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Robert S. Dombroski, ‘Overcoming Oedipus: Self and Society in *La Cognizione del dolore*’, *MLN*, Vol. 99, No. 1, Italian Issue (Jan 1984), 125-143 (p. 129).

based on nothing more than a 'jeu': "Ce que je veux, somme tout", he explains in *Frêle bruit*, "c'est jouer, pour moi et, aussi bien, pour les autres [...] mais ce que je ne puis admettre, c'est que ce jeu ne soit qu'un jeu" (FB, RJ, 986). For both authors, writing thus becomes the arena in which a fragmented, inauthentic experience of subjectivity is both played out and exposed. The difference lies, I will nonetheless argue, in the fact that while Leiris's autobiographical project can be seen to stage an *ongoing* alternation between promise and failure, Gadda's narrative fiction is rooted in a preceding rejection, as expressed at the end of the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, of the possibility of any authentic subjective or external reality.

Through a study of these three key areas, this study thus seeks to respond to the need for further contextualisation of these two key figures of the twentieth-century European literary panorama, in the conviction that a comparative examination will shed new light both on their individual works and on their shared affinity with a number of key tenets of twentieth-century European thought.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis:

### Michel Leiris

**RJ:** *La Règle du jeu*

**AH:** *L'Age d'homme: précédé de De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie*

**Journal:** *Journal 1922-1989*

**AF:** *L'Afrique fantôme*

**Glossaire:** *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses, in Mots sans mémoire*

**MT:** *Miroir de la tauromachie: précédé de Tauromachies*

**Merveilleux:** 'Le Merveilleux'

**Miroir:** *Miroir de la tauromachie: précédé de Tauromachies*

### Carlo Emilio Gadda

Collected Works

**RR I:** *Romanzi e Racconti I*

**RR II:** *Romanzi e Racconti II*

**SGF I:** *Saggi giornali favole I*

**SGF II:** *Saggi giornali favole II*

**SVP:** *Scritti vari postumi*

Individual Works

**A:** *L'Adalgisa (disegni milanesi)*

**CD:** *La cognizione del dolore*

**CdU:** *Il castello di Udine*

**A:** *L'Adalgisa (disegni milanesi)*

**GGP:** *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*

**RI:** *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento (cahier d'études)*

**SG:** 'Socer Generque' (in *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi*)

**M:** *La meccanica*

**MdI:** *Le meraviglie d'Italia*

**MM:** *Meditazione milanese*

**MdI:** *Le meraviglie d'Italia*

**QP:** *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*

**VM:** *I viaggi la morte*

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# Introduction

*‘Il y a des moments qu’on peut appeler des crises et qui sont les seuls qui importent dans une vie. Il s’agit des moments où le dehors semble brusquement répondre à la sommation que nous lui lançons du dedans, où le monde extérieur s’ouvre pour qu’entre notre cœur et lui s’établisse une soudaine communication’*

*Michel Leiris, 1929*

One might well question the basis upon which two authors with such diverse biographical, literary and intellectual backgrounds as Michel Leiris (1901-1990) and Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) might justifiably be set in comparison with one another. For while they were both central figures of the twentieth-century literary panorama, they have each received little attention outside of their respective national frameworks and neither knew each other nor, it would appear, were acquainted with each other’s work. On the one hand, Michel Leiris - nicknamed by Marianna Torgovnick the “intellectual bridesmaid”<sup>1</sup> of a number of better-known, more influential figures of the time – largely followed the main intellectual currents of his time, from Breton’s Surrealism to the Bataille communities of the 1930s and 1940s, and from Sartre’s existentialism<sup>2</sup> to the ethnographic practices of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Carlo Emilio Gadda, on the other hand, an electrical engineer by profession

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<sup>1</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Leiris was a member of the first editorial board of Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes*, the first issue of which was published in October 1945.

and an ambivalent subscriber (early on at least) to the principles of the Fascist regime and the Italian Nationalist Association, remained a comparatively isolated figure within the intellectual and literary scene of contemporary Italy. Equally, while Leiris's work contains a strong element of mysticism, as evidenced by his close involvement with Bataille and life-long interest in the associated questions of the sacred, eroticism, and death, Gadda's thought is rooted first and foremost in the more practical-ethical tenets of the Lombard enlightenment. Finally, while it is for the autobiographical portion of his literary output that Leiris is undeniably best-known, Gadda's writings belong first and foremost to the genre of semi-autobiographical narrative fiction.

Leiris was a central figure of the French intellectual and literary panorama throughout much of the twentieth century. Before taking part in a mass movement away from Breton in 1929 headed by Bataille, he was an official member of the Surrealist movement. The influence that Breton's movement exerted on him is marked, as is testified not only by his own contributions – one might cite, for instance, the Surrealist novel *Aurora* (1927-8), or the anti-glossary *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses*<sup>3</sup> (1925-1936) – but also by his continued fascination with language games, the relationship between (male) self and (female) other, and, of perhaps greatest pertinence to this study, his on-going search for that elusive point of 'non-contradiction' at which society's established pattern of binary divisions would cease to hold sway. Following his split with Breton, Leiris went on to become involved with Bataille's controversial journal *Documents* (1929-1930), which led to his acquaintance with Marcel Griaule and subsequent participation, in the capacity of secretary-archivist, in the famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1931-1933. Following his return to Paris, and bitterly disenchanted with the potentialities of ethnographic study to bring about the escape from the

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<sup>3</sup> *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses* was published in three instalments in the journal *La révolution surréaliste*, between 1925 and 1936.

restrictions of modern Western European being that he had envisaged, Leiris went on to become involved in the highly influential working and theoretical community of thought, the *Collège de sociologie* (1937-1939), which, seeking to revive an experience of the communal perceived to be critically lacking within modern society, can be seen to have played a decisive role in shaping the author's thought in relation to the question of community.

Alongside these societies, Leiris was also involved in another, less official intellectual community during the 1930s, consisting of himself, Bataille, and Colette Peignot (most commonly referred to by the nickname 'Laure'). Until Milo Sweedler's recent study, the importance of this close-knit union had in fact been largely overlooked by scholarship. I will argue, in concordance with Sweedler, that it was in fact formative for the development of Leiris's understanding of the central notions of the sacred, the communal, and eroticism. In addition to these communities, Leiris's intellectual development was strongly shaped by his on-going commitment to anthropological study.<sup>4</sup> Of particular import were the theories of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Mauss's essay on sacrifice, 'Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice' (1899), for example, presents a clear source of influence for Leiris's study of tauromachy, *Miroir de la tauromachie* (1938),<sup>5</sup> while Durkheim's sociological study of religion as a social phenomenon, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912),<sup>6</sup> exerted a decisive impact on his understanding of the question of the sacred. Although never formally trained in anthropology, Leiris's contribution to the field was substantial. In addition to *L'Afrique fantôme* – the part-ethnographic, part-autobiographical record of his involvement in the famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1931-1933) – his anthropological opus

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<sup>4</sup> See: *L'Afrique fantôme [de Dakar à Djibouti, 1931-1933]* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934); *La Langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1997); *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar* (Paris: Plon, 1958); *Miroir de l'Afrique*, ed. by Jean Jamin and Jacques Mercier (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); *Journal de Chine*, ed. by Jean Jamin (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Michel Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie: précédé de Tauromachies* (Paris: GLM, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Livre de poche, 1991).

includes two ethnographic studies on the questions of ‘secret’ language and possession, *La langue secrète des dogons* (1948) and *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar* (1958), as well as the UNESCO-sponsored study *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et Guadeloupe* (1955). While anthropological study certainly constituted a central facet of Leiris’s career, exerting a decisive influence on his approach to both the conception and representation of the self and the other, a detailed examination of its importance for his development remains outside the scope of this study. My consideration of his involvement will thus be limited to a reflection, in Chapter One, on the extent to which his involvement in the Mission Dakar-Djibouti can be seen to be motivated by an on-going, ultimately thwarted, quest for direct contact with the other and an escape from the restrictions of modern Western European selfhood.<sup>7</sup>

While Leiris was involved in a large array of intellectual, political and literary groups, he nonetheless remained a somewhat marginal figure within each of them, never fully committing himself to the theories of any single one.<sup>8</sup> Like Leiris, Gadda also entertained a somewhat ambivalent outsider position within the literary and intellectual scene of his respective national context, remaining largely cut-off from any direct involvement with organised schools of thought.<sup>9</sup> After undergoing professional training at the Politecnico di Milano, he at first enjoyed a successful career as an electrical engineer, both in Italy and abroad, spending two years (from 1922 to 1924) with the *Compañía General de Fosforos* in

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed examination of Leiris’s ethnographic practices, see: Seán Hand, *Writing the Self*; Michel Beaujour, ‘Ethnography or Self-Portrayal? Review Essay of Sulfur 15, Featuring New Translations of Michel Leiris’s Work’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Nov. 1987), 470-480; Phyllis Clarck-Taoua, ‘In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris’s L’Afrique fantôme’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 42, No. 167 (2002), 479-498; and, Marc Blanchard, ‘Visions of the Archipelago: Michel Leiris, Autobiography and Ethnographic Memory’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Aug. 1990), 270-291.

<sup>8</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of Leiris’s ‘in between’ position, see Leah D. Hewitt ‘Between Literary Movements: Leiris in Literary History’, *Yale French Studies*, No. 81, On Leiris (1992), 77-90.

<sup>9</sup> Gadda was renowned for being a highly reclusive figure, especially in later life. For a comprehensive examination of his life, see Gian Carlo Roscioni, *Il duca di Sant’Aquila: infanzia e giovinezza di Gadda* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).

Argentina,<sup>10</sup> as well as various other periods of professional work in France, Germany, and Belgium. In the early 1930s, Gadda slowly began to distance himself from engineering, alternating between phases of technical and literary work before finally giving up his professional career altogether in the 1940s in order to devote himself exclusively to his literary work.

Recognised first and foremost for his extreme linguistic innovation and almost complete disregard for traditional narrative structure and narratorial viewpoint, Gadda, hailed as one of Italy's greatest modernists,<sup>11</sup> has often been associated with a form of radical experimentalism that stands in violent rupture with the traditions of the (literary) past. In her comparative study of Gadda and two other key literary figures of twentieth-century Europe, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Samuel Beckett,<sup>12</sup> the critic Norma Bouchard suggests, for example, that, on the basis of his open-ended, incoherent narratives and their lack of any centralised enunciating subject, his challenging approach to the question of language, and his fraught representation of and relationship with external reality, Gadda's works offer a clear anticipation of many of the key tenets of post-modernist aesthetics. Yet while Gadda openly espoused the form of narrative fragmentation and open-endedness ascribed to him by Bouchard, the matter is complicated, as both Giuseppe Stellardi and Robert Dombroski have argued,<sup>13</sup> by his on-going, self-professed veneration for the order and unity characteristic of the classical past. If Gadda's works can be seen to anticipate the fractured aesthetics

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<sup>10</sup> During this time, he also became a member of the Buenos Aires Fascio all'Estero. For a detailed examination of this period of Gadda's career, see Albert Sbragia, "'Toga Caput Obvolvitur': The Ideal of Rome in C. E. Gadda", *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, No. 4 (2004), <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue4/articles/sbragiarome04.php>>.

<sup>11</sup> See Robert A. Rushing, "'La sua tragica incompiutezza': Anxiety, Mis-Recognition and Ending in Gadda's 'Pasticciaccio'", *MLN*, Vol. 116, No. 1 (January 2001), 130-149.

<sup>12</sup> The affiliations between Gadda and Beckett are explored in detail in Katrin Wehling-Giorgi's comparative study *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture* (Leeds: Legenda, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Dombroski explains that: "As regards postmodernism, Gadda's use of parody and citation have no doubt something in common with postmodern literary practices, but his ongoing fascination with the depth and difficulty of his subject matter and with a hermeneutic based on cognition, investigation, and decipherment sets his work apart from postmodernism's most important constitutive features" (Robert Dombroski, *Creative Engagements: Gadda and the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.136).

characteristic of a post-modernist vision, this is not out of any positive *celebration* of fragmentation, but rather out of a sense of defeat. In an imaginary dialogue with his editor, written in response to the accusation of baroqueity directed against him by early critical interpretations of *La cognizione del dolore*, for example, Gadda explains that it is not his approach that is baroque, but rather external reality itself: “il barocco e il grottesco albergano già nelle cose, nelle singole trovate di una fenomenologia a noi esterna: [...] grottesco e barocco non ascrivibili a una premeditata volontà o tendenza espressiva dell’autore, ma legati alla natura e alla storia” (CD, RRI, 760). If his writing can be described as baroque, he professes, it is not as a result of his espousal of avant-garde aesthetics, but rather evidence of his denunciation of “(la) scemenza del mondo o della bamboccesca inanità della cosiddetta storia, che meglio potrebbe chiamarsi una farsa da commedianti nati cretini e diplomati somari” (CD, RRI, 761).

Therefore, while Gadda alternated between work of a technical and literary nature, entertained an ambivalent relationship with Fascist and nationalistic discourse and worked largely in isolation from the organised literary movements of his time, Leiris was involved in a series of intellectual communities, albeit from a somewhat marginal position, and avoided the harrowing experience of warfare that exerted such a decisive influence upon Gadda’s thought.

Despite their clear disparities, I will argue that a parallel tension can be seen to underpin both authors’ thinking between a sense of nostalgia for the unity and order characteristic of an idealised and irretrievable past, and a critique of the fragmentation and inauthenticity of modern subjective and external reality. Within Gadda’s works, this opposition finds its expression in an on-going tension between a model vision of social integration rooted in the values of self-abnegation, collectivity, order and discipline, and a contrasting, tragic awareness of the impossibility of any such an experience of collective

unity as a result of man's inherent narcissism and fallacious fixation on an unethical model of 'monadic' identity.<sup>14</sup> Within Leiris's works, the tension is played out in an on-going, ultimately unresolved friction between a series of broad antitheses, between *réalité* and *fiction*, *règle* and *jeu*. By means of an examination of three relationships central to both authors' thought – between the individual and the communal, the male self and female other, and the writing subject and written text – this study will examine the extent to which any such a search for 'unity' can be seen to be grounded on its own impossibility.

In the case of Leiris, the examination will follow a loosely linear trajectory from the author's early search for a lost experience of the communal within the context of the intellectual and political movements of the 1920s and 1930s, through the dysfunctional relationship with the female other described in *L'Age d'homme* (1939), to, lastly, the problematic experience of selfhood presented in *La Règle du jeu* (1948-1976), the autobiographical tetralogy that spanned almost three decades of his life. In relation to Gadda, the analysis will chart a corresponding progression in the author's thought from his early disillusionment, as set out in the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* (1955), with his prior, idealised vision of war as an opportunity for collective integration, through the flawed relationship between male self and female other intrinsic to the experiences of Francesco Ingravallo and Commendator Angeloni in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957), to, lastly, the tragic vision of selfhood represented by his most overtly autobiographical double, Gonzalo Pirobutirro, in *La cognizione del dolore* (1963).

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<sup>14</sup> This is based on Gottfried Leibniz's theory of the monad, as set out in his 1714 work *Monadology*. According to Leibniz's theory, the universe is made up of monads, simple substances that can be neither divided nor changed in any way. Gadda uses this theory in his 1974 treatise *Meditazione Milanese* in order to provide a theoretical basis for society's fallacious belief in the self as an autonomous, unified entity existing in isolation from the social context of which it is part.

Despite this affinity with a key tenet of twentieth-century thought – consisting in the tragic loss of ‘unity’ within a fractured modernity and the dissolution of any sense of authentic selfhood – critical interpretations have however largely failed to contextualise their writings within the wider intellectual currencies of the period. In relation to Gadda, the efforts of a small number of critics have gone some way to remedying this oversight, but much still remains to be done. Perhaps the most widely discussed comparison to be made with an author outside of the Italian context relates to the perceived affinities between Gadda and his Irish contemporary, James Joyce (1882-1941). Gianfranco Contini, for example, has identified a “profonda connivenza” between the two authors’ works,<sup>15</sup> while Gian Carlo Roscioni points to a shared “disintegrazione motivata”, which is motivated, he explains, “perché prodotta non da un più consumato e perciò insoddisfatto mestiere, ma da una più vigile e partecipe consapevolezza della complessa natura e origine degli eventi.”<sup>16</sup> The most comprehensive analysis of the congruities between the two authors is provided by Loredana di Martino’s recent contribution, *Il caleidoscopio della scrittura: James Joyce, Carlo Emilio Gadda e il romanzo modernista*<sup>17</sup> (2009), which examines the authors’ shared espousal of the principle of multiplicity central to modernist aesthetics. In *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic* (1996), Albert Sbragia offers a broader contextual scope for the Milanese author’s works by situating his denunciation of the illusion of unified, autonomous selfhood within a wide-ranging European lineage of masters of the “modern macaronic”. In each of these authors’ work, he suggests, “archaism is used to ridicule and overcome the myth of subjective totality and mimetic realism, not by going *beyond* it but rather *behind* it, all the way to the

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<sup>15</sup> Gianfranco Contini suggests that the difference between Gadda and Joyce “non resta affatto all’estrinseco” inasmuch as while Joyce gives voice to “una ricchissima esperienza plurilinguistica [...] al servizio d’un’inaudita introversione”, Gadda’s works put forward “un espressionismo naturalistico” (Contini, *Quarant’anni d’amicizia: scritti su Carlo Emilio Gadda (1934-1988)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp.15-35).

<sup>16</sup> Gian Carlo Roscioni, *La disarmonia prestabilita. Studio su Gadda* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Loredana Di Martino, *Il caleidoscopio della scrittura. James Joyce, Carlo Emilio Gadda e il romanzo modernista*, (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2009).

novel's pre-modern origins in satiric parody, grotesque realism, and macaronic pastiche."<sup>18</sup>

Other significant efforts to place the Gran Lombardo's work within a broader European literary landscape have been offered by Katrin Wehling-Giorgi's recent fascinating comparative study of Gadda and Beckett, which is centred on questions of subjective and textual fragmentation and on the crisis of language at work within their writings. Besides such important contextualising efforts as these, however, little has been done to establish Gadda's place within the wider European literary landscape, a problem which is clearly exacerbated by the commonly held view of Gadda as Italy's "most untranslatable author", in Sbragia's words, which has led to a marked lack of critical study of his works outside of the Italian scholarly community.<sup>19</sup>

The lacuna is even more pronounced, however, when it comes to Leiris. For while numerous studies have helped situate the French author's place within his contemporary national context, there has been hardly any attempt to consider his importance within a broader European framework. Indeed, besides Seán Hand's full-length study of Leiris's involvement with the key intellectual movements of twentieth-century France and the innovative approach to autobiographical representation presented by *La Règle du jeu*, there has been remarkably little study of the author's work within Anglophone scholarship. One comparison that has received considerable critical attention is to be found, however, in the affinities between Leiris and his intellectual mentor and close friend, Georges Bataille; an association which exerted a strong influence on the development of Leiris's thought in relation to a number of central issues. Most recently, Milo Sweedler's study of the Bataillean

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<sup>18</sup> Albert Sbragia, *Carlo Emilio Gadda and the Modern Macaronic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Federica Pedriali's recent introductory study of Gadda, which presents itself as a complete "Gadda starter-pack", sets out to open Gadda up to a wider Anglophone readership, and offers a broad overview of the key issues that the author's works presents (*Gadda goes to war: translational provocations around an emergency*, ed. by Federica G. Pedriali (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013)).

enterprises of the 1930s and 1940s, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure* (2009),<sup>20</sup> opens up the perspective on Bataille and Leiris to include the influence exerted on them by the important intellectual figures of Colette Peignot and Maurice Blanchot. Through a comparative examination centred on the interrelated notions of the sacred, communication, community and eroticism, Sweedler highlights the decisive influence that each of these thinkers exerted on one another, as well as offering a particularly interesting analysis, in light of this study, of the question of eroticism and the notion of the sacred erotic bond. The connection between Bataille and Leiris is also the subject of an important study by Denis Hollier, *Les Dépossédés: Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Malraux, Sartre* (1993), which, in addition to the relationship between these three thinkers, also throws light upon Leiris's place within the broader literary context of contemporary France.

In *Georges Bataille et Michel Leiris: Échanges et correspondances* (2004), Louis Yvert adds weight to the affiliation by grouping together a number of texts that the authors wrote about one another, as well as their extensive mutual correspondence. In *Bataille/Leiris: l'intenable assentiment au monde* (1999), lastly, Francis Marmande considers the implications of their long-lived, at times tempestuous, friendship, for their shared theorising on such issues as friendship, theories of the masculine and the feminine, eroticism, and the importance of 'affect' within the context of social being. In his analysis of the question of selfhood within Leiris's work, *La règle du Je dans l'Age d'homme de Michel Leiris*,<sup>21</sup> Hubert de Phalèse goes further in the effort to contextualise Leiris's works by situating him within what he describes as an age-old history of interrogation of the self, ranging from Saint Augustin's *Confessions*, to Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and

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<sup>20</sup> Milo Sweedler, *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Hubert de Phalèse, *La règle du Je dans l'âge d'homme de Michel Leiris* (Saint-Genouph: Librairie A-G Nizet, 2005).

Baudelaire's *La Fanfarlo* (1847). He also draws attention to numerous parallels between Leiris's autobiographical undertaking and that of a number of other French authors of the time: from Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928), to Gide's *Journal* (1889-1939), and de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* (1843).

Despite such attempts, however, efforts to examine Leiris's place within the broader European cultural context remain critically lacking. Thomas Wilk's recent comparative study of the autobiographical works of Michel Leiris and Fichte - *Experimentation and the Autobiographical Search for Identity in the Projects of Michel Leiris and Hubert Fichte* (2006)<sup>22</sup> – goes some way to addressing this need, but remains an isolated case. In his study, de Phalèse proposes that Leiris can in fact be seen to belong to a whole generation of writers, a “légion de garçons” to use his term, riven by a core set of concerns characteristic of the period of which they were part: “unie par la même destinée, dépourvue d'idéologie cohérente, ayant la nausée de tout et particulièrement la guerre”.<sup>23</sup>

Through an analysis structured around three core thematic areas – community, women, and the relationship between writing and selfhood - this thesis sets out to respond to the need for a broader contextualisation of these authors' works, through an examination of their shared place within this disillusioned “legion” of thinkers for whom modern reality is experienced as a fragmented realm bereft of order and unity.

Centred on the question of community and the problematic relationship between the individual and the communal, Chapter One will focus on the early stages of both authors' intellectual trajectories. In relation to Leiris, this chapter will offer a detailed examination of Leiris's involvement in the series of intellectual communities of the 1930s and 1940s noted

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Wilks, *Experimentation and the Autobiographical Search for Identity in the Projects of Michel Leiris and Hubert Fichte* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> de Phalèse, p. 16.

above, from Surrealism to *Documents*, ethnography, and the *Collège de sociologie*, questioning the manner and extent of the influence these working communities had on the author's conception of the relationship between the self and collective other. I will then proceed, in relation to Gadda, to offer an examination of the process of disillusionment set out in the author's *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, which charts a fundamental progression in his thought from an early idealised conception of war as a time of collective integration and positive self-abnegation, to an out-and-out loss of faith in the possibility of any such an experience of collective unity. This will lead to a consideration of the implications of this process of disenchantment for the author's subsequent conception of the question of subjectivity through an analysis of his extended theoretical inquiry into the related issues of narcissism and monadic selfhood, as set out both in 'Emilio e Narcisso' (1950) and 'L'Egoista' (1953), and in the theoretical treatise *Meditazione milanese*.

Far from an isolated case, Gadda's and Leiris's concern with the issue of community – what it means, how it might be achieved within the context of modern society, and the effect of collective integration on the individual – highlights a shared sensitivity on their part, I will argue, to a key issue within the intellectual landscape of twentieth-century European thought.<sup>24</sup> A key axis of investigation in this chapter will therefore relate to the importance of a number of key theories of group psychology in circulation at the time. The focus will be on three key studies from the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century. Firstly, Freud's seminal paper on the question, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921),<sup>25</sup> which examines the nature of group psychology and the liberating effect of collective integration on the individual. Freud's study takes its cue, in many respects, from the second

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed study of contemporary debates on the subject of community in twentieth-century France, see Nikolaj Lübecker, *Community, Myth and Recognition in Twentieth Century French Literature and Thought* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Ohio: Martino Publishing, 2010).

study of interest, namely, Gustave Le Bon's analysis of crowd psychology, *Psychologie des foules* (1895),<sup>26</sup> which questions the very nature of the group and the profound alteration experienced by the individual upon his or her integration into the collective unit. Like Freud, Le Bon sees the unique potentialities of the group to derive, specifically, from the erasure of individual distinctiveness and its replacement with a new, powerful set of shared, collective capacities. A number of the same concerns are also set forth, lastly, in the third study under examination in this chapter: Wilhelm Reich's study of Fascist psychology, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), in which he makes the bold claim that, "there is not a single individual who does not bear the elements of Fascist feeling and thinking in his structure".<sup>27</sup> In his analysis, Reich explains that "Fascist mysticism is orgiastic yearning, restricted by mystic distortion and inhibition of natural sexuality."<sup>28</sup> In line with a number of the concerns put forward in these studies, Leiris and Gadda both express an on-going interest in the concept of collective integration and its transformative effect upon the individual. This is evidenced most clearly by Gadda's early nationalistic and Fascist tendencies, alongside Leiris's allegiance with a series of intellectual societies directed at the creation of a modern-day 'sacred' community governed by the force of 'affect', most particularly the *Collège de sociologie*.

The second chapter will continue this examination into the fragmented relationship between self and other through an analysis of the flawed relationship between individual (male) self and (female) other set out in both authors' writings, as well as the intrinsic association between eroticism and fear at the base of their approach to the sphere of the female at large. Taking my cue from Freud's theory of abnormal love, which describes the experience of psychic impotence that results from an unhealthy disjunction of the poles of

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<sup>26</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: PUF, 1963).

<sup>27</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

‘sensuality’ and ‘affection’, this section explores the connection between the authors’ understanding of the intrinsically dysfunctional relationship between male self and female other and their wider rejection of the any experience of ‘unity’ between individual self and other as an unattainable ideal. As illustrated by their shared polarisation of woman around the opposing categories of sublimated, untouchable other and debased, threatening sexual object, relations with the female other represent an intrinsically negative and flawed experience throughout both authors’ works, based on an overarching association between desire and fear, Eros and crime. The focus in this chapter will be on Leiris’s *L’Age d’homme*, which offers a detailed presentation of the author’s difficult relationship with women and fixation on the relationship between eroticism and suffering, alongside Gadda’s *Quer pasticciaccio de via Merulana*, a novel structured around a complex web of failed relationships that Sbragia has described as “a summa of Gadda’s narrative treatment of Eros”.<sup>29</sup>

The third and final chapter will conclude this three-tiered examination through an analysis of the authors’ shared exposure, through the act of writing the self, of the inauthenticity of subjectivity itself. As exemplified in the writings of such key figures as Luigi Pirandello and Italo Svevo, twentieth-century thought was grounded on a radical dissolution of the notion of the centralised subject and its replacement with a fractured self characterised by its own plurality and instability. In line with this negative vision of selfhood, Leiris repeatedly describes the act of writing the self in terms of a process of self-fortification, a defence mechanism designed to protect the writing subject from his or her own dissolution; “une tentative symbolique de *minéralisation*, réaction de défense contre ma faiblesse interne et l’effritement dont je me sentais menacé” (AH, 183). Corresponding to this conception of writing as a self-defensive tool directed at fabricating “une sorte de cuirasse”, a number of critics have interpreted the autobiographical doppelgänger that populate the pages

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<sup>29</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 149.

of Gadda's fictional narratives as an attempt to shield both the reader and the author from an underlying tragic 'reality' through the creation of a protective, 'comic' layer of fiction. As against such interpretations of writing as a 'comic' self-defensive screening device, however, I will argue that the true tragedy of these authors' writings might be seen to lie in their shared recognition, and exposure, of the impossibility of distinguishing between the poles of 'fiction' and 'reality', and subsequent impossibility of entering into any truly authentic experience of subjectivity itself outside of the series of "parvenze non valide", or "menzogne salvatrici" which, for Gadda, govern social reality. Rather than a self-protective screening device, writing becomes the arena in which an experience of subjective and external inauthenticity is not masked, but rather played out.

Through a comparative analysis of three key thematic areas – community, women, and the relationship between selfhood and writing - this study thus sets out to throw light upon a shared preoccupation within both authors' writings with the loss of subjective and external order and unity characteristic of a fragmented modern reality. As against the position of cultural isolation to which they have most commonly been assigned, I would therefore argue that their oeuvres can fruitfully be situated within the context of a broader preoccupation within twentieth-century European thought with the dissolution of the notion of the 'unified' subject, and the problematic nature of the relationship between individual and community, self and other.

## CHAPTER 1

### The (Impossible) Search for the Communal

Attention: vont-ils s'apercevoir que *noir* veut dire *blanc*, mais non, non, jamais. C'est simple: impossibilité d'échanges vrais – plus jamais.

Colette Peignot, *Ecrits de Laure*

The question of community holds a position of primary importance within the works of both Leiris and Gadda. For Leiris, the search for what I will term an experience of the 'communal' takes place within the context of a series of intellectual groups that engage with the issue from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. From Breton's Surrealism to Bataille's *Documents*, and from the *Collège de sociologie* to the ethnographic practices of Marcel Mauss, Leiris was involved in a wide array of seemingly disparate literary, intellectual and political societies throughout the course of his career. Yet while these movements were in many respects driven by differing – even, at least on the surface, conflicting – goals, I will argue that what drew Leiris to each of them was their shared interest in overcoming the division between self and other through the reinstatement of a 'sacred' experience of communal 'unity' absent from modern reality.

For the Surrealists, this was to involve the initiation of an experience of non-contradiction in which "haut et bas se confondent et où la distance s'abolit entre le tout et le

rien”,<sup>30</sup> which Leiris later sets in terms of a sacred merging of left and right; “l’union stridente des deux natures – gauche et droite” (Miroir, 47). For Bataille, Peignot and Leiris, it was through the implementation of a form of ‘sacred communication’ involving a dissolution of the barriers between self and other and a subsequent exhilarating experience of self-loss that this sacred experience of unity might be achieved, while for members of the *Collège de sociologie*, it was to be brought about through a reinstatement of the communifying sacred practices characteristic of so-called ‘primitive’ societies. In addition to the theories of these established groups, Leiris also remained drawn throughout his life to a series of ‘sacred’ everyday experiences that offer a rare opportunity to erase the barrier between self and other. From alcohol to eroticism, and from jazz and poetry to the ceremonial practice of the bullfight, each of these activities was seen to involve an experience based on what the author describes, in *L’Age d’homme*, as a rare “coïncidence entre le sujet et l’objet” (AH, 174).

Like Leiris, Gadda grappled with the issue of community throughout his career. Denouncing the notion of isolated identity as a concept that is at once fallacious and dangerous, the Milanese author remained tormented by society’s incapacity to eradicate the ills of narcissism and initiate the form of collective unity required to bring about any form of social progress.<sup>31</sup> Yet while it was to a series of intellectual communities and the theories of the communifying ‘sacred’ that Leiris turned for a means of overcoming this crucial divide between self and other, for Gadda it was through the practical, collective integration of war and the potentialities of Fascist psychology – with its perceived valorisation of the group over the individual and favouring of concrete action over sterile reflection – that the ills of individual narcissism and the fragmentation of modern subjectivity might be eradicated. In

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<sup>30</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘De Bataille l’Impossible à l’impossible Documents’ in *Échanges et correspondances*, ed. by Louis Yvert (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> In the theoretical treatise *Meditazione milanese*, Gadda sets this in terms of a heuristic progress from  $n$  to  $n + 1$ . Failure to progress beyond the state of  $n$  is the result of society’s entrenchment in a position of unsublimated narcissism.

keeping, in a number of respects, with the vision of war set out by Roger Caillois in his controversial study *L'homme et le sacré* (1939), as well as some of the key tenets of a number of seminal theories of group identity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gadda initially envisaged the war as a rare opportunity for social renewal and individual transformation. Following the bitter realities of his actual wartime experience, however, as documented in his *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, he underwent a radical revision of his early belief in the possibility of true collective integration. For, far from the vision of communal unity and progress he had initially foreseen, the experience of war was in reality one of heightened estrangement, neurosis and disorder for the young author, leading to his embittered recognition of the inescapability of individual narcissism, and the resultant impossibility of any true form of collective unity.

This chapter will thus chart the progression in Leiris's and Gadda's thought in relation to the concept of community and the possibility of initiating any true experience of communal integration. What is the significance of community within the context of a fractured modern reality? And to what extent might it be possible to reinstate an experience of the communifying 'sacred' characteristic of an idealised, classical past?

## **Leiris**

*Surrealism, the merveilleux, and the search for the point of unity "vers laquelle convergent toutes les directions confondues"*

Between 1924 and 1929, Leiris was an official member of the Surrealist movement. And although relatively fleeting, his involvement can be seen to have had a decisive impact on the development of his thought in relation to a number of key questions, from language, to the relationship between desiring (male) self and desired (female) other, and the importance of

the imagination.<sup>32</sup> In the first manifesto – *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) – André Breton presents the movement's primary goal as being that of dissolving the entrenched oppositions around which established social reality is structured. Focusing firstly on the opposition between 'rêve' and réalité', Breton famously declared that, "Je crois à la résolution de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*, si l'on peut ainsi dire."<sup>33</sup> Through a breakdown of society's fixed pattern of oppositions and barriers - between reality and the imagination, the waking and sleeping, conscious and unconscious states, and the internal and the external – the Surrealists sought to initiate an ideal state of non-contradiction in which division might be replaced with unity, binary division with undifferentiation. As Breton goes on to declare in the *Second manifeste du surréalisme* (1929),

Tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement. Or, c'est en vain qu'on chercherait à l'activité surréaliste un autre mobile que l'espoir de détermination de ce point.<sup>34</sup>

One key Surrealist concept by which Leiris was strongly influenced in this regard was the notion of the 'merveilleux'. The question is first alluded to by Breton in the first

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<sup>32</sup> In *L'Age d'homme*, Leiris describes the movement's continued influence on him as follows: "Pour diverses raisons [...] j'avais rompu avec le surréalisme. Pourtant, il est de fait que j'en restais imprégné. Réceptivité à l'égard de ce qui apparaît comme nous étant donné sans que nous l'ayons cherché [...] valeur poétique attachée aux rêves [...] large créance accordée à la psychologie freudienne (qui met en jeu un matériau séduisant d'images et, par ailleurs, offre à chacun un moyen commode de se hausser jusqu'au plan tragique en se prenant pour un nouvel Œdipe, répugnance à l'égard de tout ce qui est transposition ou arrangement c'est-à-dire compromis fallacieux entre les faits réels et les produits purs de l'imagination, nécessité de mettre les pieds dans le plat (quant à l'amour, notamment, que l'hypocrisie bourgeoise traite trop aisément comme matière de vaudeville quand elle ne le relègue pas dans un secteur maudit): telles sont quelques-unes des grandes lignes de force qui continuaient à me traverser, embarrassées de maintes scories et non sans quelques contradictions, quand j'eus l'idée de cet ouvrage où se trouvent confrontés souvenirs d'enfance, récits d'événements réels, rêves et impressions effectivement éprouvées, en une sorte de collage surréaliste ou plutôt de photo-montage puisque aucun élément n'y est utilisé qui ne soit d'une véracité rigoureuse ou n'ait valeur de document." (*L'Age d'homme*, pp. 15-16).

<sup>33</sup> André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: J-J Pauvert, 1962/1979), p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pp. 72-73.

manifesto, in which he declares that, “le merveilleux est toujours beau, n’importe quel merveilleux est beau. Il n’y a même que le merveilleux qui soit beau.”<sup>35</sup> For Breton, the ‘merveilleux’ is to be located in a series of privileged, irrational states of being – from hysteria to dreams, to the irrational, revolution, convulsive beauty, *l’amour fou*<sup>36</sup> and chance - in which society’s traditional focus on rationality gives way to a liberating revival of the irrational. This celebration of the ‘merveilleux’ – which offers the potential to disrupt society’s pre-existing structure of boundaries and oppositions – is further clarified in Louis Aragon’s claim that the marvellous is to be understood as an experience of contradiction *within* reality, experienced by the individual as a sense of electrical *frisson* resulting from a break with perceived normality. For Roger Cardinal, this represents an unsettling experience of “imbalance which paralyses the mechanisms of habit”.<sup>37</sup> The result, for Cardinal, is that the individual “loses track of the distinction between the objective and the subjective, the real and the imaginary”,<sup>38</sup> thereby bringing about a destabilising experience which forms “the empirical foundation of the true Surrealist experience”.<sup>39</sup> In their quest to overturn traditional modes of thought, then, the Surrealists were drawn to all those experiences of the ‘merveilleux’ which overturn society’s established binary oppositions. They conceived of the experience as an unsettling yet exhilarating moment described by Katherine Conley as the

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<sup>35</sup> Breton, *Manifestes*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> Another key means through which the Surrealists sought to bring about this dissolution of binary oppositions was via a radical reconceptualisation of the notion of love and of the relationship between the masculine and the feminine. A clear illustration of this can be found in the writings of André Breton. In a series of semi-autobiographical narratives centred on key encounters with women in his life – pertinent examples of which include *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), *L’Amour fou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) and *Arcane 17* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1971) – Breton proclaims that love alone holds the destabilising force required to shake up the foundations of society: “C’est toute la conception moderne de l’amour qui serait [...] à reprendre” (*L’Amour fou*, p. 76). In *Arcane 17*, he asserts that, “C’est précisément par l’amour et par lui seul que se réalise au plus haut degré la fusion de l’existence et de l’essence, c’est par lui seul qui parvient à concilier d’emblée, en pleine harmonie, ces deux notions” (*L’Arcane 17*, p. 28).

<sup>37</sup> Roger Cardinal, ‘The Imaging of Magic’, in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealists*, ed. by Patricia Allmer (London: Prestel, 2009), 27-45 (p. 37).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

“double sensation of existing on two planes, inside and outside, asleep and awake, right-side and upside-down.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1925, after having been assigned the task of creating a ‘Glossaire du Merveilleux’ by Antonin Artaud, Leiris proceeded to set out his own thoughts on the question in a short but comprehensive study titled ‘Essai sur le merveilleux’. The essay is divided into two separate sections – ‘Essai sur le merveilleux dans la littérature occidentale’, and ‘Le merveilleux moderne’ - which deal, respectively, with the origins of the concept of the marvellous in Western literature, and its influence on and place in modern thought. The text provides an instructive record on the author’s own early thoughts on such questions as the issue of limits, the potential utilisation of the imagination as a means of overturning rational, logical patterns of thought, and the possibility of engaging in an experience of unity outside of society’s established structure of binary opposition. While Leiris’s initial enthusiasm for the Surrealist project did ultimately come to diminish, one key aspect of Surrealist thought that continued to attract him was the experience of “imbalance” described above; the ambivalent state of being in between two opposing modes of being. For Leiris, the modern ‘merveilleux’ – which represents an interesting foundation for the theory of the everyday sacred that he would later go on to develop within the context of the *Collège de sociologie* – constitutes a unique opportunity for experiencing the extraordinary within the confines of the ordinary. Stressing the importance of this form of dissolution of oppositions, Leiris opens the essay with the following claim:

C’est aux dernières limites du possible, sur les confins les plus lointains des apparences, à l’extrême pointe vers laquelle convergent toutes les directions confondues, voire même au-delà, dans cette région où ne peut plus se rencontrer que

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<sup>40</sup> Katharine Conley, ‘Safe as Houses: Anamorphic Bodies in Ordinary Spaces: Miller, Varo, Tanning, Woodman’, in *Angels of Anarchy*, 46-53 (p. 50).

la conjecture audacieuse ou bien plutôt l'étonnement sans mesure, que s'effectue la plus profonde et la plus énigmatique peut-être des démarches que tente l'esprit de l'homme, celle par qui s'élabore secrètement le Merveilleux. (Merveilleux, 39)

Leiris's conception of the notion of the 'merveilleux' is also associated with the role of art itself which, as he explains in an entry from his *Journal* dated 1922, serves the primary goal of presenting the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar, thereby bringing about a heightened experience of reality within the confines of the everyday: "L'art est une protestation de l'homme contre la nature [...] La poésie est essentiellement le merveilleux [...] Faire voir les objets familiers sous un aspect merveilleux" (Journal, 28-29). Drawing an equation between poetry and the 'merveilleux', Leiris suggests that it is the role of art to overturn man's established view of reality, displacing him from his fixation on the strict dictates of rational, logical patterns of thought. Anticipating his later theory of the sacred, which is rooted in the everyday, the experience of the 'merveilleux' thus relates for Leiris to an unsettling coming together of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the familiar and the unfamiliar. He is also keen to stress the importance of distinguishing the marvellous from the supernatural in this text, since the former, which in fact constitutes nothing more than a shift in man's *perception* of reality, is an experience that comes entirely from within, rather than being the result of any external influence: "Le Merveilleux n'existe qu'intérieurement à l'homme [...] Le Merveilleux est l'Inconnu dans l'homme [...] il est l'attrait qu'exerce l'inexplicable" (Merveilleux, 42-3).

In the second section of the essay, Leiris focuses his attention on what he terms the *modern* 'merveilleux', which provides an interesting early expression of some of the key notions later developed in his theory of the everyday sacred. Conceived as a form of revolt against "l'esclavage honteux de la logique" and devoid of all element of mysticism, the focus here is once again on the use of the imagination as a means of overturning society's fixation

on the discourse of binary logic and reason. Born of a “bouleversement pur et simple des relations par le jeu tout à fait spontané de l’imagination” (Merveilleux, 61), Leiris locates the modern marvellous in five key areas: the lyrical realm of the “purement irrationnel”; the act of moral revolt, which is triggered by “la haine du rationnel et la révolte contre les conditions mêmes de la vie”; pure speculation, which constitutes an extreme form of rationalism stripped of all external purpose; the realm of the “humoristique”, as distinct from that of the “comique”; the realm of pure adventure; and, finally, the “élément érotique”. While it takes multiple, disparate forms, therefore, the modern ‘merveilleux’ might be defined by one key feature: the attempt to overturn the established logic of causality and rationality through a rejection of socially-imposed binary structures of opposition. This is perfectly encapsulated, Leiris suggests, in the work of the French writer and inventor of pataphysics, Alfred Jarry, which provides a striking example of “la forme la plus moderne du Merveilleux, celle qui n’est mêlée d’aucune mystique [...] mais qui consiste en le pur et simple bouleversement des relations et la superposition de cet ‘univers supplémentaire’ dont parle Jarry à l’univers traditionnel” (Merveilleux, 72-3).

With its focus on the question of ‘limits’, the coming together of converging directions and the exhilarating experience of imbalance that results from this violent overturning of opposition, Leiris’s theory of the ‘merveilleux’ thus provides an instructive illustration of the author’s early quest for an exhilarating experience of non-contradiction, or ‘unity’, and associated endeavour to escape society’s established structure of binary opposition.

Having grown disillusioned with the Surrealist project and what Catherine Maubon has termed its attempted “fuite dans l’imaginaire”, Leiris took part, in 1929, in a widespread movement away from Breton headed by the polemical figure of Georges Bataille. Bataille’s group of dissidents criticised the Surrealists, and Breton in particular, for their failure to eradicate society’s enslavement to a restrictive logic of binary opposition and rationality, and for having done no more than merely perpetuate the errors they had set out to overcome. As Jean-Michel Heimonet explains,

Somme tout le surréalisme est tombé naïvement dans le piège métaphysique par excellence. En s’opposant purement et simplement en échos et reflets, aux valeurs homogènes, en entretenant et reconduisant le jeu des contraires, il s’est fait l’allié objectif et, jusqu’à un certain point, le défenseur de ce qu’il croyait détruire.<sup>41</sup>

Merely criticising the system from within rather than establishing a new one with which to replace it, the intended “révolution contre la raison” was seen to result in nothing more than an empty act of ‘agitation’. As Gavin Grindon explains, Bataille denounced the Surrealist movement “for simply acting reactively to that which it opposed by constructing an idealist ‘sur’-realism”.<sup>42</sup> Dissatisfied with the failings of the Surrealist movement, Bataille and his followers came together in a joint effort to counter the movement’s excessive focus on the *ideal* through an opposing reinstatement, and revalorisation, of the values of the *concrete* and the *everyday*.

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<sup>41</sup> Jean-Michel Heimonet, *Politiques de l’écriture: Bataille/Derrida: Le sens du sacré dans la pensée française du surréalisme à nos jours* (Chapel Hill: U.N.C. Dept. of Romance Languages, 1987) p. 56.

<sup>42</sup> Gavin Grindon, ‘Alchemist of the Revolution: The Affective Materialism of Georges Bataille’, *Routledge*, Vol. 24, Issue 3 (May 2010), 305-17 (p. 317).

And one of the key channels through which they sought to do so was the polemical journal *Documents*, edited by Bataille and co-directed together with Georges-Henri Rivière and Carl Einstein. Leiris was a member of the editorial board and occasional contributor, including articles on Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Joan Miró. Published during the period 1929 to 1930, *Documents* – which Leiris later described as the concrete expression of a “philosophie agressivement anti-idéaliste”<sup>43</sup> – was conceived with the primary aim of overturning society’s pre-existing hierarchical dichotomies through a radical revalorisation of the lower, mundane spheres of reality. By juxtaposing a surprising array of disparate objects, via the adoption of seemingly absurd methods of investigation, the journal once again sought to shock people out of their entrenched patterns of thought. A particularly striking illustration of this technique can be found in the famous series dedicated to the study of the human toe.<sup>44</sup> The series was presented in *Documents* 6 (1929), and consists of a text titled ‘Le Gros Orteil’, written by Bataille, together with a series of black and white photographs of human toes, taken by the photographer Jacques-André Boiffard. Together with the written text, the images present a clear critique of the form of aesthetic idealisation with which Bataille and his followers had charged Breton and his movement. Leiris describes the purpose of the campaign thus:

... si le pied est frappé de tabous et est l’objet d’un fétichisme dans le domaine érotique, c’est parce qu’il rappelle à l’homme, dont les pieds se situent dans la boue et dont la tête s’élève vers le ciel, que sa vie n’est qu’un “mouvement de va-et-vient de l’ordure à l’idéal et de l’idéal à l’ordure.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Leiris, ‘De Bataille l’impossible à l’impossible *Documents*’, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> *Documents*, N° 6, November 1929, pp. 297-302, in Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) pp. 200-204.

<sup>45</sup> Leiris, ‘De Bataille l’impossible à l’impossible *Documents*’, pp. 22-23.

In the text, Bataille denounces man's fixation on the upper spheres of corporeal being and associated attempt to dissimulate the realities of human physicality. As against this entrenched habit of thought, he calls for a revalorisation of the lower spheres: "Mais quel que soit le rôle joué dans l'érection par son pied, l'homme, qui a la tête légère, c'est-à-dire élevée vers le ciel et les choses du ciel, le regarde comme un crachat sous prétexte qu'il a ce pied dans la boue."<sup>46</sup> While *Documents* was conceived as a means of countering the perceived failings of the Surrealist movement, the two groups can be seen to be united by a shared endeavour to overturn society's enslavement to binary logic and established, rational modes of thought, in order to bring about a dissolution of hierarchical opposition. However, while for the Surrealists this was to be achieved through an initiation of that critical point of being at which "haut et bas se confondent et où la distance s'abolit entre le tout et le rien", for the members of *Documents* it was through a revalorisation of the 'lower' spheres of human reality that binary, hierarchical thought might be overturned.

In the case of both Breton's Surrealism and Bataille's *Documents*, the primary motivation behind Leiris's involvement might thus be attributed to an on-going quest to escape society's established focus on binary opposition and engage, instead, in an exhilarating experience of non-contradiction wherein hierarchical barriers might be overcome. And it is in precisely such a quest that we also find one of the driving motives behind his subsequent involvement in the famous 1931-1933 Dakar-Djibouti mission, following his acquaintance with Marcel Griaule during his participation in *Documents*.<sup>47</sup> For while Leiris was initially called upon to partake in the capacity of secretary-archivist – his

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<sup>46</sup> Bataille, *Documents* n° 6, novembre 1929, in *Œuvres Complètes I*, pp. 200-204.

<sup>47</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to offer a detailed examination of the importance of *L'Afrique fantôme*. For a more detailed consideration of the text and the importance of Leiris's contributions to the field of ethnographic study more generally, see: Irene Alberts, 'Mimesis and Alterity: Michel Leiris's Ethnography and Poetics of Spirit Possession', *French Studies*, Vol. 62, Issue 3 (July 2008), 271-289; and John Culbert, *Paralyses: Literature, Travel, Ethnography in French Modernity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

role was to relate primarily to the keeping of a detailed day-to-day record of the expedition – Leiris himself looked upon the voyage primarily as an opportunity to escape the restrictions of modern Western being and his own personal limitations. Having become disillusioned with the potentialities of the Surrealist movement to bring about the revolutionary transformation it had initially set out to achieve, the expedition represented for him a unique chance for personal transformation wherein he might shake off his own limitations and enter into a true form of contact with the other. In the introduction to *L’Afrique fantôme*, he explains that this was to be “*en même temps qu’une épreuve, une poésie vécue et un dépaysement*” (AF, 14). In line with his on-going interest in the notion of the ‘merveilleux’ – which, as already suggested, derives from a desire to overturn society’s entrenched pattern of rational, logical thought and enter into an exhilarating experience of the extraordinary within the everyday - Leiris goes on to explain that, “*L’Afrique fantôme me parut s’imposer, allusion certes aux réponses apportées à mon goût du merveilleux par tels spectacles qui avaient capté mon regard ou telles institutions que j’avais étudiées, mais expression surtout de ma déception d’Occidental dans sa peau*” (AF, 7). And it was also upon the recommendation of his psychoanalyst, Adrien Borel, with whom he had begun treatment after suffering a breakdown the previous year, that Leiris agreed to partake in the expedition. By making a transition away from purely literary activities towards the more ‘concrete’ sphere of ethnographic study, it was his intention to “*rompre avec les habitudes intellectuelles qui avaient été les [s]iennes jusqu’alors et, au contact d’hommes d’autre culture que [s]oi et d’autre race, abattre des cloisons entre lesquelles [il] étouffai[t] et élargir jusqu’à une mesure vraiment humaine [s]on horizon*” (AF, 13).

His involvement was thus not driven primarily by scholarly motives, but rather by a quest to “*se faire autre en effectuant une plongée – d’ailleurs toute symbolique – dans une ‘mentalité’ primitive*” dont [il] éprouvai[t] la nostalgie” (AF, 13). Disillusioned with both

Surrealism and with the capacity of his own poetic activities to bring about any real change, and increasingly frustrated by his own personal limitations and sexual neuroses, Leiris wished to rid himself, Beaujour explains, “of the burden of repression, neurosis, impotence, and ennui attendant on a European manhood.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than a serious piece of objective anthropological study, he posits, “Leiris’s African diary constantly refers to a personal quest for wonderment beyond the mental and physical space of Europe. It is an attempt to turn an Outside, Africa, the dark locus of trance and possession, into an Inside, the writer’s psyche.”<sup>49</sup>

Just as Gadda’s experience of military involvement ultimately proves one of bitter disillusionment, however, laying waste to the author’s belief in the possibility of war as a moment of collective integration or personal liberation, the expedition charted in *L’Afrique fantôme* fails to provide Leiris with any such an experience of personal transformation or true contact with the other. Far from an account of the sought-after union with the exotic other, *L’Afrique fantôme*, like Gadda’s *Giornale*, in fact becomes no more than “a record of protracted failure”,<sup>50</sup> to quote Beaujour. Questioning the result of his findings in Africa, in a flier written in the third-person in 1934, Leiris offers the following response:

Peu d’aventures, des études qui le passionnent d’abord mais se révèlent bientôt trop inhumaines pour le satisfaire, une obsession érotique croissante, un vide sentimental de plus en plus grand. Malgré son dégoût des civilisés et de la vie des métropoles, vers la fin du voyage, il aspire au retour. Sa tentative d’évasion n’a été qu’un échec et il ne croit plus, d’ailleurs, à la valeur de l’évasion: malgré le capitalisme qui de plus en plus tend à rendre tout vrai rapport humain impossible; n’y-a-t-il pas qu’au sein de

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<sup>48</sup> Beaujour, ‘Ethnography of Self-Portrayal?’, p. 473.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 477.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 477.

sa propre civilisation qu'un Occidental ait des chances de se réaliser, sur le plan passionnel? Il apprendra une fois de plus, toutefois, qu'ici comme partout ailleurs l'homme ne peut échapper à son isolement : de sorte qu'il repartira, un jour ou l'autre, happé par de nouveaux fantômes – quoique sans illusions, cette fois!<sup>51</sup>

Having failed to rid himself of the European values of scientific detachment and rationality that he had so vehemently opposed, Leiris thus returns to Paris disillusioned with the potentialities of travel and ethnographic study to offer any real contact with the other or escape from the restricting sphere of the individual. Rather than renouncing his quest, however, Leiris proceeded upon his return to involve himself, instead, in a series of intellectual, working communities each of which can be seen to have been engaged in a shared endeavour to relocate, and reinstate, an experience of the communifying 'sacred'.

*The Bataillean communities of the 1930s and 1940s: from Contre-attaque, to Acéphale, and the Collège de Sociologie*

It is again in the figure of Bataille, in whose works the issue of community represents a question of central and on-going importance, that one finds the most important source of influence on Leiris in relation to the question of community.<sup>52</sup> The extent of Bataille's importance for Leiris is illustrated not only by their extensive correspondence, but also, more particularly, by Leiris' dedication of *L'Âge d'homme* to Bataille in 1939 and the latter's dedication of *L'Érotisme* to him, in 1957. Bataille wrestled with the question of community

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<sup>51</sup> Leiris, 'L'Afrique fantôme: De Dakar à Djibouti' (1931-1933), *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, No. 248 (1 May 1934), 159-159 (p. 159).

<sup>52</sup> See also Maurice Blanchot's study of the 'unavowable' community, which presents a detailed consideration of Bataille's own understanding on the question of the communal, as well as a response to Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the 'inoperative' community: Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).

throughout his writings, and the importance of the issue within his wider thought has been the subject of considerable critical attention. Insisting upon the fallacious nature of any attempt to conceive of the individual outside of the sphere of the communal, Bataille adheres throughout his writings to the principle, as Michael Richardson notes in his introduction to Bataille's writings on Surrealism, that, "Without a social purpose in *himself* (i.e. not as a thing that serves others) man is cast adrift both from himself and from his fellow beings".<sup>53</sup> Contrary to failed political efforts of the time, Bataille set out to establish what he perceived as a genuine community based not upon national or racial unity, but rather upon a privileged mode of communal being held together by the force of 'affect'. And one of the key ways in which he endeavoured to initiate such an experience was through his establishment of and involvement with a series of working and theoretical communities. These included, namely, the *Cercle communiste démocratique*, which was active from around 1930 to 1934; *Contre-attaque*, which was co-founded by Bataille and Breton in 1935; the *Collège de sociologie*, which was initiated in 1937 and ran until 1939; *Acéphale*, a controversial clandestine society active during the years 1936-1939, and which overlapped for a certain period of time with the *Collège de sociologie*; and, lastly, the close-knit community comprising Leiris, Bataille, and Laure in the 1930s. While *Contre-attaque* and *Acéphale* introduced a number of key concepts relating to the issue of community, it is the *Collège de sociologie* that represents the most important source of influence on Leiris in this regard, and it is in this community that he played an active role. After briefly touching upon the central ideas put forward by the first of these communities, it is thus to the *Collège* that greatest attention will be accorded in this section.

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<sup>53</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, edited, translated and introduced by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 10.

After a period of involvement with the *Cercle communiste démocratique*, which was established in 1926 by Boris Souvarine, one of the founders of the French Communist Party, Bataille went on to become involved with the anti-Fascist group *Contre-attaque*. Initiated in 1935 through a surprising allegiance between Bataille and Breton, the group brought together a number of Surrealists and former members of the recently disassembled *Cercle communiste démocratique*, in what Michael Richardson has described as a “union of revolutionary intellectuals”.<sup>54</sup> Following the perceived failure of the communists to counter the threat of Fascism, members of *Contre-attaque* believed a new revolutionary strategy to be necessary in order to bring about any real concrete change.

The group was officially established through the publication of a manifesto<sup>55</sup> in October 1935, which was written by Bataille and signed, among others, by Breton and Eluard. In the manifesto, the group’s underlying purpose is presented, in Lübecker’s words, as that of “reconcil[ing] Surrealism as a *method of creating a collective myth* with the much more general movement involving the liberation of man.”<sup>56</sup> And the manner by which this was to be achieved, it was declared, was through the implementation of the very same tools employed by the Fascist movement itself, in an attempt to deploy the regime’s strategies against it. As Gavin Grindon explains, “not only had the Communists fatally overlooked the potential of affect, but Fascists had meanwhile taken full advantage of it, to terrible effects.”<sup>57</sup> Bataille declared it to be necessary to move away from a focus on abstract discussion towards a strategy of concrete affective engagement. The group thus set out to

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<sup>54</sup> Richardson, *The Absence of Myth*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Contre-Attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires’ in Georges Bataille, *Œuvres Complètes Vol. 1*.

<sup>56</sup> Lübecker, p. 210.

<sup>57</sup> Grindon, p. 313.

engage in a valorisation and redeployment of the very collective forces that Gadda himself first espouses in his early comments on the Fascist movement, before later vehemently renouncing these same forces in *Eros e Priapo*, his retrospective denunciation of the psychology of group identity underpinning Fascist discourse. Anticipating a key tenet of the *Collège de sociologie*, members of *Contre-attaque* stressed the importance of collective cohesion, which for Bataille is intrinsically tied up with the question of the ‘sacred’. Understood here as the cohesive force that ensures the unity and coherence of any given society, the sacred was central to the theory of collective integration at the base of the group’s approach. As Nikolaj Lübecker explains, “members of Contre-Attaque regarded the political movement as a modern day version of a sacred community: in the ecstatic community of revolutionary action the individual would discover a secret truth of both individual and social character”.<sup>58</sup> Just as Gadda was drawn to the experience of war as a possible means of initiating a productive form of collective integration impossible within the context of mundane, everyday life, then, members of *Contre-Attaque* stressed the positive effects to be achieved through the creation of a ‘sacred’ community held together by shared goals and affective force.

This quest to create a cohesive ‘sacred’ community held together by affective force takes on more radical form, however, in *Acéphale*, a highly controversial, clandestine society. Established in 1937 by Bataille, *Acéphale* was co-directed by Bataille and Klossowski, and numbered among its members such figures as Simone Weil, Raymond Queneau, Picasso, and Masson. Like *Contre-Attaque* and the *Collège de sociologie*, with which it overlapped for a certain period of time, its goal was to engage its members in a working ‘sacred’ community. However, while the *Collège de sociologie* took the form of an open community structured around meetings accessible to the general public, one of the defining characteristics of

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<sup>58</sup> Lübecker, p. 21.

*Acéphale* was its closed, ‘secret’ character which, as I shall explore later, formed a key element of Leiris’s own theory of the sacred, as set out in the 1938 essay ‘Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne’.<sup>59</sup> Like the *Collège de sociologie*, *Acéphale* was established with the intention of reliving, within the context of a desacralised modernity, the sacred rituals and myths central to the functioning of so-called ‘primitive’ societies. To this end, members engaged in a series of clandestine rituals, the most radical of which involved a gathering at the Place de la Concorde in order to commemorate the decapitation of Louis XVI, metaphorically signifying the death of God. Other rituals carried out by the group, which are detailed by Michel Surya in his authoritative biography of Bataille, include the members’ daily lunch of horsemeat, their pact to refuse to shake hands with anti-Semites, and the communal ceremony, organised by Bataille, during which they burned sulphur at the foot of a tree struck by lightning in a nearby forest.<sup>60</sup> The ultimate sacred ritual envisaged by the group, however, was intended to take the form of a real human sacrifice involving the decapitation of one of its members. As Allan Stoekl suggests, “The acephalic man through Nietzsche represented the death of God as well as the death of the classical conception of man.”<sup>61</sup> The event never actually took place, however, and the group fortunately limited itself to undertaking a series of projects of a mere symbolic nature.

While Leiris was not actively involved in either of these two groups, then, the closely aligned underlying goals of *Contre-attaque* and *Acéphale* – which relate first and foremost to the initiation of a cohesive, ‘sacred’ community held together by the force of

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Leiris, ‘Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne’, in Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie: 1937-1939*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 60-75.

<sup>60</sup> For more on this, see Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 251.

<sup>61</sup> Allan Stoekl, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. xx.

‘affect’ – can be seen as a useful introduction to a number of the key tenets underpinning the philosophy of the *Collège de sociologie*, in which Leiris was to play a key role.

*The ‘Collège de sociologie’: towards a revival of the communifying sacred*

The *Collège de sociologie* was founded in October 1937 and remained active until the summer of 1939. United by a shared mission to bring about a concrete revalorisation of the communifying sacred, the *Collège* brought together a number of eminent intellectuals, including Bataille, Caillois, Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, Jules Monnerot and Georges Ambrosino. Inspired by the ethnographic practices of Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim – in particular the theories that emerged from Durkheim’s *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912) – the group’s primary goal was to engage in a thorough examination and revival of the ‘sacred’ through a reinstatement of the communifying practices characteristic of so-called primitive societies. In organisational terms, the group involved fortnightly meetings, with presentations being given by a long list of speakers, from Bataille, to Caillois, Leiris, Klossowski, and Alexander Kojève, among others. While discussions related to a wide range of topics, they were brought together under the central theme of social cohesion, the focal aim being to establish firstly what was meant by the term, and secondly how it might be revived in modern society.

Running simultaneously with the clandestine group *Acéphale*, the *Collège* provided Leiris with the opportunity to engage with the question of community, not only from a theoretical perspective, but also through his direct involvement in a concrete, working community of thought. As Heimonet explains, members of the group were united by a shared desire to “créer une communauté, de former un agrégat social où les membres, à l’instar d’initiés, eussent communiqué [...] au fil d’un pur lien de sympathie magique.”<sup>62</sup> Richardson

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<sup>62</sup> Heimonet, p. 17.

has also stressed the importance of this connection between the theoretical subject matter at hand and the working nature of the group, describing the *Collège* in terms of a “moral community”.<sup>63</sup> In the group’s manifesto – ‘Pour un Collège de Sociologie’ – priority is accorded to the question of the communal, with the primary objective being described as that of engaging in a collective study of the sacred:

L’objet précis de l’activité envisagée peut recevoir le nom de *sociologie sacrée*, en tant qu’il implique l’étude de l’existence sociale dans toutes celles de ses manifestations où se fait jour la présence active du sacré. Elle se propose ainsi d’établir les points de coïncidence entre les tendances obsédantes fondamentales de la psychologie individuelle et les structures directrices qui président à l’organisation sociale et commandent ses révolutions.<sup>64</sup>

As suggested by Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi in *Rethinking the Political*, a study of the political ambiguity of the *Collège* and the lasting impact it has had on the way we conceive of the issues of community formation and the communifying sacred, this was an endeavour “to reevaluate the importance of the sacred in modern social life and reclaim the role of religion – intended as a mystical experience – in a totally secularised world.”<sup>65</sup> As a close-knit community in its own right, the group came to be conceived as a sacred space, which at once symbolised and brought into being that crucial experience of affective cohesion which for Bataille was crucial to the functioning of society itself:

Espace sacré, délimité, protégé et agrégé par des rites, elle symbolise et réalise, à travers chacun de ses membres et dans l’unité de leur communion, la réserve affective, le lieu de dépense, de déchaînement passionnel, bref la part maudite que la

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Hollier, *Le Collège de sociologie*, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> Falasca-Zamponi, ‘A Left Sacred or a Sacred Left? The Collège de Sociologie, Fascism and Political Culture in Interwar France’, *South Central Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 40-54 (p. 40).

société contractuelle, pour vivre, pour survivre, gagner le temps nécessaire à la rédaction de son contrat, a tâché d'évacuer ou de censurer.<sup>66</sup>

Leiris's own clearest contribution to the question of the sacred within the context of the *Collège* is to be found in the essay 'Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne', which was presented to the group in the form of a lecture in January 1938. In this study, Leiris describes his unique conception of the sacred as an ambivalent "mélange de crainte et d'attachement" present in all those moments that are characterised by a tension between the opposing forces of attraction and repulsion. And it is to the idealised context of his childhood that he turns for his clearest memories of this form of ambivalent, everyday sacred: from his father's hat and revolver, symbols of paternal authority, to the feared household object of the *Salamandre* and his parents' bedroom, the epitome of the *sacré droit*, Leiris lists a number of privileged places, objects and experiences from his childhood that evoke an experience of the sacred within the everyday. For Leiris, the sacred is located in all those day-to-day experiences that offer access to a realm that is "radicalement distinct, aussi différent du monde profane que le feu l'est de l'eau."<sup>67</sup> While it is situated within the contours of the everyday, the sacred thus at the same time hints ambivalently at an alternative sphere of being radically divergent from the profane realm of the quotidian, involving a transition from the "état commun" towards "un état plus privilégié, plus cristallin, plus singulier, le glissement d'un état profane à un état sacré".<sup>68</sup> One example of this conception of the sacred as an ambivalent mélange of the everyday and the extraordinary consists in his description of those sacred moments, generative of a unique experience of the communal, in which he and his brother would shut themselves off from the rest of the family in the household W.C., retreating into a self-constructed community of two. During these moments of fraternal complicity, shielded from

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<sup>66</sup> Heimonet, p. 32.

<sup>67</sup> Leiris, 'Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne', p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

the view of the other members of the household, the two brothers would establish what Leiris describes as “toute une mythologie quasi secrète”,<sup>69</sup> a self-contained, secret community which Leiris remembers as being both exhilarating and dangerous, and imbued with all the “magie louche d’un sacré gauche”.<sup>70</sup> Leiris also stresses the importance here of a further key aspect of his theory of the sacred, which relates to the notion of *belonging*; “cette chose éminemment sacré qu’est toute espèce de pacte.”<sup>71</sup> This is reiterated, in the context of *Biffures*, when, returning to his secret hide-outs with his brother, he explains that, “C’était dans cet endroit, où nous nous retrouvions comme dans un repaire de brigands ou l’antre d’une société secrète, que nous sentions le mieux notre complicité [...] [nous] brodions intarissablement toute une mythologie” (B, RJ, 219). Illustrating the intrinsic connection between the sacred and the communal within the author’s mind as well as the importance of the association between secrecy and the sacred, Leiris’s theory of the sacred here can be seen to echo some of the key tenets of his earlier conception of the ‘merveilleux’, as elaborated during the context of his involvement with Surrealism.

A further key contribution to the theory of the communifying sacred put forward within the context of the *Collège* is to be found in Roger Caillois’s controversial examination of the collective sacred practices of so-called primitive societies. In *L’homme et le sacré*,<sup>72</sup> which was first published in 1939 during his involvement in the *Collège*, Caillois offers a detailed account of such practices, locating the communifying sacred in all those moments of collective agitation which, by temporarily overturning the strict rules and regulations of everyday life, allow for the liberation of individual instincts and a radical form of social renewal. The clearest manifestation of this form of collective sacred practice, Caillois

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<sup>69</sup> Leiris, ‘Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne’, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>72</sup> Roger Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré*, édition augmentée de trois appendices sur le sexe, le jeu, la guerre dans leurs rapports avec le sacré (Paris: Gallimard, 1950).

suggests, is to be found in the mass social occasion of the 'fête'. Constituting a moment of collective effusion, excess and regeneration, Caillois asserts that the festival was central to the healthy continuation of 'primitive' societies, playing a role that had remained unfulfilled within the context of the modern world. As a protracted period of social cohesion, Caillois explains that the festival constituted a crucial moment of unequalled turmoil and expenditure, a time when all taboos could be broken and accumulated wealth lavishly squandered. A key distinction is also drawn in this regard between the contrasting spheres of the profane and the sacred. For while the profane represents the static plane of everyday life, the sacred involves a clear break from the quotidian, in a moment of active *creation* as opposed to static *being*. As Caillois explains, "le monde du sacré, entre autres caractères, s'oppose au monde du profane comme un monde d'énergies à un monde de substances. D'un côté, des forces: de l'autre, des choses."<sup>73</sup> Without the revitalising effect of the sacred, everyday life would simply continue along its path without undergoing any form of change or renewal, thus leading over time to a gradual process of decline. It follows, Caillois notes, that the festival often takes place after a period of strict repression, initiating a cathartic moment of renewal, when everything is shaken up and transformed:

On comprend que la fête, représentant un tel paroxysme de vie et tranchant si violemment sur les menus soucis de l'existence quotidienne, apparaisse à l'individu comme un autre monde, où il se sent soutenu et transformé par des forces qui le dépassent. Son activité journalière [...] ne fait qu'occuper son temps et pourvoir à ses besoins immédiats. Il y apporte sans doute de l'attention, de la patience, de l'habileté, mais plus profondément, il vit dans le souvenir d'une fête et dans l'attente d'une

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<sup>73</sup> Caillois, p. 44.

autre, car la fête figure pour lui, pour sa mémoire et pour son desir, le temps des émotions intenses et de la métamorphose de son être.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast with this celebration of the role played by the *fête* in ancient times, Caillois laments the lack of any such a phenomenon of sacred collectivity within the context of modern society. In the concluding chapter of the text, Caillois draws a parallel between the role of the festival in the past, and the function of the vacation within modern society. Just as in primitive societies the festival would bring about a critical break with the everyday, the vacation represents a rupture with normality for the modern individual. Caillois's most influential, and indeed polemical, elaboration on this comparison is to be found in the post-war preface to the book, in which he proceeds to refute this parallel in favour of a more dramatic equivalence. Caillois explains here that while he had initially envisaged the vacation as a moment of social *cohesion*, what it in fact involves is the very opposite. Entailing the removal of the individual from the social context, the vacation actually represents the ultimate *isolating* activity. As Falasca-Zamponi has pointed out, "Vacations [...] did not display any element of the sacred: rather they were a profanation of sacred tie."<sup>75</sup> Having rejected this potential equivalence, Caillois goes on, in the post-war edition of *L'homme et le sacré*, to propose a far more controversial modern equivalent of the festival: the experience of war. Consistent with Gadda's initial celebration of war as a time of collective integration, social progression and personal transformation, Caillois sees this as a unique moment of collective effervescence and social cohesion that stands firmly outside the sphere of everyday reality. In the last appendix to the text, which is dedicated to this correlation, he explains that just as in 'primitive' society the festival represented a time in which laws were overturned and the entire social community thrown into a productive state of freneticism, so too, for

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<sup>74</sup> Caillois, p. 131.

<sup>75</sup> Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Rethinking the Political: The Sacred, Aesthetic Politics, and the Collège de Sociologie* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), p. 225.

modern society, does the experience of war offer a unique opportunity to overturn the established regulatory framework of everyday reality, and enter into a moment of truly collective integration:

La similitude de la guerre avec la fête est donc ici absolue: toutes deux inaugurent une période de forte socialisation [...]; elles rompent le temps pendant lequel les individus s'affairent chacun de son côté en une multitude de domaines différents. [...] Dans les sociétés modernes, la guerre représente pour ce motif l'unique moment de concentration et d'absorption intense dans le groupe de tout ce qui tend ordinairement à maintenir à son égard une certaine zone d'indépendance. C'est pourquoi, de préférence aux vacances et aux jours de fête, elle appelle la comparaison avec l'antique saison de l'effervescence collective.<sup>76</sup>

As Falasca-Zamponi explains, constituting a moment of “collective effervescence”, “wars brought social paroxysm to its extreme through a dialectical process of fascination and terror that opposed the destruction and violence of armed conflict to the peaceful time of prosperity”.<sup>77</sup> He goes on to explain that, “they completely crushed the rule of economic rationality and unified the group in a common experience that marked the renewal of the social.”<sup>78</sup> And for the individual, this was a liberating experience: in war, the individual finds himself thrown into a situation in which it is not only permissible, but essential, to perform acts that would under normal circumstances be deemed not only extravagant but unacceptable; “Chaque individu est ravi à sa profession, à son foyer, à ses habitudes, à son loisir enfin.”<sup>79</sup> Dan Stone describes this as a “sense of ecstatic participation”, explaining that,

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<sup>76</sup> Caillois, p. 223.

<sup>77</sup> Falasca-Zamponi, *Rethinking the Political*, p. 225.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 225.

<sup>79</sup> Caillois, p. 222.

“With the licence to indulge in frenzied transgression of norms and laws, this is a time for personal release just as much as it is a time of social revivification.”<sup>80</sup>

A strong parallel emerges, moreover, between Caillois’s conception of war as a moment of collective effusion and liberating individual transformation and Leiris’s own presentation of military involvement, in *Fourbis*, as a unique opportunity to escape the trappings of individual, everyday reality: “malgré la peur que j’en avais”, he explains, “la guerre m’est apparue en 1939, vue sous un certain angle, comme une espèce d’évasion et de salut en tant, d’une part, que seule chose vraiment importante qui pourrait encore m’arriver et en tant, d’autre part, que fulgurant dépaysement” (F, RJ, 434). As a time of personal release and individual and social transformation, then, war was perceived as an opportunity to break with normality and escape the limitations of individual identity. And perhaps the most important aspect of military involvement for Leiris, in this light, is the transformative effect on the individual: by donning the uniform, and hence persona, of the soldier, the individual is afforded the chance, Leiris suggests, to achieve a degree of heroism and personal transformation unparalleled, and indeed unattainable, in everyday life. Describing the benefits of such a transformation, Leiris explains that,

... elle les déguise en autre chose que ce qu’ils sont (ce qui, non seulement, représente en soi-même une manière d’aventure mais facilite le courage, parce qu’en uniforme on est moins soi qu’en civil, l’habit comme toute la vie militaire tendant à faire passer de l’état d’individu à celui de parcelle d’un être collectif) et elle les tire encore du

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<sup>80</sup> Dan Stone, ‘Genocide as Transgression’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, No. 7 (February 2004), 45-65 (pp. 53-4). Caillois’s theory has been the subject of considerable criticism. In ‘Genocide as Transgression’, for instance, Dan Stone lists Caillois’s theory of ‘war as festival’ alongside Bataille’s concept of ‘excess energy’ and Durkheim’s idea of ‘collective effervescence’, as an one of a number of key sources for the positive conception of genocide as a time of collective transgression. Equally, in the article ‘A Left Sacred or a Sacred Left?’, Falasca-Zamponi examines the *Collège de Sociologie* against the background of the Fascist rise to power, analysing the fierce critiques that were directed at the *Collège* for its affinity with the philosophy of group psychology underlying the Fascist regime.

quotidien quand la peur les mène à un dépouillement si extrême qu'on ne peut même plus à son propos parler de solitude. (F, RJ, 434).

In relation to this insistence upon the freedom that comes from the submission of the individual to the communal, a parallel emerges here with Caillois's own suggestion that, "L'uniforme endossé par chacun d'eux marque visiblement qu'il abandonne tout ce qui le distinguait d'autrui, pour servir la communauté."<sup>81</sup> A clear relation thus exists between the creation of a cohesive community – be it through the experience of the festival, or its modern equivalent for Caillois, war – and the individual's escape from, and transformation of, his experience of singular identity. A further correspondence might also be identified between Leiris's celebration of the transformative capacities of war here and Gadda's repeated insistence, throughout his early writings, on the benefits for the individual of his complete subjugation to the wider group.

For both Gadda and Leiris, this fascination with the transformative effects of group identity is also intrinsically tied up with the authors' shared sense of their own personal inadequacy, which shall be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. Within Gadda's writings, one finds repeated references to his neuroses, failings, and incapacity to relate successfully to others. Concerning his lack of military success, for example, one might recall his assertion that: "Certo le mie capacità militari sono poche: ma appena sento il rumore della battaglia, appena i cannoni urlano nelle foreste, una specie di commozione sovrumana mi pervade l'anima" (GG, SGF II, 644-645). Equally, Leiris repeatedly stresses the disjunction between his desire for concrete action and his incapacity to leave the sheltered sphere of intellectual reflection, as well as the crippling timidity that precludes him from ever feeling truly at ease in the company of others: "avoir peur de la tâche de sang mais accepter que mon

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<sup>81</sup> Caillois, p. 223.

confort repose sur la sueur voire sur le sang des autres [...] parler amour et poésie en menant le train le plus bourgeois, rêver action positive quand je me sais intellectuel jusqu'au bout des ongles" (FB, RJ, 906).

For both, collective military involvement thus represents a unique opportunity to escape the weaknesses and limitations of their individual personalities. This is further highlighted in Gadda's presentation of the war, in *Il castello di Udine*, as a rare opportunity for concrete, lived experience, and the sole worthy endeavour of his life: "Vigili angosce dominarono la mia guerra, una cieca e vera passione, fatta forse [...] di brutalità, di bestialità, di retorica e di cretinismo: ma fu comunque una disciplina vissuta, la sola degna di essere vissuta" (CdU, RRI, 136). A similar sentiment is voiced by Leiris when, in *Fourbis*, he describes the capacity of war to both cancel out individual failings, and remove all sense of individual responsibility:

La mobilisation, suivie à peu de jours par mon départ pour l'Afrique du Nord, avait ouvert dans ma vie une large parenthèse. L'arrachement à la coulée de l'existence qu'on s'est faite et l'effacement de la personne telle qu'elle s'est définie dans les affections, les travaux, les manies, voilà ce qui donne au civil brusquement transformé en soldat l'illusion de repartir à zéro, en un monde où n'ayant plus à se tenir que pour à demi responsable il se sent affranchi d'une partie de ses liens et, si peu satisfaisante que soit sa condition nouvelle, souffre moins de sa pesanteur en même temps qu'il dispose, pratiquement, d'un *alibi* commode. (F, RJ, 502)

For Leiris, this fascination with the potentialities of concrete collective engagement also forms part of a rejection of the notion of isolated selfhood, and a corresponding life-long fascination with all those everyday experiences that offer the possibility to erase the barriers between self and other. "Il est intolérable", he proclaims in *Fourbis*, "de rester tout seul [...]"

nouer même fugacement une relation avec des inconnus, pour peu qu'on les présume le moins du monde en sympathie, est indispensable" (F, RJ, 441). And while members of the *Collège* turned to ritualised social practices in their quest for this form of communifying experience, Leiris also located it in a number of privileged experiences within the sphere of the everyday. One such experience, to which he draws his readers' attention on a number of occasions, is to be found in the liberating state of drunkenness. For Leiris, alcohol represents a unique means of engaging in a rare sense of contact with the other through an eradication of the barriers between self and other within everyday reality: "Briser sa gangue, sortir de soi, se fondre avec les êtres du dehors", he proclaims, "c'est dans la simplicité et l'indistinction de cet élan que, sans passion de l'ivrognerie pour l'ivrognerie, l'on peut aimer s'en aller boire dans les bars de même qu'on peut prendre plaisir aussi à se mêler à la foule" (F, RJ, 441). This is further stressed when, describing one particularly drunken evening, the author expresses the desire to "faire sauter les barrières, abolir les distances qui me séparent des autres, telle était ma colonne de feu et ma colonne de nuées dans cette quête zigzagante d'une terre promise" (F, RJ, 448). Like the experience of military involvement described above, alcohol brings about a rare moment of self-transformation and a dissolution of the restrictive barriers that separate the individual from the other: "l'alcool, qu'il m'arrivait d'interroger comme un oracle et que je prisais en tant qu'instrument de délire et poison mâle qui nous détache du réel, nous douant illusoirement d'une sorte de force héroïque et d'intangibilité de demi-dieu" (AH, 184). As illustrated in the first of these assertions, moreover, for Leiris the experience of contact with the other achieved during this state of drunkenness is closely mirrored by the feeling experienced by the individual when he is integrated into the undifferentiated mass of the crowd. As he explains in *Fourbis*,

Perdu ordinairement dans une masse qui n'est guère (sauf exotisme la haussant en couleur) que quelque chose qui bouge comme on le fait soi-même et contre quoi il

faut éviter de se cogner, on éprouvera de la joie quand un lien même futile se créera, permettant de vivre à l'unisson avec cette masse ou la poignée d'anonymes qui la représentent. [...] tout ce remue-ménage formel engendrera, pour qui se sent d'accord avec le fond, une multiplication enivrante de soi par le contact avec les autres. (F, RJ, 441-2)<sup>82</sup>

As part of his on-going search for that elusive experience of 'unity' so sought-after by the Surrealists, Leiris conceives of the integration of the individual into the crowd as a privileged, everyday experience of self-transformation and collective synthesis. Alongside a number of other such key everyday experiences – from alcohol to jazz, and from poetry and bullfighting to erotic love – the experience of immersion in a crowd is just one example of the author's ongoing endeavour to engage in a sacred erasure of individual barriers within the sphere of the quotidian.

*Leiris, Bataille and Laure, and the impossible search for an experience of 'sacred communication'*

The final community that I wish to consider here, and which introduces a number of the concepts that will be central to the area of investigation at stake in Chapter Two – namely, the relationship between male self and female other, and the authors' problematic approach to the sphere of the female at large – is the close-knit community of thought established in the 1930s and early 1940s between Leiris, Bataille, and the largely neglected intellectual figure

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<sup>82</sup> In this suggestion of a link between personal liberation and mass collective integration, Leiris's thought stands in line, in a number of respects, with some of the key theories of group psychology from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most notably, one might highlight Le Bon's *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895), Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), and Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), which I will discuss in greater detail in relation to Gadda. In the introductory lecture for the *Collège de Sociologie*, delivered by Bataille and Caillois, Reich's 'The Mass Psychology of Fascism' was cited as one of the group's formative influences.

Colette Peignot. Engaged in a shared quest to eradicate the division between self and other through the initiation of an exhilarating experience of fusion and self-loss, together Laure, Leiris and Bataille developed a theory of ‘sacred communication’ accessible through a limited number of privileged experiences.

Nicknamed ‘Laure’ or “la sainte abime”, Colette Peignot, whom the critic Milo Sweedler goes so far as to label *the* “neglected figure of the twentieth-century avant-garde”,<sup>83</sup> was an author, intellectual figure and political activist involved in many of the same intellectual and political movements as Leiris himself.<sup>84</sup> She is described by Bataille, in *Les Écrits de Laure*, as “l’une des existences les plus véhémentes, les plus traversées de conflits qui aient été vécues [...] aussi inconcevable à la mesure des êtres réels qu’un être de légende, elle se déchirait aux ronces dont elle s’entourait jusqu’à n’être qu’une plaie, sans jamais se laisser enfermer par rien ni personne.”<sup>85</sup> In *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains of Laure*, Sweedler provides a detailed analysis of the importance of Laure’s influence on both Leiris and Bataille. Drawing a clear-cut distinction between Leiris and Bataille in this regard, he suggests that,

In Bataille’s case, the obsession with excessive, ‘divine’ female figures and the concomitant pursuit of limit experiences, in which the subject feels him or herself to be in touch with a force that exceeds his or her individual sphere of being; in the case of Leiris, the role of the poetic muse and the theory that certain out-of-body experiences can, when shared with others, function as community-creating events.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Sweedler, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Laure was a fervent advocate of the workers’ cause, a resolute anti-Stalinist, and closely associated with Boris Souvarine, with whom she was romantically involved until beginning a relationship with Bataille in 1934.

<sup>85</sup> Colette Peignot, *Laure: Écrits, fragments lettres*, ed. by Jérôme Peignot and others (Paris: J-J. Pauvert, 1977).

<sup>86</sup> Sweedler, p. 19.

What unites each of these three thinkers, according to Sweedler, is their shared interest in the initiation of a sacred experience involving what Andrew Mitchell has described as a “movement outside oneself”, driven by the individual’s “obsessive and passionate desire for the outside, the desire for contact with what is other, and the desire to be other than that which the social order makes us.”<sup>87</sup> Again, Leiris is in pursuit of an experience of self-transformation involving an escape from the confines of his individual being and dissolution of the barriers between self and other. And perhaps the clearest means by which this is expressed within the theories established by these three thinkers is the concept of *sacred communication*. The question of communication – what it means, if and how it can be achieved, and the implications it has for our conception of subjectivity itself – is one with which Leiris grapples almost obsessively throughout his writings. The issue holds an equally central role for Bataille, for whom it is intrinsically connected with the question of community itself. As Mitchell suggests, “community and communication do not indicate two arbitrary themes among others but stand out as the privileged and omnipresent foci subtending Bataille’s work.”<sup>88</sup>

However, while both Leiris and Bataille remain preoccupied with the broad question of communication throughout their writings, Sweedler argues that it is to Laure that one must turn in order to locate the origin of their shared theory of ‘sacred communication’. A useful summary of this concept can be found in the following note to Peignot’s study of the sacred, edited by Bataille and Leiris:

Cette définition lierait le sacré à des moments où l’isolement de la vie dans la sphère individuelle est tout à coup brisé, moments de communication non seulement des

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<sup>87</sup> Andrew J. Mitchell, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*, ed. by Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree (New York: SUNY Press, 2009) p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. xi.

hommes entre eux mais des hommes avec l'univers dans lequel ils sont ordinairement comme étrangers: communication devrait s'entendre ici dans le sens d'une fusion, d'une perte de soi-même dont l'intégrité ne s'accomplit que par la mort et dont la fusion érotique est une image.<sup>89</sup>

For all three thinkers, sacred communication comes about in all those moments that involve a temporary dissolution of the barrier between the self and other, resulting in a rare, albeit temporary, moment of fusion described by Sweedler as a “sacred bond”. Laure’s own theory of the sacred is set out in a collection of writings published clandestinely after her death by Leiris and Bataille. And the connection between Laure’s model of the sacred and the theory described in Leiris’s ‘Le Sacré dans la vie quotidienne’ is clear. Laure’s essay, ‘Le Sacré’, was in fact written in direct response to Leiris’s contribution to the question, as is illustrated by the opening question, which constitutes a tacit, yet direct, response to Leiris: “Quelle couleur a pour moi la notion même du sacré? Le sacré est ce moment infiniment rare où la ‘part éternelle’ que chaque être porte en soi entre dans la vie, se trouve emportée dans le mouvement universel, intégrée dans ce mouvement, réalisée.”<sup>90</sup> Explicit reference is being made here to the line from Leiris’s own essay – “Il apparaît désirable que chacun examine [...] quelle couleur a pour lui la notion même du sacré” – in which he highlights the association between the sacred and colour.<sup>91</sup>

For Laure, there can be no sacred without communication. As she explains, “Je rejoins la notion des sociologues, le Sacré mêlé au Social pour que cela soit *sacré*. Pour que cela *soit*, il faut à mon sens que cela soit ressenti par les autres, en communion avec d’autres.”<sup>92</sup> Any

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<sup>89</sup> Laure: *Écrits, fragments, lettres*, p. 161.

<sup>90</sup> Peignot, ‘Le Sacré’, in Laure: *Écrits, fragments, lettres*, p. 111.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Taussig offers an interesting study of the question of the connection between colour and the sacred in *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2009).

<sup>92</sup> Peignot, Laure: *Écrits, fragments, lettres*, p. 115.

experience involving a moment of direct and unhindered communication with the other constitutes an experience of the sacred, one example of which is to be found in the act of poetic expression: “L’œuvre poétique est sacrée en ce qu’elle est création d’un événement topique, ‘communication’ ressentie comme la *nudité*. – Elle est viol de soi-même, dénudation, communication à d’autres de ce qui est raison de vivre, ou cette raison de vivre se ‘déplace’.”<sup>93</sup> For Laure, poetry is sacred inasmuch as it involves a rare experience of self-exposure, bringing about a form of unguarded communication with the other. Equally, as is also the case for Leiris, Laure’s quest for an experience of unity with the other can be seen to have its roots in a contrasting sense of personal isolation originating in her early childhood. As she explains, “Quelque chose de cassé pas seulement avec mon frère mais avec tous – et, en même temps, tous très ‘gentils’ – une simple question de distance. Je suis ‘au point’ le plus loin. Cette conviction qu’aucun être humain ne peut en *aider* un autre. Chacun doit suivre son étoile.”<sup>94</sup> Laure’s fascination with the notion of ‘sacred communication’ thus derives in large part from a personal need to eradicate the distance between self and other, which she describes in terms of a “brouillard épais” resulting in the “impossibilité d’échanges vrais – plus jamais.”<sup>95</sup> For Leiris, this division between self and other is frequently presented, moreover, in terms of a ‘screen’ that sets him apart from surrounding reality. As he explains in *Biffures*, “j’éprouve trop souvent l’impression affligeante d’être séparé de la nature par une multiplicité d’écrans” (B, RJ, 75).

The concept of sacred communication thus hinges on a specific conception of the notion of communication itself, which is based not on the utilitarian goal of a pragmatic transmission of *information* from one individual to another, but rather on the initiation of a direct moment of contact between self and other. Leiris is keen to stress the distinction

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<sup>93</sup> Peignot, *Laure: Écrits, fragments, lettres*, p. 116.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 189.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 156.

between these two alternative forms of communication, which he sets, respectively, in terms of a “simple accord formel” and an “accord profond”. For while the former, he explains, serves no greater purpose than the utilitarian exchange of practical information typical of everyday interactions, the latter involves a true moment of interaction with the other. For Leiris, true communication is not necessarily dependent on an agreement between the communicating parties. Rather, while a “simple accord formel” can be devoid of any *actual* act of communication, the “accord profond” can occur even within a moment of overt disagreement:

L’erreur qui consiste à confondre ‘communication’ avec ‘parfait accord’ (obtenu d’un coup, en dehors de toute discussion). Il est, à coup sûr, des accords 100% et immédiats, sans l’ombre de ‘communication’; inversement, il peut y avoir communication même dans le désaccord, communion au sein de la discussion. ‘Communication’, en somme, implique accord profond, et non simple accord formel, - accord réel, même quand, du point de vue logique, il y a désaccord.<sup>96</sup>

Sacred communication thus involves a rare experience of unrestricted “accord” with the other wherein the individual can escape the restrictive boundaries between inner and outer experience. And one of the key realms within which such an experience is to be sought, for all three thinkers, is that of the erotic. For Laure, Leiris and Bataille, eroticism – like the Surrealists’ ‘merveilleux’ - represents a destabilising experience that momentarily disrupts the structure of opposition upon which established intersubjective relations are grounded. As Sweedler explains, however, such an experience of fusion also comes at the price of an unsettling experience of self-loss: “In ‘communicating’ [...] lovers create a sort of two-backed beast, but they do so at the price of losing a part of themselves.”<sup>97</sup> As Sean Connolly

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<sup>96</sup> Leiris, *Échanges et correspondences*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>97</sup> Sweedler, p. 101.

has highlighted in his article ‘Laure’s War: Selfhood and Sacrifice in Colette Peignot’, Laure’s conception of self-sacrifice is thus to be distinguished from key ethnographic conceptions of sacrifice inasmuch as it involves a partial loss of the self that is not returned. In Mauss’s classic definition of the concept, by contrast, as set out in his ‘Essai sur la nature et fonction du sacrifice’ (1899), Connolly explains that all sacrifice is necessarily predicated on the central notion of “rachat”, or “buy-back”.<sup>98</sup> Hence, in Mauss’s words, “cette abnégation et cette soumission ne sont pas sans un retour égoïste. Si le sacrifiant donne quelque chose, il ne se donne pas; il se réserve prudemment. C’est que, s’il donne, c’est en partie pour recevoir.”<sup>99</sup> The conception of erotic love put forward by Laure, by contrast, involves an entirely self-destructive experience of total self-loss.

For Leiris, however, while erotic love does offer a glimpse of the form of sacred bond at the base of his and Laure’s theory, it is in fact only in death that this form of sacred unity can truly be brought about. For, he explains, any form of unrestricted sacred unity between self and other is inevitably precluded at the last minute,

L’amour – seule possibilité de coïncidence entre le sujet et l’objet, seul moyen d’accéder au sacré que représente l’objet convoité dans la mesure où il nous est un monde extérieur et étrange – implique sa propre négation du fait que tenir le sacré, c’est en même temps le profaner et finalement le détruire en le dépouillant peu à peu de son caractère d’étrangeté. (AH, 176)

The only true experience of sacred communication, for Leiris, is thus to be found at the moment of death, wherein one enters into a form of “tangence complète au monde et à nous-

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<sup>98</sup> Leiris studied under Marcel Mauss at the École Pratique des Hautes Études upon his return from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. In an interview with Jean Jamin, Leiris claims that it was his reading of Lévy-Bruhl’s *La mentalité primitive* (1922) that led him to take Mauss’s courses, and his continued attraction to the possibility of thinking outside of Western rationalism. See: Sally Price and Jean Jamin, ‘Entretien avec Michel Leiris’, *Gradhiva*, No. 4 (1988), 28-56.

<sup>99</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Les fonctions sociales du sacré* in *Œuvres Vol.1* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 304.

même, fusion de tout notre être avec le tout – ne pouvant se produire qu’à l’instant de la mort” (Miroir, 39).

From the Surrealists’ search for that idealised, elusive point of non-contradiction, or “unité au-delà de la fragmentation”, to the theories of the working community held together by the force of affect proposed by such Bataillean societies as *Acéphale* and *Contre-attaque*, and the *Collège*’s endeavour to reinstate the ritualised practices of the communifying sacred, then, each one of these various communities of thought, while diverging in their individual goals and specific methods of approach, can be seen to have played a critical role in shaping Leiris’s understanding of the question of community, the relationship between the individual and the communal other, and the possibility of erasing the structure of binary opposition upon which social reality is based. However, as I shall explore in Chapter Two in connection with Leiris’s approach to the relationship between the (male) self and individual (female) other, any such an experience of ‘unity’ is ultimately to be dismissed, Leiris suggests, as an unattainable ideal. For just as the sacred must necessarily remain out of reach inasmuch as its attainment leads to its immediate destruction, so too is desire based on an unending, unfulfillable movement from one unattainable object to the next.

## Gadda

*'If an individual gives up his distinctiveness in a group and lets its other members influence him by suggestion it gives one the impression that he does it because he feels the need of being in harmony with them rather than in opposition to them.'*

Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*

While Leiris's search for the communal takes place, as we have seen, within the context of a series of working intellectual communities that engage with the issue from both a theoretical and a pragmatic standpoint, for Gadda it was through the collective experience of war and the initiation of a form of concrete group psychology that society might successfully initiate such a form of productive communal 'unity'. In keeping with Caillois's presentation of war in *L'homme et le sacré* as a moment of social renewal and individual transfiguration, and with Leiris's own praise of the transformative effect of military involvement upon the individual, Gadda's early writings give testament to a strong faith in war as a productive moment of communal integration and self-abnegation, an opportunity for heroism and self-sacrifice in which society's fixation on the individual might be replaced with the forces of fraternity and communal progress.

In this section, I will chart the progression in Gadda's thought from his early idealisation of war and ambivalent adherence to the theory of group psychology underpinning Fascist philosophy, to his subsequent loss of faith in the possibility of any such an experience of collective integration within a society grounded on the ills of narcissism and a fallacious belief in the individual as an isolated entity. I will question the extent to which the author's subsequent extended philosophical inquiry into the ills of narcissism might be seen to derive from the process of disenchantment presented in the *Giornale di guerra*, before examining

the fierce denunciation of Fascism set out in *Eros e Priapo*, wherein Fascist psychology – initially perceived as a potentially productive form of concrete collective integration – is itself denounced as a relationship rooted in nothing more than a state of destructive, unsublimated narcissism.

*Gadda's pre-war interventionism: war as a time of collective integration*

Gadda enlisted in 1915, initially serving as an officer in the Fifth Alpine Division Infantry before being held at a prisoner-of-war camp for two years in Germany. This followed his capture at the battle of Caporetto on 25 October 1917. The most comprehensive record of his war experience is contained within the pages of his meticulously detailed war journal, *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, which serves as an exhaustive account of the daily trials and tribulations of the war experience for the young author. Further testament is also provided by *Il castello di Udine*, a collection of essays that relate both to the experience of war itself and to its aftermath, as well as providing a useful insight into the reasons for the author's early glorification of military involvement. Before enlisting, Gadda envisaged the war not only as a chance to partake in an historic, truly collective experience, but also as an opportunity to escape his oppressive family environment. Moreover, in line with his desire to escape the limitations of his introverted, difficult personality, war represented for him a singular opportunity to escape his individual shortcomings by submitting to a truly communal experience extending beyond the level of the individual.

Grounded first and foremost on a glorification of the values of order, discipline, and physical vigour, Gadda's admiration for the military institution in fact stems all the way back to his early childhood. This is particularly well illustrated in the short story 'Una tigre nel parco', a psychoanalytic interpretation of the author's childhood contained within the

collection *Le meraviglie d'Italia*. Written in 1936, the tale revolves around an afternoon spent in the Parco Sempione in Milan during the author's early childhood. Describing the jealousy he experiences upon witnessing a group of soldiers vying for the attention of his nurse, Gadda proclaims that, "Ecco, forse, donde scaturì la mia mania militare: e il primo nascere del senso di simmetria, di parata e di ordine: quel bisogno di ordine che ha reso così poco felice la mia vita!" (MdI, SGF I, 78). The figure of the soldier, with his inherent aura of authority and automatic power over women, comes to represent the ultimate ego-ideal for the young Gadda, a model against which to pattern his own identity:

Si manifesta una sodalità con esseri del mio medesimo sesso, che mi appaiono quali desiderati modelli: un giorno io avrò le loro medesime armi, il fucile, la baionetta, e mi pavoneggerò, se non proprio davanti alle donne di servizio, ma certo davanti ai loro corrispettivi del mio 'grado sociale': saranno donne stupende, che suonano il piano, cantano in inglese e dipingono dei cagnolini appena nati. (MdI, SGF I, 78)

From an early age, Gadda thus associates the military enterprise with the values of discipline, masculinity and order, consequently envisaging the war as an opportunity not only to enter into a state of communal integration, but also, at the individual level, to attain a level of virility impossible within the confines of everyday experience. In *Gadda – D'Annunzio e il lavoro italiano*, Giuseppe Papponetti suggests that this gives rise to,

un vero e proprio mito della guerra, unica forma e mezzo per affermarsi pienamente nella dignità di uomo: mito che racchiude in sé [...] altrettanti miti vitalistici della forza, della grandezza, della salute fisica, della gioia del vivere: miti che è troppo riduttivo ricondurre, meno compromissoriamente, alla nostalgia eroica carducciana.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Giuseppe Papponetti, *Gadda - D'Annunzio e il lavoro italiano* (Rome: Fondazione Ignazio Silone, 2002), p. 14.

And it was under the lure of these convictions that in 1915 – in the third year of his engineering course at the Polytechnic of Milan – Gadda drafted the letter ‘Una legittima protesta di studenti’ to Gabriele D’Annunzio, together with fellow students Emilio Fornasini and Luigi Semenza. The letter was published in Mussolini’s interventionist newspaper *Il popolo d’Italia* on 22 May 1915, and provides an instructive illustration of Gadda’s fervent interventionism in these years. It served as a rallying cry for what the three companions saw as the sacrosanct right of students across the nation to play their part in the war. In the following assertion, contained within *Il castello di Udine*, Gadda offers a useful description of this early quasi-mythical vision of the war:

Io ho voluto la guerra, per quel pochissimo che stava in me di volerla. Ho partecipato con sincero animo alle dimostrazioni del ’15, ho urlato Viva D’Annunzio, Morte a Giolitti [...]. Io ho presentito la guerra come una dolorosa necessità nazionale, se pure, confesso, non la ritenevo così ardua. E in guerra ho passato alcune ore delle migliori di mia vita, di quelle che m’hanno dato oblio e compiuta immedesimazione del mio essere con la mia idea: questo, anche se trema la terra, si chiama felicità. (CdU, RR I, 142)

The motives for his early idealisation of the war can thus be seen as twofold: for while on the one hand it was perceived as a chance for heroic self-sacrifice, it was also seen as an opportunity for personal glory. As Albert Sbragia has suggested,

In the general yearning felt by so many pro-war European intellectuals to experience a Bergsonian élan or Nietzschean will to power, the young Gadda, who absorbed many of these sentiments through his avid reading of D’Annunzio’s poetry, saw the war as a

last chance to overcome what he felt to be the “deviation” of his life and “waste of marvellous faculties”.<sup>101</sup>

This conception of the transformative effect of collective integration on the individual in fact remained a concern for Gadda throughout his writings, forming part of a wider preoccupation with the notions of individual and group identity themselves, which presents similarities with some of the key theories of group psychology in circulation at the time. These include, namely: Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), Le Bon’s *Psychologie des Foules* (1895), and Reich’s *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933). Despite their differences, these texts share a common preoccupation with a core set of questions: the nature of collective identity and how it might be distinguished from individual identity; the role of ‘affect’ in the establishment and continuation of any collective unit; and, lastly, the transformative effect on the individual of his or her integration into the group. Consistent with Caillois’s insistence upon the liberating effects of war, Freud proposes, for example, that, “in a group the individual is brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instincts.”<sup>102</sup> Robert Dombroski has also highlighted the importance of this notion of self-transformation and liberation for Gadda, suggesting that the author’s valorisation of collective action might be seen to stem from a desire to “sottempere a una forza superiore in cui le debolezze individuali scompaiono”.<sup>103</sup> For, he notes, “Davanti all’immensità di questo prodigio le imperfezioni umane infatti cessano di esistere; all’uomo si offre la possibilità di fuggire dal tempo, dalla storia, dall’auto-disintegrazione, per diventare immutabile e vivere eternamente.”<sup>104</sup> One is reminded here of Leiris’s discussion of the effect on the individual of donning the military

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<sup>101</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 47.

<sup>102</sup> Freud, *Group Psychology*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Dombroski, *L’Esistenza ubbidiente: letterati italiani sotto il fascismo* (Naples: Guida, 1984), p. 17.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

uniform, which, he claims, as quoted in the previous section, “les déguise en autre chose que ce qu’ils sont [...] parce qu’en uniforme on est moins soi qu’en civil, l’habit comme toute la vie militaire tendant à faire passer de l’état individu à celui de parcelle d’un être collectif” (F, RJ, 434). In line with this understanding of military involvement as a process of self-abnegation and transformation, Gadda draws a clear-cut distinction between his military and civilian characters, presenting his military experience as a chance to throw off the limitations of his individual identity. As a civilian, he declares himself to be weak, introverted and listless – tormented by a series of psychoneuroses that were set to plague him throughout his life – while as a soldier he gained a capacity for decisive action that otherwise eluded him. Hence, he proclaims, “In questo libro sono sfoghi di rabbia d’un povero soldato italiano, pieno di manchevolezze come uomo, pieno di amarezza per motivi intimi, familiari, patrotici, etnici, ma forse non pessimo come soldato” (GGP, SGF II, 650). A hierarchical distinction is therefore established by Gadda between the man-of-thought, set apart from his fellow man, and the man-of-action, who forms part of a collective effort with a concrete purpose:

... appena la fucileria tambureggiante si fonde in un solo boato, l’ardore della lotta mi prende, sotto forma d’un moltiplicarsi della energia, della volontà, del vigore fisico, della spensieratezza e dell’entusiasmo. [...] sotto il fuoco, presente, immediato, provo il tormento che prova ogni animale nel pericolo: ma prima vi è solo il desiderio di fare, di fare qualche cosa per questa porca patria, di elevarmi nella azione, di nobilitare in qualche maniera quel sacco di cenci che il destino vorrebbe fare di me. (GGP, SGF II, 644-5)

This interventionism also went hand in hand for Gadda with a strong sense of patriotism, which was bolstered both by his political leanings and experiences, and by the values instilled in him early on by his family. Born into a conservative family, Gadda acquired nationalist

sentiments and a strong sense of the value of military tradition from an early age. He was a member of the Italian Nationalist Association until 1921, at which point he became an official member of the Fascist party. Gadda's support of the Fascist regime is illustrated by a number of different activities during the 1920s and early 1930s. In the course of the two years he spent in Argentina (1922-1924), for example, he was part of the directorate of the Buenos Aires Fascist cell abroad. His support is also illustrated by a number of journalistic articles that he published throughout the 1920s in support of the regime, primarily in the Milanese newspaper 'L'Ambrosiano'.<sup>105</sup> While the majority of these are in praise of the regime's autarchic policies, in others he sets out his specific admiration for the movement's leader. On 31 December 1921, for example, he writes the following in a private letter to Ugo Betti: "Adesso ti dò una brutta notizia: preparati: potevi pensarci già prima: ero iscritto al partito nazionalista! Adesso sono iscritto al partito Fascista".<sup>106</sup> A year later, Gadda again extols the values of the regime in another letter to Betti, in which he offers a reverent description of the qualities of the Fascist squadrons. Likening the vivacity of the troops to that of "i vivi accanto ad un morto", he bemoans that, "Io, logicamente avrei dovuto essere frammezzo a loro: ma bisognerebbe essere ancora sereno e forte come loro",<sup>107</sup> establishing a clear distinction between the heroism and strength of the Fascist movement, and his own perceived weaknesses. In a subsequent note written in April 1923, Gadda openly declares his personal admiration for Mussolini: "Mussolini c'è ogni giorno (sui giornali argentini, *n.d.r.*)", he proclaims, "Il prestigio di quest'uomo è enorme. È conosciuto come Lenin, amato e odiato come lui, secondo gli umori. L'influenza morale dei suoi gesti ha cresciuto all'italiano un grande rispetto."<sup>108</sup> Moreover, many of his fictional texts – *Racconto italiano di ignoto del*

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<sup>105</sup> For a detailed analysis of Gadda's journalistic writings of this period, see Rebecca Falkoff, 'After Autarchy: Male Subjectivity from Carlo Emilio Gadda to the Gruppo '63' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Carlo Emilio Gadda, *L'ingegner fantasia. Lettere a Ugo Betti, 1919-1930*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 58.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

*novecento*, *La meccanica*, and *Le meraviglie d'Italia*, for example – present a clear appreciation for the decisiveness and pragmatism of the regime, which is set in stark opposition to the irresolution displayed by other political movements of the time. In the notes to *Racconto italiano*, for instance, Gadda delivers a sharp attack on the socialists in the assertion that, “La vita deve essere Vita, non una vittima delle chiacchiere” (RI, SVP, 417), employing the semi-autobiographical figure of Grifonetto to voice his own belief in the need for what he calls a “metodo reale”, a means, that is, of strictly imposing order on an otherwise chaotic reality. “Rigenerare la sua anima”, Gadda posits, “significa guardare il mucchio enorme del lavoro reale e ordinare un metodo reale per sviluppare una migliore realtà della presente realtà. Sognare non è virtù, è vizio” (RI, SVP, 566).

In accordance with his celebration of war, Gadda’s praise for the Fascist regime is rooted in a denunciation of moral languor and the absence of self-discipline as signs of moral failing and an unacceptable evasion of social duty on the part of the individual. In line with a life-long mania for order and self-discipline, Gadda’s appreciation of the regime can also be seen to derive largely from the movement’s perceived adherence to a set of fixed rules, as well as its prioritisation of action over thought. As Peter Hainsworth suggests,

Fascism responded to his need for order and dignity in a world which his own traumatic experience during and after the First World War indicated was bereft of both. It held out the prospect of harmonising diversity in the social and political spheres, even if the fundamental disharmony of life and the self could not be eradicated, and of restoring order and dignity to Italy after the chaos of liberalism.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Peter Hainsworth, ‘Fascism and Anti-Fascism in Gadda’ in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Manuela Bertone and Robert S. Dombroski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 221-236 (p. 224).

This view is also supported by Norma Bouchard, who interprets Gadda's adherence to the Fascist party first and foremost as "a response to his desire to restore harmony to a nation sharply divided in opposing camps."<sup>110</sup> In addition to the values of order, discipline and rationality, however, Fascism's most attractive facet for Gadda was its perceived ability to place the interests of the group over those of the individual. Capitalising on the unique powers and potentialities of the group, the movement was seen to draw its force from a successful submission of the individual to the collective, thereby offering up a means of achieving unrestricted social progress, uninhibited by the limitations of individual weakness.

In *Psychologie des foules*, Le Bon analyses the benefits of this form of collective integration for the individual, suggesting that it is only as part of a group that the individual subject can achieve true heroism and selflessness: "Seules les collectivités", he suggests, "sont capables de grands dévouements et de grands désintéressements. Que de foules se sont fait héroïquement massacrer pour des croyances et des idées qu'elles comprenaient à peine!"<sup>111</sup> For only in a crowd, he explains, is the individual ready to sacrifice his or her personal interests for the good of the wider group, thereby acquiring an unprecedented capacity for self-transformation: "Avant même d'avoir perdu toute indépendance, ses idées et ses sentiments se sont transformés, au point de pouvoir changer l'avare en prodigue, le sceptique en croyant, l'honnête homme en criminel, le poltron en héros."<sup>112</sup> This stress upon the potential for self-transformation through group integration is reiterated when Le Bon proclaims that, "Dans une foule, tout sentiment, tout acte est contagieux, et contagieux à ce point que l'individu sacrifie très facilement son intérêt personnel à l'intérêt collectif."<sup>113</sup>

Consistently with Le Bon's conception of the benefits of group psychology, Reich posits that

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<sup>110</sup> Norma Bouchard, '(Re)Considering Gadda and Futurism', in *Italica* 79, no. 1 (2002), 23-43 (p. 27).

<sup>111</sup> Le Bon, p. 30.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

Fascism's success derived first and foremost from its successful exploitation of the unique powers and potentialities of collective identity, which is rooted in a deep-seated need for collectivity present in each and every individual: "there is not a single individual", he explains, "who does not bear the elements of Fascist feeling and thinking in his structure. As a political movement Fascism differs from other reactionary parties inasmuch as it is borne and championed by masses of people."<sup>114</sup> Describing Fascism as the ultimate "expression of the irrational structure of mass man", he goes on to propose that, "It is in the nature of a political party that it does not orient itself in terms of truth, but in terms of illusion, which usually corresponds to the irrational structure of the masses".<sup>115</sup> In *Psychologie des foules*, Le Bon further stresses the importance of this element of *irrationality* for the functioning of the collective mindset when he suggests that,

Ce n'est qu'en approfondissant un peu la psychologie des foules qu'on comprend à quel point les lois et les institutions ont peu d'action sur elles; combien elles sont incapables d'avoir des opinions quelconques en dehors de celles qui leur sont imposées; que ce n'est pas avec des règles basées sur l'équité théorique pure qu'on les conduit, mais en recherchant ce qui peut les impressionner et les séduire.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to the irrational acceptance of illusion over truth characteristic of the collective mindset, Le Bon points to another aspect of group identity that is central both to Gadda's early adherence to Fascist psychology, and to Leiris's interest in the communifying, 'sacred' practices celebrated by members of the *Collège de sociologie*: the loss of individual responsibility. For it is only through a complete submission to the group, Le Bon suggests, that the individual can escape the restrictions of individual accountability. Individual desires

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<sup>114</sup> Reich, p. 16.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

<sup>116</sup> Le Bon, p. 9.

are lost within the irresistible flow of the collective unit, and all established societal rules by which individual behaviour is customarily dictated are temporarily erased: “L’hétérogène se noie dans l’homogene, et les qualités inconscientes dominant.”<sup>117</sup> Both experiences, he explains, enable the individual to escape the restrictive regulations of everyday life and acquire a degree of liberation otherwise unachievable. Within this liberating state, free from individual responsibility, ideas can also be translated immediately into acts: “La personnalité consciente s’évanouit, les sentiments et les idées de toutes les unités sont orientés dans une même direction. Il se forme une âme collective, transitoire sans doute, mais présentant des caractères très nets.”<sup>118</sup> In keeping with his early idealisation of war as an opportunity to achieve a degree of heroism unattainable in everyday life, then, Gadda is drawn to Fascist psychology for its perceived eradication of individual failings through the initiation of a productive and liberating state of collective unity. The following encyclopaedic definition of Fascism, cited by Dombroski in *L’Esistenza ubbidiente*, offers a useful summation of the benefits of this form of collective unity for Gadda:

L’uomo del Fascismo è individuo che è nazione e patria, legge morale che stringe insieme individui e generazioni in una tradizione e in una missione, che sopprime l’istinto della vita chiusa nel breve giro del piacere per instaurare nel dovere una vita superiore libera da limiti di tempo e di spazio: una vita in cui l’individuo, attraverso l’abnegazione di sé, il sacrificio dei suoi interessi particolari, la stessa morte, realizza quell’esistenza tutta spirituale in cui è il suo valore d’uomo.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Le Bon, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Dombroski, *L’Esistenza ubbidiente*, p. 18

A number of clear parallels can be identified between this conception of the benefits of group psychology and Gadda's philosophical examination of the relationship between the individual and the community in *Meditazione milanese*: the insistence upon man's duty to his nation and fellow countrymen; the conception of the individual as an inherently social being and subsequent condemnation of the fallacious concept of isolated individual identity; and the necessity of self-sacrifice for the positive functioning of society. As Sbragia explains,

Fascism was to have been the repressive, sublimating Logos, the political Superego that would have cured Italy's chronic narcissism, would have put a stop to the egoistic affirmation of its 44 million individual parts to the detriment of the national whole.

This was Gadda's 'rational' excuse for Fascism.<sup>120</sup>

Involving a valorisation of Logos over Eros, for Gadda Fascism therefore came to represent a potential solution to the narcissistic individualism corrupting the social fabric. Clear parallels emerge, moreover, between the author's idealisation of war and early adherence to Fascist psychology, on the one hand, and the theory of the communifying sacred put forward by the intellectual communities Leiris was involved in during the 1930s and 1940s, particularly the *Collège de sociologie*. In relation to the experience of war, the affinity is most evident in connection with Caillois's comparison of war to the 'sacred' practice of the festival central to the functioning of so-called primitive societies. However, just as any genuine experience of the sacred is ultimately dismissed by Leiris as an unachievable ideal, so too does Gadda ultimately come to denounce the possibility of any such a form of productive communal integration as a result of the individual's inherent, ineradicable narcissism and society's erroneous fixation on a mendacious notion of 'monadic' selfhood.

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<sup>120</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 169.

*‘Giornale di guerra e di prigionia’: from a positive vision of collective integration to the ills of narcissism*

In stark opposition to his early vision of the war as an opportunity for self-sacrifice, discipline and collective unity, Gadda's actual military experience brought about a crucial loss of faith on his part in the possibility of any such a form of positive collective integration. For, contrary to his initial positive vision of military involvement, the experience that he describes in the *Giornale* is characterised not by heroism and collective glory but rather by an unending series of daily frustrations and dissatisfactions: “la realtà di questi anni, salvo alcune fiamme generose e fugaci, è merdosa: e in essa mi sento immedesimare ed annegare” (GGP, SGF II, 863). Interpreting this as a pivotal moment in the development of his thought, Dombroski suggests that the experience of war initiates a conflict with external reality set to stand at the base of Gadda's subsequent approach to external reality itself; a “face-to-face confrontation, enemies paired off against each other, and willing to fight to the very end”.<sup>121</sup> In addition to this loss of faith in the possibility of an ordered, meaningful external reality, however, a further key aspect of the process of disillusionment charted in the *Giornale* relates to the author's anger at his fellow soldiers. This derives, in particular, from two recurrent failings: disorderliness, on the one hand, and egotism, on the other.

In *Creative Entanglements*, Dombroski describes the authorial figure that emerges in the *Giornale* as that of a neurotic idealist, “fascinated by the world as it should be and intolerant of anything that contradicts his ideals and expectations.”<sup>122</sup> And one of the key means through which this contradiction between the ideal and the real is conveyed relates to the author's fixation on the issue of disorder. The question of ‘order’ in its broadest sense remains a central and highly complex motif throughout Gadda's writings. In accordance with

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<sup>121</sup> Robert S. Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements: Gadda and the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

his strong admiration for the perceived values of the military, Gadda is obsessed with the associated issues of order and discipline from an early age. “Il disordine è il mio continuo cauchemar”, he proclaims in the *Giornale*, “e mi causa momenti di rabbia, di disperazione indicibili” (GGP, SGF II, 597). As Sbragia suggests,

Order in Gadda is always associated with rationality and sublimity. Disorder is the realm of the irrational and the filthy. Gadda’s militarism is born precisely from his mania for order. He is attracted to the ‘lived discipline’, ‘military duty’, and ‘motivated obligation’ of army life.<sup>123</sup>

Far more than just an inconvenience of everyday life, the concept of disorder holds important philosophical implications for Gadda. For him, ‘order’ is intrinsically connected with the same values that underscore his appreciation of the military sphere at large - discipline, duty, and the sense of shared obligation for a collective cause – and its absence represents one of the key points of contention through which the process of disillusionment in the *Giornale* is expressed. At the level of the everyday, this is conveyed first and foremost through repeated bursts of anger directed at the general disorderliness of life in the trenches, an aspect that not only causes him general distress, but threatens to bring about a loss of faith in the military structure as a whole:

Quand’è che i miei luridi compatrioti di tutte le classi, di tutti i ceti, impareranno a tener ordinato il proprio tavolino da lavoro? [...] Quand, quando? Quand’è che questa razza di maiali, di porci, di esseri capaci soltanto di imbruttire il mondo col disordine e con la prolissità dei loro atti sconclusionati, proverrà alle attitudini dell’ideatore e

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<sup>123</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 52.

del costruttore, sarà capace di dare al seguito delle proprie azioni un legame logico?  
(GGP, SGF II, 574)

What began as an idealised vision of the soldier as the very model of self-discipline, order and self-sacrifice, ends with the dejected realisation that, “Il disordine è, poi, la legge di cotesti pancioni [...]. L’ignoranza degli alti comandi, la loro assoluta incapacità, la negazione di ogni buon senso logistico, sono fatti che si palesano anche al più idiota” (GGP, SGF II, 473). Yet while disorderliness represents one of the most recurrent daily irritations for Gadda in the *Giornale*, it is his compatriots’ perceived narcissism and incapacity for self-sacrifice that generates the greatest sense of disillusionment on his part, since it is this failing that rules out the form of collective integration that stands at the very root of his early idealisation of the military.

At the concrete level, displays of petty egotism abound in the *Giornale*. Gadda is quick, however, to elevate this to the status of a national characteristic: “da innumerevoli testimonianze di feriti, di malati, di reduci dal fronte ho capito che l’egoismo personale è l’unica legge di molti” (GGP, SGF II, 472). At its simplest, narcissism can be understood as the tendency to accord greater importance to the self than to others. In his study of the question of narcissism, *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*, the French psychoanalyst André Green offers a useful definition of the term as: “le Désir de l’Un. Utopie unitaire, totalisation idéale”, wherein “l’accent est mis sur la conservation de soi-même, l’autonomie et l’insoumission.”<sup>124</sup> Accordingly, ‘narcissism’ would relate to a desire on the part of the individual to achieve a state of self-sufficiency or isolation from others, for the purpose of self-conservation. Gadda offers his own succinct summary of the notion in the suggestion that “L’egotismo cretino dell’italiano fa di tutto una questione personale, vede dovunque le

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<sup>124</sup> André Green, *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2007), p. 45.

persone, i loro sentimenti, il loro amor proprio” (GGP, SGF II, 579). For Gadda, this critical failing on the part of the individual is grounded firstly on a prioritisation of the interests of the self over those of both the individual and collective other, and secondly, on the establishment of a clear-cut division between subjective and external realities. Green further stresses the importance of this opposition in the suggestion that,

En principe, réalité et narcissisme s’opposent s’ils ne s’excluent pas. C’est la contradiction majeure du Moi, d’être à la fois l’instance qui doit entrer en rapport avec la réalité et s’investir narcissiquement, en ignorant celle-ci pour ne connaître que soi-même.<sup>125</sup>

In a self-defensive endeavour to preserve his/her own isolated selfhood, the narcissistic subject thus refutes all those elements of external reality that might threaten the integrity of the self. As Gadda explains in *Eros e Priapo*,

La menzogna narcissica è, nel procedere della storia, quel che è la dissipazione nella vita privata. Consiste nel negare una serie di fatti reali che non tornano graditi a messer ‘Io’. [...] Lo stesso vediamo fare con più acerba rancura forse, ma con risultati pressoché identici, alla isterica o all’ipocondriaco e in genere a quelli che sono smagati da un ‘delirio interpretativo’ dei fatti reali. (EP, SGF II, 348)

In connection with the question of community, though, perhaps the single most important aspect of narcissism for Gadda, as stressed throughout the *Giornale*, relates to the failure on the part of the individual to fulfil his or her social duty. For Gadda, as Guido Lucchini has pointed out, “The narcissist’s worst sin lies in his inability to sublimate himself in a socially useful activity.”<sup>126</sup> Social cohesion depends on the submission of the individual to the level

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<sup>125</sup> Green, p. 44.

<sup>126</sup> Guido Lucchini, ‘Gadda’s Freud’ in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, 177-194 (p. 181).

of the collective, and it is only through the former's active integration into the social unit, Gadda proposes, that society can function. Hence, he proclaims in *Meditazione milanese*:

Il disertore è persona del male perché nega in sé la patria (sistema coinvolgente  $n + 1$ ) per salvare la sua persona fisica ( $n$ ). L'assassino nega in sé l'umano suo senso ( $n + 1$ ) per porgere ascolto all'ira o alla cupidigia d'un io immediato ( $n$ ). Il corruttore nega in sé l'umana solidarietà ( $n + 1$ ) che ci induce a sorreggere e ad educare i minori per decadere nella cupa libidine: p.e. per far sfoggio di scetticismo. Egli dimentica che vive in un corpus che dovrà avere necessariamente un domani. (MM, SVP, 763)

Given Gadda's early vision of the war as an exalting opportunity for self-sacrifice, in which the possibility of a "morte utile e bella" would cancel out petty, individual failings and provide the individual with the opportunity to "elear[si] nella azione, di nobilitare in qualche maniera quel sacco di cenci che il destino vorrebbe fare di [sé]" (GGP, SGF II, 645), it is perhaps not surprising that what angers him most about his fellow soldiers is their failure to capitalise on this opportunity for heroic self-sacrifice and communal purpose: "Porci ruffiani [...] andate al diavolo tutti. Non siete degni di chiamar vostri figli i morti eroici. [...] Non nego che il sacrificio della vita sia gravissimo per tutti: che gravissimo appaia anche a me: ma l'uomo deve essere uomo e non coniglio [...] è roba che mi fa schifo" (GGP, SGF II, 574). Following his initial exasperation at the everyday moments of petty narcissism that typify life in the trenches – from petty acts of thievery to daily squabbles – Gadda thus gradually begins to lose faith in the form of collective integration that had underpinned his early celebration of war, before proceeding to embark upon an extended philosophical examination of the question of narcissism. Two essays contained within the collection *I viaggi la morte* – 'L'Egoista' and 'Emilio e Narcisso' – offer a particularly fruitful starting-point for a consideration of this issue.

*‘La vita di ognun di noi pensata come fatto per sé stante [...] è concetto erroneo’: the dangers of narcissism*

The first of the two essays, ‘Emilio e Narcisso’ (1950), opens the analysis with an examination into the progression of the terminology employed to deal with this issue. The first term, ‘l’egoismo’, the least charged of the three for Gadda, denotes the simple desire on man’s part to satisfy his most basic, natural instinct: hunger. Containing none of the connotations of deviation expressed by the two subsequent terms, ‘egotismo’ and ‘narcissismo’, ‘egoismo’ constitutes no more than a basic drive for self-preservation present within all individuals from the earliest stages of infancy. When it was introduced, Gadda explains, it was ascribed “a debito, o a credito, dell’angoscia prima del vivente, del suo egoismo vitale, nucleale: dell’egoismo fagico, addentatore dilaniatore del cibo, e bucco-esofagico, cioè appropriatore, insalivatore e peptonizzatore del cibo” (VM, SGF I, 639-40). With the subsequent introduction of the notion of ‘egotismo’, however, the matter becomes more complex. Governed by what Gadda terms the individual’s incurable tendency towards a self-obsessive “fissazione tolemaica” (VM, SGF I, 640), egotism relates to the importance of man’s self-perception, which comes to shape the very base of communal existence, which he terms the “vita di relazione” (VM, SGF I, 660). For, since a certain degree of egotistical self-appreciation constitutes the very basis of relational being, Gadda suggests, the individual can easily move towards an excessive degree of self-reflection and self-aggrandisement:

Sì: l’egotismo ovvero narcisismo è il congegno base per la vita di relazione, per l’amore, per la vita associativa. [...] Noi dobbiamo piacere al prossimo: in ispecie alle donne. E ci fa piacere di piacere. Ma per piacere, dobbiamo anzitutto ‘voler piacere’ [...] Volendo dunque piacere un po’ a tutti, siamo portati a pettinarci, a esibirci, a pavoneggiarci, a passeggiar su e giù lungo lo struscio del villaggio come tanti galli a collo ritto, a zampa alta e protesa. (VM, SGF I, 660-61)

Introducing a degree of self-awareness that is absent from the notion of ‘egoism’, ‘egotism’ is associated with man’s excessive tendency for self-admiration and self-aggrandisement. This is based on what Gadda describes as an excessive “sentimento centrico della personalità” (VM, SGF I, 640) – as depicted in George Meredith’s *The Egoist* (1879)<sup>127</sup> – and consists of a highly damaging dismantlement of the ties or “vincoli antichi” that hold the individual units of society together. What this involves, then, is not merely an exaggeration of one’s own qualities or importance *within* society, but a perilous, misguided belief in the very possibility of individual (or monadic) unity itself: “il poco sentimentale sentimento vanità – orgoglio – cognizione della propria unità biologica – senso puntuale (monadico) della persona propria – felicità di vivere – letizia altera – esibita qualità – esibito pregio maschile – compiacimento (estetizzato) di sé” (VM, SGF I, 642). As shall be examined in greater depth in relation to *Meditazione milanese*, Gadda considers such a belief in unitary selfhood to be fundamentally flawed, maintaining repeatedly that it is only through the renunciation of a belief in the concept of monadic unity on the part of all individual members of the social unit that society can function as an integrated whole. One is reminded here of Leiris’s insistence upon the ludicracy of the concept of a subject without an object, an ‘I’ without a ‘you’, when he questions, in *Biffures*, “Mais qu’est-ce qu’un je – un je unique et isolé – sans un tu, sans un nous, sans un il gravitant autour de lui?” For, removed from the intrinsically intertwined network “du nous-vous-ils (sans parler du je-tu-ELLE)”, he goes on to explain, “le je, dans d’aussi évidemment absurdes conditions, n’est plus guère qu’un enfant” (B, RJ, 71). While he remains drawn to the idealised, undifferentiated unity of infancy, Leiris therefore rejects any separation of the individual from the social, insisting upon the inextricable bonds that connect the self to the other. The form of egotism described by Gadda in this essay – which constitutes the insidious desire on man’s part to “conferire alla propria anima una

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<sup>127</sup> George Meredith, *The Egoist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

significazione programmata [...] il fasciare, del tepore d'una scranna o cattedra, la propria solerzia maestra" (VM, SGF I, 640) – involves the breakdown of precisely those bonds, subsequently threatening the dismantlement of the social fabric itself.

The lexical cycle is completed, Gadda proposes, by the introduction of the term 'narcissism' in 1902, by the English psychologist Havelock Ellis: "L'inglese voleva un nome nuovo, per il 'suo' sentimento [...] lo stendhaliano 'egotismo', il senso centrico e un tantinello esibito della propria personalità, lui, lo psicologo inglese, ne perfezionò il contorno e cavò fuori il nome giusto: che fu 'narcisismo'" (VM, SGF I, 640).<sup>128</sup> In his ensuing explanation of the term – which is structured around a detailed consideration of the myth of Narcissus – Gadda draws particular attention to its dualistic nature, establishing a strict division between the different forms of narcissism exhibited during adolescence and adulthood. While the former, the "carica normale" exhibited during the stages of adolescence, constitutes a natural degree of self-absorption necessary to the process of human development, the latter represents an excessive degree of self-absorption, or "carica abnorme", characteristic of adulthood. Gadda describes these two levels of narcissism as "due gradi d'intensità della carica narcissica" (VM, SGF I, 643), suggesting that this is not a transmutation from one *form* of narcissism to another, but rather a simple increase in degree. The situation is complicated, however, by the extensive range of different types of narcissism exhibited during adulthood: "La vita adulta, poi, la conosce un supernarcisismo di carattere genetico (procreante), un altro di carattere operativo e potremmo dire artigiano ossia tecnico, un altro di carattere etico e sociale, e via via" (VM, SGF I, 649). Completing this list, Gadda adds one further fundamental form of narcissism, which lies not in any active offense on the individual's part, but rather in the critical offense of inaction; the failure, or lack of

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<sup>128</sup> Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) was a British physician, psychologist and sexologist interested primarily in questions of human sexuality, gender, and narcissism. He is credited with introducing notions of narcissism and autoeroticism. He was also the first psychologist to use the term "Narcissus-like" in a clinical context, in 1898.

desire, to act. This form of narcissistic inaction constitutes what Gadda describes here as the individual's tendency to "intorpidire, d'irrigidire, anche d'inebetire e stordire: donde narcotico. Egli è però, il Narciso, l'irrigidito in sé, l'intorpidito, il sonnolente (nell'alba acerba di prepubertà non ancora levatosi a bruzzico), quegli che non dà, che non si dà: che non si sdà" (VM, SGF I, 650).

The second of the two essays, 'L'Egoista' (1954), is structured around a dialogue between two imaginary interlocutors, 'Teofilo' and 'Crisostomo'. This study builds upon the association between egotism and man's erroneous belief in his own monadic isolation, as well as the ethical implications that such a belief holds both for the individual and for society as a whole. The opening quotation offers a helpful encapsulation of these ideas, and is therefore worth quoting in full here:

Chi immagina e percepisce se medesimo come un essere 'isolato' dalla totalità degli esseri, porta il concetto di individualità fino al limite della negazione, lo storce fino ad annullarne il contenuto. L'io biologico ha un certo grado di realtà: ma è sotto molti riguardi apparenza, vana petizione di principio. La vita di ognuno di noi pensata come fatto per sé stante, estraniato da un decorso e da una correlazione di fatti, è concetto erroneo, è figurazione gratuita. In realtà, la vita di ognuno di noi è una 'simbiosi con l'universo'. La nostra individualità è il punto di incontro, è il nodo o groppo di innumerevoli rapporti con innumerevoli situazioni (fatti od esseri) a noi apparentemente esterni. Ognuno di noi è limitato, su infinite direzioni, da una controparte dialettica: ognuno di noi è il no di infiniti sì, e il sì di infiniti no. [...] Se una libellula vola a Tokio, innesca una catena di reazioni che raggiungono me. (VM, SGF I, 654)

As the product of an infinitely complex series of interrelated systems – “il no di infiniti sì, il sì di infiniti no” – Gadda contends that the individual cannot (and must not) be isolated from the totality of the social complex of which he is part. And yet he does not reject the concept of individuality *per se* here. Rather, what he opposes is any attempt on the part of the individual to push this sense of individuality “fino al limite della negazione”. Drawing upon Dostoevskian conceptions of the interrelatedness of sin – in which it is suggested that “la colpa di uno è colpa di tutti” (VM, SGF I, 656) – Gadda dismisses the possibility of independent, self-contained action. What begins as a seemingly isolated event ends as an unstoppable concatenation of ungovernable reactions, in an interminable cycle of events the outcome of which lies entirely outside of the control of its source. A narcissist is therefore to be defined, for Gadda, as any individual who seeks to exist in isolation both from others and from his external reality: “Egoista è colui che ignora o trascura la condizione di simbiosi, cioè di necessaria convivenza, di tutti gli esseri” (VM, SGF I, 654). Such an individual overlooks the crucial correlations that tie him to the rest of society, and as such remains ignorant of the fundamental lessons to be gleaned from the teachings of such thinkers as, for example, Dostoevski and Leibniz: “Non ha letto, e non ha meditato a sufficienza, la monadologia di Leibniz né i Karamazov di Dostoevski” (VM, SGF I, 655).

Yet, far from a simple phenomenon, Gadda explains that narcissism can take multiple forms within society. The first form to come under consideration in this essay is the so-called “egoista economico”, whose primary characteristic is an excessive preoccupation with protecting his family and material fortune: “egli crede, nella sua dura buona fede, poter salvare sé, la sua donna, la sua prole, il suo peculio, dal naufragio dei casi e delle fortune aliene, dallo sprofondare della patria” (VM, SGF I, 655). Overly focused on the protection of their personal *possessions* in the widest sense – be it their family members, material objects or personal glory – such individuals disregard their obligations to the wider community. The

second form of egoism is embodied by the “egoista dell’al di là”, “il quale ritiene d’aver potuto recare a salvezza la propria anima sulla perdizione delle rimanenti” (VM, SGF I, 655). Wrongfully believing in the possibility of the salvation of the one in the face of “[la] perdizione delle rimanenti”, the “egoista dell’al di là” exhibits a marked ignorance of the concepts of integration and interrelatedness. The third form, which is intrinsically connected with Gadda’s aversion to disorder, is the so-called “aesthetic” narcissist. The “egoista estetico”, who fails to recognise man’s shared obligation to maintain common order, exhibits a marked ignorance of the very notion of social duty: “sono fenomeni esterni all’egoismo dell’io individuo, intrinseci invece alla comunione dei beni: fenomeni che l’io individuo vanamente si studia di padroneggiare” (VM, SGF I, 657). The final form is the “hygienic” egoist, or “egoista igienico”, whose primary failing lies in his untenable and unethical attempt to abscond himself from the ills of communal existence: “quegli che cerca di esimersi, con l’isolamento, col mettere maschera al grifo, dal contrarre il male epidémico: o anche semplicemente endémico”, and to thereby “evitare a se stesso la calamità comune” (VM, SGF I, 658).

Although exhibited in a myriad of different forms, Gadda’s understanding of the question of narcissism might therefore be reduced to one central failing on the part of the individual: the desire to escape social duty as a result of an erroneous belief in the possibility of an isolated form of selfhood. Together, these different forms of narcissism combine to establish what Gadda describes as an overpowering “egoismo tirannico”: we are all victims of “[la] folla di coloro che difettano di spirito civile” (VM, SGF I, 658). The centripetal force of narcissism has the effect of shattering not only the individual but the wider social structure in general, leaving nothing but “briciole” of any former (albeit illusory) unity:

L’egoista, tal’e quale come il pianeta ipergravidico, acciacca se stesso. [...] l’egoismo ‘estremo’ raggiunge gli stessi risultati di una ‘estrema’ schizofrenia (scissione

mentale, frantumazione psichica). La psiche dello schizofrenico non sussiste come io unitario, come io monadico: è scoppiata, è andata in pezzi: una bomba pestata sull'innescò. Ma la psiche dell'introvertito egoista, il quale neppure ode o vede chi gli parla, è a sua volta un bel vaso della Cina andato in briciole, autostritolatosi nella sua pressione centripeta, nella sua propria ipergravità. La sua disumana forza-centripeta, la disumana coesione del suo io inutilmente io, lo hanno polverizzato, annichilato.

Altrettanto si può dire del narcisistico, dell'auto-soddisfatto. (VM, SGF I, 659)

Narcissism, intrinsically connected with an erroneous theory of individuation, is therefore more than just an erroneous exaggeration of self-importance for Gadda. Rather, constituting a transgression of the ethical code that underpins social existence, it is to be understood, to quote Guido Lucchini's, as an "intrinsically evil"<sup>129</sup> process: "Individuation is a transient, precarious, mostly illusive process, and above all an intrinsically evil one. In its false presumption of autonomy, the self contains in embryo its own perversion, the 'phagic' impulse that Gadda believes to be typical of the instinct of self-preservation."<sup>130</sup> From his initial frustration at the mundane, daily acts of egotism of his fellow soldiers, then, Gadda has come to conceive of narcissism as "la fonte di tutti i mali",<sup>131</sup> constituting one of the most dangerous threats to both individual and social wellbeing. For, he laments, "la storia umana, sotto questo aspetto, non è che un salvadanaio di miserie e di colpe: e di tutti i soldi e i soldoni che vi cadono, l'egoismo è il più grave" (VM, SGF I, 656).

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<sup>129</sup> Lucchini, 'Gadda's Freud', p.177.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>131</sup> Ferdinando Amigoni, *La più semplice macchina: lettura freudiana del "Pasticciccio"* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), p. 15.

*‘Meditazione milanese’, and the refutation of closure*

In line with this denunciation of narcissism as “la fonte di tutti i mali”, a recurrent association underpins Gadda’s thought between ‘il male’ and the concept of *dissipation*, on the one hand, and ‘il bene’ and *combination* on the other. The philosophical basis underlying Gadda’s theory of good and evil – which is intrinsically connected with his critique of narcissism and the erroneous notion of monadic subjectivity – finds its clearest expression in his theoretical treatise, *Meditazione milanese*. Drawing on the anti-metaphysical theories of Bergson, Leibniz, Spinoza and Dostoyevsky, Gadda sets out the basis in this text for his rejection of established ideological theories of identity and cognition, in what Sbragia describes as a “dismantlement of the hackneyed notion of reality and the human psyche as self-contained ‘postal parcels’ and its replacement with a vision of human and phenomenal reality as tangled, fissured webs of multiplicity, differentiation and deformation.”<sup>132</sup> Rejecting the very notion of closure, Gadda sets out a vision of reality composed of a series of inter-related, contaminating systems or fragments, according to which each and every element of reality exists in a state of inescapable interconnectedness, and is therefore incapable of acting in isolation.

In order to frame his theory, Gadda sets up an opposition between his own conception of human identity and external reality, and that of the seventeenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz.<sup>133</sup> For Leibniz, the individual elements of reality constitute self-contained ‘monads’. Impervious to external influence, and each containing within themselves a perfect reflection of the world to which they belong, these monadic units form part of a divine system of order and unity. Firmly opposed to any such a vision, Gadda sets

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<sup>132</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 31.

<sup>133</sup> For a more detailed consideration of this question, see Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, ‘The Leibnizian Monad and the Self through the Lens of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s and Samuel Beckett’s Writings’, *MHRA: Working Papers in the Humanities*, 2 (2007), 57-68.

forth his conflicting theory of a reality that is based on the very impossibility of autonomy itself. As Wehling-Giorgi explains in her study of the relationship between the Leibnizian monad and Gadda's theory of selfhood, "for Gadda the self is a system in constant movement, an agglomeration of relations".<sup>134</sup> In opposition to Leibniz's model, for Gadda "all movement progresses towards difference and differentiation" and "thus can only work with fragments."<sup>135</sup> Contrary to the self-contained "postal parcel" of the Leibnizian model, Gadda's subject is an intrinsically plural entity – merely one of an infinite number of interconnected fragments – which is inseparable both from the phenomenal world to which it belongs, and from other individuals:

Esempio: l'individuo umano p.e. Carlo, già limitatamente alla sua persona, non è un effetto ma un insieme di effetti ed è stolto il pensarlo come una unità: esso è un insieme di relazioni non perennemente unite: (p.e. il suo amore per una certa ragazza dura in lui tre mesi e la sua ira contro un debitore otto giorni). Ma poi è assolutamente impossibile pensare Carlo come persona, come uno, come un pacco postale di materia vivente e pensante. Ciò vien praticato su larga scala: eppure è cosa grottesca, puerile, degna di mentalità pleistoceniche. (MM, SVP, 649-650)

What results is a fragmented 'I' constituting nothing more than one of an endless series of interrelated fragments: "La mia monade e il mio io sono delle baracche sconvolte rispetto alle pure sfere d'acciaio di Leibniz e hanno mille finestre e fessure" (MM, SVP, 832).

Distinguished by its porosity, the Gaddian self is a highly unstable entity, which, according to Norma Bouchard, "can emerge only as a flux of shifting, multiplying images."<sup>136</sup> This

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<sup>134</sup> Wehling-Giorgi, 'The Leibnizian Monad', p. 61.

<sup>135</sup> Guido Guglielmi, 'Gadda and the Form of the Novel', in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, 25-42 (p. 40).

<sup>136</sup> Norma Bouchard, *Céline, Gadda, Beckett. Experimental Writings of the 1930s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

rejection of monadic subjectivity also extends, for Gadda, to a dismantlement of the very concept of the barrier or limit within reality itself: “Altro errore profondo della speculazione: di veder ad ogni costo l’io e l’uno dove non esistono affatto, di veder limiti e barriere, dove vi sono legami e aggrovigliamenti” (MM, SVP, 647). For Gadda, the failure to recognise the impossibility of any such a delimitation, within the context of an external reality characterised by its complete lack of closure, represents a transgression of society’s ethical code. As Verbaro explains,

Il ‘male’ e il ‘bene’ si identificano per Gadda con una scala che va dal minimo al massimo della relazione. L’antindividualismo, che già era stato uno dei nuclei portanti del *Giornale di guerra*, si traduce in *Meditazione milanese* nell’idea profondamente etica di un mondo governato dalla relazione.<sup>137</sup>

While good is intrinsically connected with notions of *combination* and *collectivity* – in line with the praise of collective integration set out in Gadda’s early writings - evil is to be understood as anything that leads to dissipation or wastage, be that of material capital, life, or biological continuity. Evil represents that which is *uncombinable*, anything (or anyone) that cannot be successfully integrated into the wider, communal whole: “L’equilibrio è l’affermazione cosciente della combinazione, mentre ciò che non sussiste in equilibrio è l’incombinabile, cioè l’irreale. È l’errore” (RI, SVP, 407). As already noted in relation to the question of narcissism, then, for Gadda the failure to integrate with the wider community constitutes an unethical transgression of the social code:

Certo bisogna ponderare: a) Che l’intreccio non sia di casi stiracchiati, ma risponda all’‘istinto delle combinazioni’ cioè al profondo ed oscuro dissociarsi della realtà in

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<sup>137</sup> Caterina Verbaro, *Cognizione della pluralità: Letteratura e conoscenza in Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2005), p. 72

elementi, che talora (etica) perdono di vista il nesso unitario. – Idea anche etica! notare. La ‘dissoluzione’ anche morale e anche teoretica è una perdita di vista del nesso di organicità. La parola dissoluzione deriva forse da ‘solutus legibus’ – che si è sciolto, allontanato dalle leggi – o solutus more, dal buon costume. (RI, SVP, 460)

As illustrated both in the *Giornale* and in his theoretical studies of the questions of narcissism and subjective identity, for Gadda any attempt to separate the individual from the communal is therefore not only based on a fallacious notion of monadic subjectivity, but threatens the very fabric of social being itself. And it is only through an act of self-abnegation and prioritisation of the communal over the individual that the subject can be integrated into the wider social unit. This, the critic Carla Benedetti suggests, “is what Gadda calls a heroic feeling, it belongs to the hero who goes to war to sacrifice his own *n* (life) for ‘the country’s *becoming*’, but also to the man who procreates to preserve humankind.”<sup>138</sup> Concomitant with this theory of evil as dissolution or stagnation, ‘il bene’ for Gadda is to be connected with the values of collective association, convergence and progress; “Il bene o realtà si attua per la coincidenza di una enorme dovizia di relazioni ed è quindi manifestazione centrale, o convergenza; o quadrivio; o fibra centrale del tessuto” (MM, SVP, 689). “In a moral universe subject to the same laws of multiplicity as the physical universe”, Sbragia explains, “goodness is the coming together of as many relationships as possible.”<sup>139</sup>

As for Leiris, though, for whom any endeavour to reinstate the form of ‘sacred’ communal unity characteristic of an idealised past is ultimately ruled out by the impossibility of achieving any authentic contact between self and other, for Gadda any search to establish the form of communal integration necessary for the ideal functioning of society is precluded by man’s inherent narcissism and insistent belief in a mendacious notion of monadic

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<sup>138</sup> Verbaro, p. 171.

<sup>139</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 33.

subjectivity. Far from the vision of collective integration and individual self-abnegation envisaged in his early writings, Gadda has therefore arrived at a refutation of social identity for its grounding on the ills of narcissism and an illusory belief in the possibility of separating the individual from the communal. It is in his anti-Fascist pamphlet, *Eros e Priapo*, however, that this embittered renunciation of the possibility of any form of non-narcissistic group integration finds its clearest expression.

*‘Eros e Priapo’: Fascism as a state of unsublimated narcissism*

Characterised by an explosive use of aggressive humour, diatribe and satire, *Eros e Priapo* sets out Gadda’s attempt to analyse and condemn the Fascist movement through the framework of Freudian theory. In a dramatic reversal of his early praise for the Fascist philosophy of group identity, *Eros e Priapo* can be seen to deal the final blow to his belief in the possibility of entering into any authentic experience of collective integration.

The text is directed at two primary targets: the unsublimated narcissism of the *Duce*, on the one hand, and the irrationality of his female followers, on the other. Although only published in 1967, Gadda in fact began drafting *Eros e Priapo* in 1944, just before he began work on *Quer pasticciaccio*, with the dual intention of denouncing Fascism and of redressing his own misguided early adherence to the regime.<sup>140</sup> Psychologically, *Eros e Priapo* can be seen as a natural progression from Gadda’s exasperation at the egotism, irrationality and disorder described in the *Giornale*. For, while the text primarily serves as a denunciation of the infantile narcissism of both the Fascist leader – *Il Duce* – and his followers, it also offers

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<sup>140</sup> Gadda’s desire to distance himself from the regime in this text is clear, as illustrated in the assertion that, “il mi’ rospo, tre giorni avanti di tirar le cuoia, devo pur principiare a buttarlo fuori: il rospaccio che m’ha oppilato lo stomaco trent’anni: quanto una vita!” (EP, SGF II, 236). This is further highlighted by his presentation of the treatise as a form of “atto sacrale”: “L’atto di conoscenza con che nu’ dobbiamo riscattarci preclude la resurrezione se una resurrezione è tentabile da così paventosa macerie” (EP, SGF II, 223).

an expression of the author's anger, again, at the general disorder and irrationality of external reality itself. In connection with the question of community and group identity, the text highlights a number of fundamental issues, namely: the flawed nature of group identity itself; the inherently narcissistic nature of the bond between leader and followers, and the opposition between Eros and Logos, which shall be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two in relation to the dysfunctionality of the relationship between male subject and female other. For Gadda, Fascism's primary offense consists in its failure to progress beyond a state of unsublimated, infantile narcissism. For, far from the productive celebration of collective integration and self-abnegation praised in his early writings, Fascism is denounced in this treatise as being based on what Sbragia describes as,

the rhetoric of falsehood and exaggeration (narcissists are incurable liars); the incompetency of the Italian military regime [...]; the unchecked libidinal drives of greedy industrialists [...]; the malfunctioning institutions of family, education and religion, all perverted by narcissistic self-interest; the disastrous cult of narcissistic youth.<sup>141</sup>

In line with the theory of narcissism set out in *Meditazione milanese*, which involves a degenerative movement from  $n + 1$  to  $n$ , this fixity at a state of infantile narcissism is seen not only to preclude society from advancing, but to constitute an actual regression for society as a whole. As Peter Hainsworth explains, "there was in the Italian nation as a whole a regression to infantile narcissism, or a refusal to go beyond it and reach full psychological maturity."<sup>142</sup> As part of the opposition at work throughout the text between the irrational, destructive state of Eros and the contrasting, rational state of Logos, Gadda ascribes this failure to a prevalence of the former over the latter, which is at the root of the failings of

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<sup>141</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 165.

<sup>142</sup> Hainsworth, pp. 226-7.

Fascist philosophy itself: “Eros nelle sue forme inconscie e animalesche, ne’ suoi aspetti infimi, e non ne’ sublimati e ingentiliti, ha dominato la tragica scena. Vent’anni. Logos è stato buttato via di scena dalla Bassaride perché inetto a colmare la di lei pruriginosa necessità” (EP, SGF II, 246). Signifying the prevalence of the erotic and irrational over the rational, pragmatic and progressive, the opposition between Eros and Logos offers an instructive interpretive key to much of Gadda’s thought, as shall be examined in further depth in the following chapter in connection with the relationship between male self and female other. It is, however, in relation to the question of group identity, and the relationship between the individual and the wider community, that *Eros e Priapo* is of interest here.

While, in accordance with a number of key theories of group psychology, Gadda initially stressed the positive aspects of group identity – in relation, notably, to the potential eradication of personal egotism and the positive transformation of the individual – even this relationship is dismissed in this text as an inherently narcissistic one. For, in line with psychoanalytic theories concerning the process of narcissistic ‘incorporation’, Gadda suggests that at the moment at which the individual is integrated into the group – be it at the level of the family, town, or council – the group is automatically incorporated into the self, as part of an endeavour on the part of the individual to cancel out the threat of anything exterior to it. The group thus becomes what is described by Gadda as a mere “estensione della carica narcissica o autolubido alla collettività o al gruppo di cui si è parte o per cui idealmente si parteggia” (EP, SGF II, 327). Hence, he explains,

La propria famiglia, la propria scolarasca, la gente di villa propria, i co-vassalli della propria baronia, ecc. possono venir sentiti come Io, in termini precisamente narcissici. Sotto questo aspetto la estensione narcissica alla collettività è la forma ingenua di civismo, di socialità, ecc. Ciò è ben fino a un certo punto, male al di là. (EP, SGF II, 327)

This theory of narcissistic incorporation has its roots in psychoanalytic theories of narcissistic development during infancy. Jerold Post provides a summary of this process in the article ‘Narcissism and the Charismatic Leader-Follower Relationship’, which offers a useful framework for understanding the narcissistic nature of the leader-follower relationship set out in *Eros e Priapo*. Calling upon the theories of narcissism developed by the two Austrian-born psychoanalysts, Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) and Otto Kernberg (1928-), Post draws particular attention to Kernberg’s understanding of narcissism as a pathological disorder. According to his theory, the development of a narcissistic personality results from some form of psychological damage being inflicted upon the child early on in the course of his development. Post explains that, subsequent to the stage of primary narcissism, in which the child makes no distinction between himself and others, and positions himself at the centre of reality, the child gradually becomes aware of the separation that exists between himself and external reality. The result, he explains, is that the child can assume one of two personality patterns, either adopting the position of “the ideal or grandiose self”,<sup>143</sup> or reacting through an attempt to remedy his own sense of incompleteness by attaching himself to the ideal-other. However, if during this crucial period of development the child suffers some form of trauma or damage, the result is the formation of an “injured self”. This can take one of two forms: either the child adopts a “*mirror-hungry personality*”, which leads him to develop an exaggerated sense of his own grandiosity and to seek constant confirmation of this through the admiring response of others; or the child assumes an “*ideal-hungry personality*”, wherein he seeks constantly to overcome his own sense of incompleteness by attaching himself to a series of idealised figures who make up for those areas where he is lacking. These two ‘injured’ personality types provide an instructive model for comprehending the narcissistic

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<sup>143</sup> Jerold M. Post, ‘Narcissism and the Charismatic Leader-Follower Relationship’ in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Dec. 1986), 675-688 (p. 678).

nature of the relationship between the “mirror-hungry” leader and the “ideal-hungry” follower described in *Eros e Priapo*. For while according to some theories of group psychology the submission of the self to the group represents an act of self-abnegation, for Gadda even this act is ultimately denounced as being based on an intrinsically narcissistic drive; to achieve subjective completion by attaching oneself to an external ideal-other (in this case, the group leader). The individual incorporates, or ingests, the other as a means both of achieving subjective completion, and of defending himself against the threat posed by the external other, corresponding to the narcissism inherent in the stage of adolescent “innamorazione”:

L’Io in formazione, l’Io in fase evolutiva, l’Io potentemente centripeto dei 14 anni incorpora in sé il modello, consustanzia il modello: se ne innamora perché lo introita, perché lo sente già Io. Così come nella ritualistica delle religioni positive si può mangiare e inghiottire il Dio adorato, poniamo l’agnello pasquale. Più che di innamoramento, si deve parlare di appropriazione o ingestione o incorporazione del modello: così la serpe sente come Io lo stritolato conigliolo. (EP, SGF II, 334)

Contrary to the conception of group identity as a means of eradicating individual egotism and entering into a productive state of communal progress, Fascist psychology therefore involves a narcissistic act of incorporation, wherein the ‘we’ is transmuted into the ‘I’, and the wider group transmuted into a mere extension of the self. For the group leader, this relationship offers a means of validating his own egotistic sense of his own grandiosity, while for individual group members it serves to fill a sense of intrinsic *lack*, through the appropriation of the perceived qualities of the leader. As well as attaching themselves to the ideal leader figure, however, members of the group can also be seen to seek this form of self-validation through an appropriation of the relative stability of the group identity; as against the fluctuation and instability of individual identity, collective identity offers a unique form of

fixity. As Jerold Post explains, “For isolated individuals with damaged self-esteem and weak ego boundaries, the sense of ‘we’ creates and imparts a coherent sense of identity. For such individuals, the self and the ‘we’ are fused so that the self is experienced *as* the relationship.”<sup>144</sup>

A clear contrast can be identified, therefore, between this denunciation of the narcissism of group identity and the fervent idealism of Gadda’s early writings, in which he extolled the possibilities for communal integration and heroic self-sacrifice that the war and the Fascist regime looked set to provide. From an initial vision of collective unity and self-abnegation, he has arrived at an understanding of the relationship between self and other as one characterised by fragmentation, inherent narcissism, and the prevalence of a destructive, narcissistic Eros over the rational, positive force of Logos.

What this comparative investigation into the question of community in Gadda’s and Leiris’s writings has sought to bring to light, therefore, is a shared critique of modern society underpinning both authors’ thought on the basis of the impossibility of initiating any form of authentic collective integration. While they differ in their modes of approach – Leiris’s search for the communal takes the form of a quest to reinstate an experience of the communifying ‘sacred’ within a series of intellectual and political societies, while that of his Italian counterpart hinges on an early adherence to a theory of mass collective involvement as a means of overcoming narcissism and initiating a productive state of communal unity – both authors are ultimately thwarted in their search to reinstate an experience of the communal. A number of key affinities have emerged, namely: a common nostalgia for a form of communal integration characteristic of an idealised, irrecoverable past; a shared celebration of the

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<sup>144</sup> Post, p. 686.

transformative, regenerative effects of group psychology, the desire to initiate a form of undifferentiated selfhood through the eradication of the barriers between self and other; and, lastly, a common desire to escape a deeply flawed sense of self through a transformative union with the collective other. Yet while for Leiris the communifying experience of the sacred – involving an exhilarating eradication of the barriers between self and other – is ultimately recognised as being impossible outside of the experience of death itself, for Gadda any attempt to reinstate this form of productive collective integration is ultimately thwarted by man's inherent narcissism, society's prioritisation of Eros over Logos, and the fallacious belief in an erroneous concept of monadic identity.

The next chapter will continue this investigation into the problematic relationship between self and other through an analysis of the relationship between individual (male) self and (female) other set out in Leiris's and Gadda's autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writings, respectively. Through an examination of the overarching association at work within both authors' oeuvres between woman and fear, Eros and crime, it will question the extent to which they might be seen to reject the possibility of any real relationship between self and (individual) other, as a result of what Leiris terms the ineradicable *vide* at the base of all human experience and which, for Gadda, represents the essential condition of the fragmented modern subject.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **‘Chesti femmine!’: The Flawed Relationship between Male Self and Female Other**

Si, dans la tauromachie, ce monde lui-même représente un danger  
immédiate – d’où impossibilité, sous peine de mort, d’une fusion complète -  
l’on retrouve, dans l’amour, pareille impossibilité; car la communion totale  
de deux êtres ne pourrait s’effectuer que dans la mort.

Michel Leiris, ‘Miroir de la tauromachie’

Following this process of disenchantment with the possibility of initiating any form of successful integration between the individual and the community, self and collective other, this chapter will analyse the problematic relationship between the individual male self and female other presented in Leiris’s autobiographical text *L’Age d’homme*, and the experiences of some of Gadda’s most overtly autobiographical fictional protagonists, particularly within the context of *Quer pasticciaccio de via Merulana*. Through the identification of a broad association between women and fear, sexuality and suffering, as well as what Sbragia has termed a “pervasive male inferiority complex”<sup>145</sup> in evidence throughout their writings, it will question the extent to which Gadda’s and Leiris’s depiction of woman might be seen to illustrate a shared recognition of the intrinsically flawed nature of human desire itself, and the

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<sup>145</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 150.

subsequent impossibility of entering into any true relationship with the individual (female) other.

Corresponding to Freud's theory of 'abnormal love'<sup>146</sup> – according to which any attempt to separate the poles of 'affection' and 'sensuality' will give rise to a crippling experience of psychic impotence on the part of the (male) desiring subject – Leiris and Gadda are often seen to structure their presentation of the female figure around two polarised typologies of woman. In Leiris's autobiographical writings, this is most clearly illustrated by the central Judith-Lucretia pairing, while within Gadda's semi-autobiographical narratives one finds a corresponding divide between the poles of the high and the low, as expressed through an opposition between woman as idealised other and woman as base sexual object. I would argue, however, that any such a clear-cut opposition is complicated within both authors' works by an *overarching* association between female sexuality and suffering, a link that finds its theoretical underpinning in Gadda's correlation between the female psyche and the destructive force of Eros. Therefore, while Liliana would at first appear to belong to the typology of the sublime female other, she ultimately becomes the centre of a complex web of crime and transgression within the narrative of *Quer pasticciaccio*. Equally, while Leiris at first separates the figures of Judith and Lucretia around two opposing categories of the female, he soon recognises that they each represent an equal threat to his own sense of (gendered) subjectivity.

To what extent, therefore, might the broad association between Eros and crime, (female) sexuality and suffering that underpins both authors' relationships with women be

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<sup>146</sup> For more on Gadda's understanding of Freud, see Elio Gioanola, *Carlo Emilio Gadda: topazi e altre gioie familiari* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2004); Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*; and Guido Lucchini, 'Gadda's Freud'. For more on the presence of Freud in Leiris's works, see Nathalie Barberger, *Michel Leiris, L'écriture du deuil*, (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998); J. B. Pontalis, 'Michel Leiris, or Psychoanalysis without End' in *On Leiris*, ed. by Marc Blanchard, *Yale French Studies* 81 (1992).

seen to derive from a wider rejection of the possibility of any successful relationship between desiring subject and desired other, and a shared belief in the unfulfillability of human desire itself?

## **Leiris**

*The advent of sexuality: from the undifferentiated flux of childhood, to the antagonism of adult intersubjectivity*

As is the case for the majority of Gadda's autobiographical male doubles, who grapple with a myriad of bodily defects and a persistent sense of their own physical inadequacy throughout the author's (overtly autobiographical) fictional narratives, Leiris entertains a negative relationship with his body from an early age, leading to an intrinsic association between his approach to sexuality and a deep-seated sense of his own (gendered) inadequacy. He in fact sets the tone for this negative corporeal experience from the very beginning of his autobiographical project, through an opening passage in *L'Age d'homme* dedicated to the description of a wide array of physical failings and peculiarities. In the space of just a few lines, we are presented with a staggering enumeration of oddities and flaws. Together with "une calvitie menaçante", we read of the author's "veines temporales exagérément noueuses et saillantes", "le bord des paupières habituellement enflammé", and "une fâcheuse tendance aux rougeurs et à la peau luisante", to name just a few. Catching sight of himself in the mirror at one point, he confesses to finding himself "d'une laideur humiliante" (AH, 25-26). Far from an isolated moment of malaise, however, this negative account in fact sets the tone for Leiris's problematic relationship with his own body throughout his life. This is further evidenced, for example, in *Biffures*, the first volume of *La Règle du jeu*, in which Leiris draws a direct causal link between his uneasy relationship with his body and a deep-seated

and persistent sense of psychological malaise: “gêné simplement dans mon corps”, he proclaims, “qui [...] était un peu trop gras [...] maladroit de ce corps dont il me semblait peut-être que les plaisirs clandestins auxquels je me livrais le soir ou dans les W.-C. augmentaient la rondeur et la mollesse, j’étais à cause de lui en posture éternelle d’accusé” (B, RJ, 195).

In order to trace the biographical roots of this uneasy relationship with his body and, by extension, with the sphere of sexuality in general, Leiris presents his reader with a series of key events from his childhood, which can be seen to have determined both his attitude to his body, and his conception of the form of combative confrontation that characterises the relationship between desiring (male) self and desired (female) other. Unlike the sought-after experience of sacred, undifferentiated ‘unity’ described in Chapter One, elaborated together with Laure and Bataille, the relationship between (male) self and (female) other described in Leiris’s autobiographical texts is in fact typified by a marked character of fragmentation and opposition. And what is perhaps most striking about the selection of incidents that Leiris chooses to bring to his reader’s attention, in this light, is the intrinsic association between sexuality and suffering that they each represent. A particularly pertinent example can be found, for instance, in the author’s account of his first erection, which occurs while he is out on a family walk in the woods, at the age of around six or seven. While observing a group of young children climbing trees, barefoot, in a clearing in the woods, Leiris is subject to an experience the significance of which he was at the time too young to grasp, and yet which remains implanted in his adult memory. Leiris only later comprehends that the incident was significant inasmuch as it constituted his first experience of the irruption of the external world into his inner experience, initiating his first foray into the adult experience of eroticism. For, he explains,

Quoi qu'il en soit, cette érection brusque [...] correspondait à une sorte d'irruption de la nature dans mon corps, soudaine entrée en scène du monde extérieure puisque, sans être encore capable de trouver le mot de l'énigme, je notai du moins une coïncidence, impliquant un parallélisme entre deux séries de faits: de ce qui se passait dans mon corps, et les événements extérieurs, dont je n'avais jusqu'alors jamais tenu compte en tant que se déroulant dans un milieu réellement séparé. (AH, 40)

Having remained sheltered up until this point in the isolated cocoon of infancy, this instance triggers the young Michel's first recognition of the direct parallelism that exists between external events and interior reactions, and, hence, the threat represented by the external sphere for the individual subject. Foreshadowing the combative nature of Leiris's adult relations with the female other, the moment is cast in markedly negative terms as "une sorte d'irruption de la nature dans [s]on corps". This is also Leiris's first experience, moreover, of the intrinsic relationship between pleasure and pain that is set to characterise his approach to the sphere of the erotic throughout his life:

Sur le moment je n'établis aucun rapport direct entre la modification qui affectait mon sexe et le spectacle qui m'était offert; simplement je constatai une bizarre coïncidence. Beaucoup plus tard, j'ai cru me rappeler la sensation étrange que j'éprouvais alors imaginant ce que devait faire ressentir d'à la fois plaisant et douloureux aux enfants en question le contact de la plante de leurs pieds et de leurs orteils nus avec l'écorce rugueuse. (AH, 40)

This correlation between pleasure and suffering in the sphere of the erotic is further highlighted in *L'Age d'homme* in the author's recollection of the inflammation that accompanied his earliest erections, which he categorises under the heading of 'sexe enflammé'. Here, Leiris describes how, aged around seven or eight, he suffered an ailment

defined in the medical dictionary as an “inflammation de la membrane muqueuse qui revêt le gland” (AH, 106). He is treated with a series of baths in a “solution de permanganate de potassium”, and recalls once again experiencing a sensation which hovers ambivalently on the borderline between the agreeable and the disagreeable: “j’éprouvais une légère sensation de cuisson dont je ne saurais dire si elle était agréable ou désagréable” (AH, 106).

The result of such instances as these, for Leiris, is the initiation of a life-long experience of sexual inferiority, which leads him to establish a sharp contrast between himself and other male figures. Just as the divergence between Gadda and his younger brother Enrico, with his easy confidence and success with women, represents a lifelong source of anguish for the Italian author, Leiris confesses in *L’Age d’homme* to having experienced a marked sense of his own inferiority whenever he compared himself to other boys of his age. One might recall, for instance, his description of a further condition that he suffered from as a young child, which, he explains: “me fut plus tard une grande source de honte, quand je comparais mon membre à celui des autres garçons” (AH, 106). This is further exacerbated by his subsequent incapacity to draw any distinction between his memory of his first erections and this particular medical affliction, leading him to conceive of sexuality as a phenomenon to be feared, even treated: “je crois qu’au début l’érection me fit peur [...] Certes, mon mal n’avait pas été sans me donner quelque plaisir, à cause de l’hypersensibilité qu’il me procurait, mais je savais qu’il s’agissait de quelque chose de mauvais et d’anormal, puisqu’on m’en soignait” (AH, 106). As a result of these early childhood experiences, Leiris quickly comes to cast eroticism in terms of the harmful:

Les premières manifestations conscientes de ma vie érotique sont donc placées sous le signe du *néfaste* et le malaise dont je souffris alors doit être pour beaucoup dans l’appréhension que j’ai longtemps eue de l’amour physique et dans ma crainte des maladies vénériennes. Longtemps j’ai cru, par exemple, que la perte de la virginité

pour l'homme ne pouvait se produire qu'avec douleur et effusion, sanglante ainsi qu'il en est pour la femme; étant donné ma structure, il me semblait que dans mon cas ce serait pire que pour quiconque. (AH, 106)

And it does not take much more, he concludes, "pour que le coït m'apparût comme un acte, non seulement coupable si l'on s'y livre trop tôt, mais éminemment dangereux" (AH, 107).

This association between sexuality and suffering is also illustrated by Leiris's presentation of another lasting memory from his childhood relating to the incident when, while playing with "une carabine Eurek", he accidentally shoots an arrow into the eye of the family maid, Rosa. Although again at the time he was too young to pick up on any wider significance the incident might have, Leiris retains a strong recollection of the acute sense of anguish that the event provoked in him: "les sanglots et les cris que je poussai à l'idée d'avoir crevé l'œil de cette fille" (AH, 80). Forming part of a complex network of associations, this memory then immediately triggers another associated one, which is placed under the broad category of "l'œil crevé". Here, Leiris recollects a game that he used to play as a child, which was introduced to him by his elder sister and her husband when he was around ten or eleven years of age. As he recalls, the game involved blindfolding one of the players before then instructing them to go and "crever l'œil à quelqu'un" (AH, 81). The unsuspecting 'patient' was then tricked into placing their hands inside a shell filled with soaked bread, a sensation which Leiris recollects with a particularly acute sense of disgust: "Au moment où l'index pénètre dans le mélange gluant", he recounts, "la victime feinte pousse des cris" (AH, 81). And for Leiris, the game served only to strengthen his association of sexuality and suffering, and resultant fear of female sexuality:

La signification de l'«œil crevé» est très profonde pour moi. Aujourd'hui, j'ai couramment tendance à regarder l'organe féminin comme une chose sale ou comme

une blessure, pas moins attirante en cela, mais dangereuse par elle-même comme tout ce qui est sanglant, muqueux, contaminé. (AH, 81)

Far from the theory of the idealised sacred bond between desiring subject and desired object elaborated with Laure and Bataille, then, Leiris's initiation into the realm of sexuality, as a child, is in fact marked by an acute sense of aggression and affliction. Involving a negative progression from the idealised state of infancy to the antagonistic relationship with the other characteristic of adult relations, Leiris experiences the advent of adulthood as a moment of rupture. And it is first and foremost through the sphere of the erotic that this negative transition comes to the fore. A particularly clear illustration of this can be found, for instance, in Leiris's account of another key event from his childhood. While on the surface the instance constitutes nothing more than a mundane, daily childhood event, it is elevated in Leiris's mind to the status of a defining illustration of the transition from the innocence of childhood to the antagonism of adult relations. Presenting himself as the innocent victim of some kind of adult conspiracy, Leiris describes how his parents once colluded to trick him into a visit to the dentist, while leading him to believe that they were taking him on a trip to the circus. For the young Michel, the cruelty of the betrayal is such that he loses the power of speech for an entire day: "le choc avait été si violent, que pendant vingt-quatre heures il fut impossible de m'arracher une parole" (AH, 105). Collected under the chapter heading 'La Tête d'Holopherne', this episode forms part of a collection of disparate episodes drawn together through the context of memories of physical suffering. Far from an isolated incident, this particular moment of deceit leaves Leiris with the life-long belief that, "tout ce qui peut m'arriver d'agréable en attendant n'est qu'un leurre". For, he explains:

Ce souvenir est, je crois, le plus pénible de mes souvenirs d'enfance. Non seulement je ne comprenais pas que l'on m'eût fait si mal, mais j'avais la notion d'une duperie, d'un piège, d'une perfidie atroce de la part des adultes, qui ne m'avaient amadoué que

pour se livrer sur ma personne à la plus sauvage agression. Toute ma représentation de la vie en est restée marquée: le monde, plein de chausse-trapes, n'est qu'une vaste prison ou salle de chirurgie; je ne suis sur terre que pour devenir chair à médecins, chair à canons, chair à cercueil... (AH, 105)

For Leiris, the advent of adulthood and the individual's subsequent initiation into the sphere of sexuality is thus experienced as a negative transition from the ideal, undifferentiated state of childhood, towards the violent antagonism of adult relations, wherein one must constantly be on one's guard against the threat posed by a hostile external sphere. And it is this very progression, he claims, that constitutes the subject of *L'Age d'homme* itself: "Il me semble que le sujet pourrait se résumer ainsi: comment le héros – c'est-à-dire Holopherne – passe tant bien que mal (et plutôt mal que bien) du chaos miraculeux de l'enfance à l'ordre féroce de la virilité" (AH, 42).

It is in the celebrated 'Reusement' episode, however, with which Leiris opens the first volume of *La Règle du jeu*, that this progression from an idealised childhood to a conflictual adulthood is most clearly expressed. In this pivotal episode – which Leah Hewitt has described as a "framework for Leiris's entire autobiographical enterprise"<sup>147</sup> – Leiris describes the acute sense of anguish that he suffers when he first becomes aware of the intrinsically social nature of all human experience. This realisation is brought about suddenly when he realises that language is in fact not a personal object, but rather an objective tool required in order to successfully engage in the relations central to collective (adult) being. As against the Surrealist model of language described in the previous chapter, language establishes itself here in the young Michel's mind as an intrinsically social tool that cannot be separated from the complex web of intersubjective relations of which it is part. This

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<sup>147</sup> Hewitt, 'Between Literary Movements', p. 85.

realisation is thrust upon the young Leiris when, after seeing his toy narrowly avoid breaking after it has fallen from the table, he reacts automatically, in what might be described as an expression of pure childish joy, with the utterance, "... Reusement!". He is immediately corrected by his older sister, however, who explains that the correct term is in fact not "...Reusement" but rather "Heureusement", which is the cause, for the young Leiris, of a violent moment of disillusionment and loss. Leiris is thus forced at this moment into the recognition that language exists not primarily for the pleasure of pure, personal expression, but rather for the practical purpose of social interaction and the pragmatic exchange of information:

Voici que ce vague vocable – qui jusqu'à présent m'avait été tout à fait personnel et restait comme ferme – est, par un hasard, promu au rôle de chaînon de tout un cycle sémantique. Il n'est plus maintenant une chose à moi: il participe de cette réalité qu'est le langage de mes frères, de ma sœur, et celui de mes parents. De chose propre à moi, il devient chose commune et ouverte. Le voilà, en un éclair, devenu chose partagée ou – si l'on veut – *socialisée*. (B, RJ, 6)

In a sudden moment of bitter disillusionment, the child's entire relationship with language – and indeed, with the external sphere itself – is violently overturned. In this single moment, Hand explains, "the veil is rent, semiotics revealed, and the child's closed world frighteningly socialised".<sup>148</sup> In line with Gadda's description of child development in the essay 'Emilio e Narciso' – in which he explains that "Il 'sentire del fanciullo' dovrà venir infatti educato, dal primo che capita, amministrato, dai molti, e unto e conspurcato della deiezione loro, che essi chiamarono la Legge" (VM, SGF I, 638) - the progression from infancy to adulthood thus involves a negative progression from the law of the individual to that of the many. From the

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<sup>148</sup> Hand, p. 92.

self-contained state of childhood, the child is forced, Hand explains, “to recognise himself henceforth as a social phenomenon and a linguistic event.”<sup>149</sup> This is further illustrated, in *Biffures*, in the following description of the progression from childhood to adulthood in terms of two opposing linguistic models:

Chassé d’ores et déjà du paradis terrestre de la plus ancienne enfance – enclos  
bienheureux dans lequel je vivais sur un pied de quasi-égalité avec les parties encore  
inclassées du monde ambiant [...] j’entamais, sous la férule de l’archange laïque  
qu’était la maîtresse d’école, la cruelle conquête de ce moi qui devait d’abord se  
perfectionner dans l’art de nommer les choses; m’appliquant en toute innocence,  
j’ignorais que chacun des mots qu’on m’apprenait à reconnaître imprimé était [...] un  
cerne d’encre ou un fossé destiné à les isoler les unes des autres et à les séparer de  
moi. (B, RJ, 49)

Experiencing the movement from childhood to the adult sphere as a negative progression from an ideal state of self-contained, undifferentiated flux to a negative state of dependence on, and combat with, the other, Leiris quickly comes to conceive of the relationship between self and other in terms of an antagonistic confrontation between victim and victor.

And, for Leiris, it is in the relationship between the male self and female other that this conflictual relationship between self and other finds its clearest embodiment. In line with the impossibility of initiating any form of authentic collective unity described in Chapter One, the relationship between (male) self and (female) other portrayed in Leiris’s autobiographical writings is characterised by a sense of hostility, which is central to both his and Gadda’s shared conception of the sphere of sexuality at large. In her analysis of the question of selfhood in Leiris’s writings, Catherine Masson stresses the importance of this

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<sup>149</sup> Hand, p. 92.

notion of ‘combat’ for the author’s conception of subjectivity itself, suggesting that “La division du JE va se traduire chez Leiris par la notion du combat.”<sup>150</sup> In an article on the role of aggression in the act of writing the self, Peter Poiana further testifies to the importance of the concept of combat within Leiris’s thought. Interpreting the author’s autobiographical project as an endeavour to bring about a violent reconstitution of the self, he suggests that aggression should not be seen as “an incidental effect of self-writing”,<sup>151</sup> but rather as an integral part of the autobiographical process itself. For Poiana, combat in fact constitutes the primary motive behind Leiris’s decision to embark upon a project of writing the self in the first place. Far from a direct mirroring process, it is, for him, an aggressive “reconstitution of the self as an object of suspicion and violence.”<sup>152</sup> Poiana conceives of Leiris’s autobiographical project in terms of an attempt to tackle the author’s own sense of conflicted (male) selfhood. Drawing a link with Lacanian theory – whose mirror stage theory describes the initiation within the infant of a critical splitting of the ego, leading to an adult selfhood grounded on an experience of corporeal fragmentation - Poiana goes on to suggest that within Leiris’s oeuvre as a whole this leads to an experience of “le corps morcelé”. And this is evidenced most clearly, he suggests, through Leiris’s “morbid disposition and pathological fear of sexual relationships”.<sup>153</sup> For Poiana, the subject described in Leiris’s autobiographical writings is afflicted by “a chronic sense of vulnerability that is explicitly related to (his) physical and psychological state”,<sup>154</sup> resulting in a conflictual relationship with women and perception of the other as a threat. Indeed, so accentuated is Leiris’s sense of his own inadequacies that he at one point proclaims to “Se détester soi-même jusqu’à vouloir presque

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<sup>150</sup> Catherine Masson, *L'autobiographie et ses aspects théâtraux chez Michel Leiris* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995), p. 58.

<sup>151</sup> Peter Poiana, ‘Aggressivity in Self Writing: Colette’s *Etoile Vesper* and Michel Leiris’ *Fourbis*’, *French Forum*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 2005), 121-136 (p. 121).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

mourir (tout en tremblant devant le moindre geste de menace esquissé par le monde extérieur)” (AH, 158). A particularly striking example of this acute experience of corporeal inadequacy is illustrated in an incident to which I have alluded briefly already in Chapter One, in which, following a failed sexual encounter, Leiris harms himself in an endeavour to wreak revenge on his body: “voulant m’en punir, je m’étais mis nu dans ma salle de bains et m’étais griffé le corps entier à coups de ciseaux, avec une sorte d’enragée et voluptueuse application” (AH, 94-5).

In line with this association between suffering and desire, Leiris draws an extended association throughout his writings between the erotic and the phenomenon of the *corrida*. This association finds its clearest expression in two dedicated studies: firstly, his philosophical meditation on the significance of the bullfight, ‘Miroir de la tauromachie’ (1938) and, secondly, the preface to *L’Age d’homme*, which is titled, ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’ (1946). In these studies, Leiris presents bullfighting and eroticism as two of a limited set of privileged experiences that offer the modern-day subject the opportunity to engage in a rare experience of sacred self-confrontation. One of the key elements that draws these two experiences together for the author is the aspect of ceremony involved in each. Far more than a “simple boucherie”, Leiris explains, bullfighting derives its particular value from a unique association of danger and ceremony: “l’ordonnance de la *corrida* (cadre rigide imposé à une action où, théâtralement, le hasard doit apparaître dominé) est technique de combat et, en même temps, cérémonial” (AH, 21). And it is in precisely these terms that Leiris envisages the erotic relationship between desiring (male) subject and desired (female) other:

À propos de l’acte amoureux [...] j’emploierais volontiers l’expression ‘terrain de vérité’ par laquelle, en tauromachie, l’on désigne l’arène, c’est-à-dire le lieu du combat. De même que le *matador* ou ‘tueur’ donne la mesure de sa valeur quand il se

trouve face au taureau seul à seul [...] de même dans le commerce sexuel, enfermé seul à seul avec la partenaire qu'il s'agit de dominer, l'homme se découvre en face d'une réalité. (AH, 69-70)

For Leiris, the erotic encounter thus represents a unique arena in which the desiring (male) subject, like the toreador at the point of his direct confrontation with the bull, enters into a courageous and hazardous moment of self-confrontation. Like the *corrida*, Leiris goes on to explain, what sets the erotic experience apart from other experiences is its unique capacity to combine union with combat: “cette beauté surhumaine, reposant sur le fait qu’entre le tueur et son taureau [...] il y a union en même temps que combat – ainsi qu’il en est de l’amour et des cérémonies” (AH, 75).

### *The Judith-Lucretia pairing*

Leiris's conception of the relationship between male desiring subject and female desired object as a combative confrontation between victim and victor equal to that of the encounter between bull and toreador is most clearly expressed, within his autobiographical writings, through his presentation of – and engagement with – a series of female figures gleaned from the spheres of mythology, fiction, and biblical reference. While a number of examples might be cited here – from the Medusa, to Cleopatra, Delilah and Hoffmann's three heroines, Olympia, Giulietta and Antonia – Leiris's focus is on the central pairing of Judith and Lucretia, as depicted in Lucas Cranach the Elder's diptych of 1536. Encapsulating the author's polarised representation of woman around the poles of aggressive sexual other and passive *soeur consolatrice*, which might be seen to stand in parallel with Gadda's dualistic categorisation of women as base sexualised object versus idealised other, Judith and Lucretia provide the author with an overarching framework around which to categorise the female. In

Cranach's diptych, Judith and Lucretia figure on opposite sides of the tableau, in a binary arrangement that encourages the viewer to see them as diametrically opposed. And indeed, embodying a seemingly clearly defined opposition between the experiences of victor and victim, violence and submission, the pair offers Leiris a binary symbolic framework around which to structure his own concrete relationships with women and experiences within the sphere of sexuality at large; "grâce à cette double qualité d'être chaste et d'être meurtrière, ces deux images de femmes sanglantes qui sont aujourd'hui dressées dans mon esprit: Lucrèce la froide et Judith la manieuse d'épée" (AH, 60). While he later goes on to refute the existence of any such a clear-cut divide, Leiris at first encourages the reader to ascribe to this polarised vision, laying stress on the opposition between "ces deux aspects de l'éternel féminin, ma Lucrèce et ma Judith" (AH, 142). Drawing a distinction between those women who represent a threat to his own subjectivity and those who merely inspire pity in him, he proceeds to establish two clear-cut typologies of the female: "s'il y a des femmes qui m'attirent dans la mesure où elles m'échappent ou bien me paralysent et me font peur – telle Judith – il y a aussi de douces Lucrèces qui sont mes soeurs consolatrices" (AH, 152). One might note a parallel here with the corresponding contrast in Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio*, which I shall discuss in greater depth in the following section, between the sexualised, aggressive figure of Virginia and the idealised, untouchable Liliana. However, just as Liliana quickly comes to stand at the very centre of a complex web of transgression that permeates the entire narrative, so too is the strict opposition between Judith and Lucretia quickly debunked by Leiris's recognition that each of these seemingly polarised types of woman represents an equal threat to him as male subject, albeit in differing manners. For while the female figure corresponding to the category of Judith poses a direct, concrete threat to the desiring male subject through her aggressive sexual agency, women belonging to the

category of Lucretia threaten the male subject through an equally dangerous destabilisation of the latter's position as dominant desiring subject:

Étant toujours ou au-dessous ou au-dessus des événements concrets, je reste prisonnier de cette alternative: le monde, objet réel, qui me domine et me dévore (telle Judith) par la souffrance et par la peur, ou bien le monde, pur phantasme, qui se dissout entre mes mains, que je détruis (telle Lucrèce poignardée) sans jamais parvenir à le posséder. (AH, 201)

As Camilla Krone points out, in the face of the weak, docile female other embodied by the figure of Lucretia, "Leiris finds no motivation to be a man, and believes that his successes with these women undermine the manhood he strives for more than they prove it."<sup>155</sup>

It is on the figure of Judith, however, that Leiris dwells at greatest length in *L'Age d'homme*. Described by the author as "la figure autour de laquelle cristallisent des images qui eurent une influence décisive sur ma vie" (AH, 89), Judith represents the central pivot around which he seeks to order his experiences in the sphere of the erotic, as well as providing an emblematic depiction of the association between female sexuality and aggression. Pictured in Cranach's diptych in the immediate aftermath of her decapitation of Holophernes, Judith, like Gadda's Virginia, constitutes the ultimate symbol of threatening female sexuality:

Judith, parée d'un collier aussi lourd qu'une chaîne de bagnard [...] Judith placide et ne paraissant déjà plus songer à la boule barbue qu'elle tient à la main comme un bourgeon phallique qu'elle aurait pu couper rien qu'en serrant ses basses lèvres au moment où les écluses d'Holopherne s'ouvriraient ou encore que, ogresse en plein

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<sup>155</sup> Camilla Krone, 'Failed masculinity in Leiris's *L'Age d'homme* or Men's Studies *avant la lettre*' (*Dalhousie French Studies*, 58, 2002), 54-65 (p. 61).

délire, elle aurait détaché du gros membre de l'homme aviné (et peut-être vomissant)  
d'un soudain coup de dents. (AH, 143)

Calmly detached from her victim, she figures as the ideal embodiment of the intrinsic “rapport entre la peur et la beauté” (AH, 153) so central to Leiris's approach to the sphere of the female, an association that is evoked perfectly in the Apollinaire poem on the subject of which Leiris has a heated argument with his father: “Cette femme était si belle / Qu'elle me faisait peur” (AH, 154). In the original biblical account of Judith's story, Judith is an honourable young widow driven to wreak revenge on behalf of her community when her village comes under siege by Nebuchadnezzar's army. Drawing upon her sexuality as a means of duping Holophernes into her confidence, she proceeds to kill her victim in a brutal and calculated act of vengeance. It was in fact with the figure of Judith, Theodore Ziolkowski has noted, that “for the first time a woman took an active role in the erotic battle between the sexes”.<sup>156</sup> Of the multiple reconfigurations that have been made of her story over the centuries, moreover, Theodore Ziolkowski suggests that the most pertinent for Leiris is Freud's ‘The Taboo of Virginity’, published in 1918.<sup>157</sup> In this paper, which draws upon anthropological sources of investigation, Freud examines the taboo associated with woman's loss of her virginity, citing what Ziolkowski describes as the “primitive fear of blood and the neuroses connected with first-time events as the main reasons for this taboo.”<sup>158</sup> Perhaps the most significant aspect of Freud's study for our reading of Leiris, he nonetheless suggests, is the former's insistence on the importance of the sense of violation suffered by the female figure at the hands of the male victor, which instils in her a deep-seated desire for vengeance against her male aggressor: “While the man is governed by the taboo, the woman responds by

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<sup>156</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski, ‘Re-visions, fictionalisations and postfigurations: the myth of Judith in the twentieth century’, *The Modern Languages Review*, 104 (2009), 311-332 (p. 315).

<sup>157</sup> Freud, ‘The Taboo of Virginity’ in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1997), pp. 60-76.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p. 319.

hating the man who violates the taboo and desiring vengeance for her defloration.”<sup>159</sup> On the basis of the symbolic association drawn by Freud between beheading and castration, Judith’s act of vengeance is thus to be understood as the castration of her male aggressor, constituting a brutal assumption of revenge. Freud’s analysis presents clear similarities with Leiris’s representation of the figure of Judith. As he explains in *L’Age d’homme*, “j’arrive à un peu mieux comprendre ce que signifie pour moi la figure de Judith, image de ce châtiment à la fois craint et désiré: la castration” (AH, 202), pointing once again to an overarching fascination with the intrinsic connection between eroticism and suffering. This is well illustrated by the following comment, in which he muses on the connection between the notions of sadism, masochism and the erotic, dismissing any notion of a form of love that does not involve an element of suffering:

D’une manière générale, sadisme, masochisme, etc., ne constituent pas pour moi des ‘vices’, mais seulement des moyens d’atteindre une plus intense réalité. En amour, tout me paraît toujours trop gratuit, trop anodin, trop dépourvu de gravité; il faudrait que la sanction de la déconsidération sociale, du sang ou de la mort intervienne, pour que le jeu en vaille réellement la chandelle. (AH, 197-8)

Like Gadda, whose fictional texts are filled with a series of female figures that inspire simultaneous feelings of fear and desire in the male subject, Leiris cannot conceive of desire without suffering. Yet, just as Gadda’s Liliana ultimately comes to figure as the centre of a complex web of association between Eros and crime, it is not only Judith who wields this form of power over her male adversary. Rather, while Lucretia would appear to represent the polar opposite of Judith, symbolising passive female submission in contrast with Judith’s

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<sup>159</sup> Ziolkowski, p. 319.

ferocious sexual agency, Leiris is quick to dismantle any such a clear-cut opposition by noting that their actions are in fact directly comparable:

Lucrèce, appuyant au centre de sa blanche poitrine, entre deux seins merveilleusement durs et ronds [...] la lame effilée d'un poignard au bout duquel perlent déjà, comme le don le plus intime pointe à l'extrémité d'un sexe, quelques gouttes de sang, et s'apprêtant à annuler l'effet du viol qu'elle a subi, par un geste pareil; celui qui enfoncera dans une chaude gaine de chair et pour une mort sanglante l'arme bandée au maximum, telle la virilité inexorable du violeur quand elle était entrée de force dans l'orifice béant déjà entre ses cuisses, douce plaie rose qui peu d'instant après restituait la libation à pleines gorgées, exactement de même que la blessure – plus profonde, plus méchante aussi, mais peut-être encore plus enivrante – faite par le poignard laisserait jaillir, du fin fond de Lucrèce pâmée ou expirante, un flot de sang... (AH, 142-3)

While Lucretia would on the surface appear to represent the prototypical submissive victim, any such view is therefore dismantled here by Leiris through the establishment of a direct parallel between her violation by Sextus Tarquin, and the violent agency of her suicide. Casting the sword in overtly phallic terms as “l'arme bandée au maximum”, Leiris draws a direct link between the two moments of penetration. For, rather than a passive act of submission, her suicide is presented in terms of an aggressive act of retribution designed to “annuler l'effet du viol qu'elle a subi, par un geste pareil”.

In line with the equation between eroticism and the ritualised practice of the bullfight, then, which is grounded on the author's belief that the worth of any activity is proportionate to the degree of danger that it involves for the participating subject, Leiris finds himself drawn to women who pose some form of threat to him as desiring subject:

“pratiquement, si la femme avec laquelle je vis ne m’inspire pas une sainte *terreur* (j’écris ‘sainte’ parce qu’ici intervient nettement la notion du sacré), je tends à remplacer cette terreur absente par la *pitié*” (AH, 151). Another such figure is to be found in Cleopatra, who represents the ideal fusion of the figures of Judith and Lucretia for Leiris, as well as the perfect embodiment of “le concept de la *fée*, ou de la femme telle qu’à la fois je la souhaitais et redoutais, enchanteresse capable de toutes les douceurs mais recélant aussi tous les dangers, comme la courtisane” (AH, 138). Alongside Cleopatra, Leiris also locates this form of threatening female sexuality in the Medusa, another key emblem of female aggression. For Leiris, the Medusa figures as the archetypal emblem of the desired female other, since she not only represents a threat to the desiring subject, but is also susceptible - in accordance with the Surrealist image of woman<sup>160</sup> - to unending transformation. In *Orphée, Médusé*, Roland Simon describes her as “Séduisante dans certaines variantes, horriblement laides dans d’autres, alliant l’horreur à la fascination.”<sup>161</sup> It is in the chapter headed ‘Tragiques’, in *L’Age d’homme*, however, that Leiris explores the symbolic significance ascribed to her in greatest depth. Rather than explicitly narrating the tale of the Medusa, Leiris elects here to present his reader firstly with the dictionary entry from the *Nouveau Larousse Illustré* on Géricault’s painting, *Le radeau de la Méduse*, and, secondly, with a brief excerpt from Goethe’s *Faust*. Goethe stresses the dangers associated with the desired female other when Mephistopheles

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<sup>160</sup> Simultaneously embodying a series of opposing states, for the Surrealists woman represented the ultimate pluralistic being, occupying a unique and powerful in between position. One key figure in this light is the mythological figure of Mélusine: part-woman, part serpent, Mélusine embodies this feminine power to break down oppositions, described by Beaujour as “une nouvelle unité au-delà de la fragmentation: la résolution des antinomies” (Michel Beaujour, *Terreur et rhétorique: Breton, Bataille, Leiris, Paulhan, Barthes & Cie, Autour du surréalisme* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1999), p. 104). This is further illustrated, within Surrealist discourse, through the importance accorded to the figures of the angel, who constitutes the very emblem of contradiction for Breton. Patricia Allmer offers an interesting study of the significance accorded to angels within Surrealist discourse, suggesting that through their unique position between heaven and earth, they both “overcome and deconstruct the paths of Western patriarchal binary thought, its hierarchical structure, replacing stability with flux, singularity with multiplicity, separation with transgression, and being with becoming and transformation” (Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy*, p. 12).

<sup>161</sup> Roland Simon, *Orphée, Médusé: autobiographies de Michel Leiris* (Lausanne: Éditions L’Age d’homme, 1984), p. 27.

warns Faust that “c’est une figure magique [...] Il n’est pas bon de la rencontrer; son regard fixe engourdit le sang de l’homme et le change presque en pierre. As-tu déjà entendu parler de la Méduse ? [...] chacun croit y retrouver celle qu’il aime”, to which Faust responds, “Quelles délices... et quelles souffrances” (AH, 43). Assuming an endless series of “formes changeantes” and thus capable of adapting to the ever-changing desires of the male gaze, the Medusa thus holds a unique power over the desiring subject.

Mephistopheles’s warning also highlights a further key aspect of both Gadda’s and Leiris’s conceptions of the question of desire: the problematic relationship between *seeing* and *desiring*. Since, according to the legend, any direct sighting of the Medusa by the desiring subject would automatically bring about his immediate and fatal demise – “son regard fixe engourdit le sang de l’homme et le change presque en pierre” (AH, 43) – the Medusa illustrates the self-destructive nature of the actual *fulfilment* of desire itself, providing an ideal embodiment of the association between desire and death (as expressed here through the state of petrification). Just as any true experience of the communifying sacred proves unattainable, therefore, so too is the relationship between male desiring subject and female desired other grounded on an essential division between the individual self and other: “l’on retrouve, dans l’amour, pareille impossibilité”, Leiris explains, in relation to the connection between the bullfight and erotic love, “car la communion totale de deux êtres ne pourrait s’effectuer que dans la mort” (Miroir, 44). This coincidence between sight (as the vector of desire) and petrification takes on further significance when considered within the context of the associative network at work in Leiris’s narrative between eroticism and antiquity: “Depuis longtemps, je confère à ce qui est *antique* un caractère franchement voluptueux. Les constructions de marbre m’attirent par leur température glaciale et leur rigidité” (AH, 56). As part of his extended correlation between eroticism and the bullfight, Leiris suggests that it is only by entering into a confrontation with the other involving a complete, self-destructive

dissolution of the barriers between self and other, that the subject can achieve the sought-after experience of unity that represents the end-point of desire itself.<sup>162</sup>

*‘Toujours en état d’infériorité’: the disempowered male subject*

While the relationship between desiring male subject and desired female object is therefore consistently presented by Leiris in terms of a confrontation between victim and victor, he struggles throughout his writings to establish in which pole of this power dynamic he himself belongs. Consistently with the experiences of Gadda’s series of male doppelgangers, who are subject, in the face of a threatening female other, to what Sbragia has described as a “pervasive male inferiority complex”, Leiris grapples throughout his writings with an acute sense of his own gendered inadequacy. For Camilla Krone, who has written specifically on the question of gender in Leiris’s writings, this leads the author to engage in an ultimately unsuccessful endeavour to use writing as a means of re-inscribing his own masculinity. For Krone, this attempt to consolidate his own masculinity through writing can in fact be seen to constitute the prime motive behind his autobiographical project as a whole: “[Leiris] is involved in a constant and unsuccessful struggle to fend off femininity as he strives to discover and define his truly masculine self.”<sup>163</sup> Indeed, Leiris presents his reader with a multitude of biographical instances in *L’Age d’homme* during which his own

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<sup>162</sup> A further parallel emerges here with Leiris’s Surrealist novel, *Aurora*, in which an intrinsic connection is drawn between the act of writing (the explicit aim of which is to transform the author into a solidified statue), and the desire to be woman’s victim. Jeffrey Mehlman has elaborated at length on a particular scene of *Aurora*, in this light, in which the protagonist is portrayed as being petrified by Aurora, who, he notes, is “herself associated with the “pierre philosophale” and its capacity for metamorphosis.” The text therefore tends, he suggests “towards the conclusion of “an ambivalent dream (Aurora-Horror) of petrification by the ideal woman. To the extent that poetry partakes of dream (wish-fulfilment), we may say that for Leiris the fantasy of poetic “creation” is closely linked to a fantasy (desire) of himself as the Medusa’s victim.” See: Jeffrey Mehlman, *A structural study of autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Levi-Strauss* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 80.

<sup>163</sup> Krone, p. 57.

masculinity is called into question, challenging the established gender dynamic between active male desiring subject and passive female desired object. One might note, for example, his reference to Kay's predilection for calling him 'Micheline', the name selected by his mother for the daughter she had wished for and yet never had: "Feignant de me courtiser, Kay m'appelait de mon nom féminisé – Micheline – prénom que projetait de me donner ma mère alors que, grosse de moi, elle souhaitait d'avoir une fille" (AH, 174). Equally, when discussing the importance he would attribute to the worlds of theatre and the opera as a child, Leiris recalls how whenever he and his brothers used to act out scenes from their favourite plays, he was always assigned the female roles. In a performance of *Le Vaisseau fantôme* (The Flying Dutchman), for example, he recollects that, "étant le plus jeune, j'étais chargé du seul rôle féminin, celui de Senta la fille du pêcheur; mon frère aîné faisait le Hollandais, et l'un de ses amis – celui qui m'avait donné le voilier – le vieux Daland père de Senta" (AH, 49). However, while on the one hand Leiris laments this exclusion from the sphere of masculinity, he openly confesses, at other points, that it in fact corresponded to a life-long *preference* on his part for the role of the subjugated, or feminised, victim: "Mon rôle me plaisait, de même que tous les rôles de 'souffre-douleur' qui m'étaient invariablement dévolus dans mes jeux avec mes frères; ainsi, à cette campagne où j'eus la révélation de ma virilité dans une clairière, jouant aux Peaux-Rouges c'était toujours moi qui faisais le prisonnier" (AH, 49). Numerous other examples of this systematic assumption of the role of the (feminised) victim, forming part of what might be set in terms of an overarching process of male disempowerment akin to that of Gadda's autobiographical male figures, can be found within his autobiographical project. One might also cite, for instance, the chapter entitled 'Les tablettes sportives' in *Fourbis*, the second volume of *La Règle du jeu*, in which Leiris provides a long list of his sporting heroes as a child. In this chapter, Leiris idealises the figure of the sportsman to such a degree as to grant him an almost inhuman position: "L'on dirait

que les protagonistes de pareils événements agissent dans un monde à part” (F, RJ, 360). This is then further heightened by the association that he draws between sporting spectacles and collective ceremonial practices, which he sees as imbued with a form of mystical power; “A l’instar du faiseur de religion, du grand révolutionnaire, ou du grand conquérant il me semblerait que le champion ait un destin.” “A certains égards”, he concludes, “le champion rappelle le magicien et, très particulièrement, le chaman des sociétés qu’on est convenu de qualifier d’archaïques” (F, RJ, 362). Yet just as Gadda frequently models his semi-autobiographical doubles *against* a contrasting series of prototypical figures of male virility, Leiris is quick to draw a firm division between these sporting emblems of masculinity and himself, a contrast which he sets in terms of the life-long champion versus the underdog:

...je m’habituai très tôt [...] à n’ambitionner que le rôle du *second*. [...] Le *challenger* plutôt que le champion, le méconnu plutôt que la gloire établie, l’élève bien doué plutôt que le premier de la classe, le bras droit dont le chef ne saurait se passer plutôt que ce chef lui-même: un goût, en somme, pour celui qui [...] n’a pas la place qu’il mérite ou pour le personnage distingué et situé en bon rang mais à quelque distance des sommets. (F, RJ, 371-2)

Further substantiating this sense of his own (gendered) inadequacy, he proceeds to explain that this preference for second position goes hand in hand with a need to feel protected by a stronger, dominant other: “Un certain besoin de me sentir protégé, de me mettre sous l’égide est vraisemblablement l’un de mes traits les plus constants” (F, RJ, 373). Hence when he watches an opera by Offenbach, aged around twelve, he finds himself identifying not with the hero, Jules Barbier, but rather with the figure of Nichlausse, the friend and confidant of Hoffmann. Openly confessing his lack of courage and incapacity to engage in the confrontation with danger envisaged in ‘De la littérature comme une tauromachie’, Leiris acknowledges that, “Je n’ai copié mes héros que dans ce qu’ils ont de plus facile à imiter.

Jamais je ne me pendrai, ni m'empoisonnerai, ni me ferai tuer en duel" (AH, 155). This identification with the figure of the victim is further underscored in *L'Age d'homme* by Leiris's recollection of his appreciation of the image of a wounded Napoleon in a painting that he sees during a family visit to the Palace of Versailles: "Napoléon blessé à Ratisbonne". Leiris goes on to recount how the image inspired him to re-enact the scene as a child, once again assuming the position of the injured victim awaiting the aid of others:

... je tendais vers le sol un de mes pieds déchaussés (ainsi que je l'avais vu faire sur la toile à Napoléon, du haut de son cheval) comme si, surmontant la souffrance, et la lèvre seulement boursouflée d'une moue dédaigneuse, j'attendais avec calme qu'on pansât ma blessure. (AH, 107-8)

And, like Gadda's series of autobiographical doubles, it is in precisely this role that Leiris imagines himself in the majority of his relationships with women. In line with the extended association between the erotic relationship and the tauromachic combat described above, Leiris confesses in *L'Age d'homme* that, "je suis, devant une femme, toujours en état d'infériorité [...] ce n'est jamais à moi qu'échoit le rôle normal du mâle qui conquiert mais toujours moi qui représente, dans cette joute de deux forces, l'élément dominé" (AH, 158). The clearest expression of this experience of gendered inferiority in the face of a stronger female other, within *L'Age d'homme*, is to be found in Leiris's description of his relationship with Kay, his first significant sexual partner. Leiris meets Kay during the immediate post-war period, a time which he recalls as being filled with 'surprises parties', jazz, and excessive drinking. Several years older than Leiris and in the process of getting a divorce, Kay quickly assumes the role of an 'initiatrice' for him, initiating his entry into the sphere of sexuality. And indeed while the relationship constitutes a key step in his initiation into *l'âge d'homme* (it is with her that he loses his virginity), it is Kay who occupies the traditional masculine role throughout their affair, a power dynamic which is established from the beginning of the

relationship. It is thus that when introducing Kay to the reader, Leiris stresses the almost protective role she assumed when they met, by helping him overcome a crippling sense of *vide* from which he is suffering at the time: “Je souffrais d’un vide si grand que je n’imaginai même pas qu’il pût jamais être comblé. C’est ce que m’apporta Kay, pourtant, au moins durant les premiers jours, et il est possible, après tout, qu’une vie vaille d’être vécue si l’on a eu, même pour un court laps de temps, la sensation de ce vide comblé” (AH, 171). This is reiterated in the following assertion, in which Kay is seen to assume the role of the saviour or protector: “Pendant huit jours je triomphai: le monde n’était plus à sa place, j’avais trouvé la Fée par qui tout était transformé, j’éprouvais la sensation d’une ivresse spirituelle inouïe” (AH, 175). The sense of passivity to which Leiris confesses in his relationship with Kay is further heightened by the sense of directionlessness he claims to have been experiencing during this period, having reached an age at which he was expected to embark upon a concrete career path and yet finding himself entirely without a calling or direction. Leiris presents himself as occupying an entirely passive role, awaiting transformation by a dominant other: “je ne me destinai à rien, vivant dans la simple attente d’une aventure sentimentale qui transfigurerait mon existence, me tirant de cet ennui profond que n’animait aucune velléité de vocation” (AH, 163). In line with this conception of Kay as saviour figure, Leiris also casts their relationship as an occurrence existing outside of the sphere of the mundane everyday. The pair meet, he informs his reader, at one of the ‘surprises parties’ that are in vogue at the time, and which are characterised by a degree of freneticism that sets them apart from the mundanity of everyday life: “On buvait beaucoup”, he explains, “on flirtait ferme et souvent plus, avec l’étonnante sensation de liberté que l’on tirait du fait de se trouver généralement en inconnu” (AH, 160). Their encounter takes place “sous [l]e signe trépidant du jazz” (AH, 162), which, alongside alcohol and immersion into the crowd, represents one of a few privileged means of reducing the distance between self and other within the context of the

everyday: “le meilleur élément pour donner leur vrai sens à ces fêtes, un sens *religieux*, avec communion par la danse, l’érotisme latent ou manifesté, et la boisson, moyen le plus efficace de niveler le fossé qui sépare les individus les uns des autres” (AH, 161). For Leiris, this relationship was thus initially envisaged as a means of escaping both his own limitations and the mundanity of his everyday existence. Suggesting that her arrival in his life was the result of “des circonstances [...] proprement *merveilleuses*” (AH, 171), Leiris describes Kay as “un ange venu pour me sauver” likened, in his imagination, to “un portrait de l’impératrice Eugénie” (AH, 171). This conception of woman as a protecting ‘saviour’ figure is reiterated in the following description, in *Frêle bruit*, of the figure of Cosmage as the symbol:

... de ce que, fût-ce sous le couvert de tentatives intellectuelles ou passionnelles de libération, je n’ai sans doute jamais cessé de rechercher comme une île où je serais protégé: le giron maternel que peuvent représenter une femme, un pays qu’on aime ou une idéologie, voire le trou noir où vous plonge – vrai retour au sommeil fœtal – un semi-suicide par les barbituriques? (FB, RJ, 855)

One might note a parallel here with the following assertion by Gadda, in which he describes the continuation into adulthood of a quasi-maternal conception of the desired female other:

Certo è che nella nostra infanzia noi percepiamo le donne *amate* (governanti, maestre, signorine, ecc.: vedi anche le *Confessions* di Rousseau) un po’ sotto la specie *materna*, o baliatica, o magistrale: e quel nostro amore è, da prima, curiosità. Tali caratteristiche dell’eros infantile permangono, talvolta, nell’eros dei cosiddetti adulti: la curiosità in modo particolare. Il mito stesso di Venere e Adone, il favolello ariostesco dell’Angelica e di Medoro, hanno un innegabile e delicatissimo semi-contenuto edipico: l’amante è un po’ madre-amante. (VM, SGF I, 609)

While, in line with this categorisation of the female other in a quasi-maternal, protective role, Leiris initially considers his relationship with Kay as an opportunity to overcome, or at least temporarily escape, his own lack of direction and sense of 'vide', it in fact gives rise to an acute sense of disempowerment on his part. Like the prototypical Gaddian male, who suffers a crippling sense of inferiority in the face of a stronger female other, Leiris undergoes a loss of agency when he is with Kay that he experiences as at once exhilarating and destructive. One example of this can be found, for instance, in his account of an incident that occurs when, out walking with Kay late one evening, they are pursued by a drunkard who proceeds to assail Kay with a barrage of lewd comments. Leiris takes the attack personally, making a half-hearted attempt to stand up to the assailant. However, when he finds himself confronted with actual physical threats, his courage fails him and he has to be saved by Kay, leading to an acute sense of humiliation on his part:

Je me retournai et l'interpellai, avec une attitude probablement comique de jeune bourgeois qui se juge offensé par la grossièreté d'un travailleur manuel. Furieux, l'homme marcha vers moi, balançant ses gros poings, et instinctivement je reculai. Pensant qu'il allait me faire un mauvais parti, Kay s'interposa, menaçant l'homme de son parapluie. Les choses en restèrent là, mais je fus atrocement humilié. (AH, 179)

A parallel might be identified here with the experience of Gildo Pessina, the semi-autobiographical protagonist of Gadda's *La meccanica*, whose physical weakness and passivity set him in stark opposition to the virile male figure of Franco Velaschi, whose masculinity, military courage and adoration by his mother establish him as a direct fictional double for Gadda's brother Enrico.

Leiris's disgrace on this occasion at having to be 'saved' by Kay is then heightened by another, similar incident during which, walking home from Kay's house one evening, he

is assailed by a group of individuals who threaten him with a revolver and then proceed to rob him of all of his valuables. When he reports the incident to the police, Leiris once again becomes a target of ridicule, in a scene that might be seen stand in parallel with the investigation of the highly feminised figure of Angeloni in *Quer pasticciaccio*: “‘Des petits voyous... Vous avez eu peur de leur revolver? Il n’était même pas chargé, leur revolver!’”.

Leiris again suffers a blow to his residual sense of his own virility here - “Encore une fois, je me sentis humilié” - that affects him so strongly as to lead to his development of a phobia at the mere prospect of making the journey home from Kay’s house alone on foot: “bien que chaque fois je m’en voulusse de ne pas revenir à pied, de ne pas être affranchi de toute crainte [...] par mon amour pour Kay” (AH, 180).

While he initially envisages his relationship with Kay as a form of ‘salvation’, a means by which to overcome the weaknesses of his own character, he is in fact subjected to a crippling experience of disempowerment. And it is in an attempt to punish himself for his resultant lack of virility that he commits his first act of self-harm: “enfermé dans la salle de bains, j’ai pris des ciseaux et me suis griffé pour me punir” (AH, 181). Leiris comes to the conclusion, as a result of these experiences, that he is himself both incapable and unworthy of love itself: “Et, de plus en plus, prenait corps en moi cette idée que, puisque mon amour ne faisait pas bon marché de telles vétilles, c’est que j’étais incapable d’aimer et, trop lâche, indigne même d’être aimé” (AH, 181). One is reminded here of Gioanola’s assertion, in relation to the failed representation of desire put forward within Gadda’s writings, that “essere inadatti a vivere è lo stesso che essere inadatti ad amare”.<sup>164</sup>

Far from an ideal, exhilarating relationship of ‘unity’, then, Leiris’s concrete experiences in the sphere of sexuality in fact leave him crippled by a debilitating sense of

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<sup>164</sup> Elio Gioanola, *L’uomo dei topazi: interpretazione psicanalitica dell’opera di C. E. Gadda* (Milan: Librex, 1987), p. 63.

anguish and inferiority. And one means by which he seeks to counter this experience of his own gendered disempowerment is through an act of theatricalisation. Faced with this assault upon his masculinity, Leiris responds, in his encounters with Kay, by seeking to transform the issue of gender into a playful, and hence controllable, performance. In his account of an evening that he and Kay spend together in the early stages of their relationship, for instance, he describes how they decide to dress up in each other's clothes, Kay donning his jacket while he puts on her dress, accessories, and even her make-up. The dismantlement of traditional gender roles brought about by this act of theatricalisation enables him to momentarily escape his own sense of inadequacy and lack of virility, and thereby acquire a degree of sexual agency which otherwise remains out of his grasp:

J'étais très fier d'être bien, plutôt que ridicule, en femme. Toute difficulté était pour moi levée, vu que, grâce à mon travestissement, je n'avais qu'à me laisser faire. Je trouvais aussi un plaisir positif dans cet apparent changement de sexe, qui transformait les rapports sexuels en jeu et y introduisant une espèce de légèreté. [...] nous passâmes insensiblement des baisers de théâtre à d'authentiques baisers. (AH, 174)

Through a theatrical overturning of their respective established gender roles, Leiris succeeds in transforming an encounter that he would otherwise have met with a debilitating sense of fear into a theatrical 'game', to be manipulated at his whim. It is only through the adoption of a self-protective theatrical persona, with which he is able to momentarily overcome the limitations of his own experience of gendered subjectivity and transmute his encounter with Kay into an act of ludic performativity, that Leiris is able to engage in a successful sexual encounter here: "parfois j'étais même obligé de feindre, et ce qui le plus réellement me grisait était le parfum de rouerie né de cette comédie que je jouais lucidement, sans être dupe de moi

à aucun degré” (AH, 176). Contrary to his normal relations with the female other, therefore, the control remains firmly in his hands throughout this staged encounter.

*The unfulfillability of desire, and the unattainable female other*

Contrary to Laure and Leiris’s conception of the erotic relationship as a sacred moment of ‘unity’ between desiring self and desired other, then, Leiris’s relationship with Kay illustrates the author’s difficulty entering into a successful, authentic relationship with the female other. For, far from his positive vision of the relationship, early on, as a means of eradicating the crippling sense of emptiness by which he is afflicted at the time, it in fact leaves him only further plagued by a heightened sense of his own gendered inadequacy and disempowerment. Woman, for Leiris, thus ultimately comes to stand not as an attainable object of desire but as a symbol of the unfulfillability of human desire itself. Hence he later deliberates, when pondering the significance of the figure of Emawayish, an Ethiopian member of the Gondar Zar cult with whom he falls in love during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission across Africa: “Il n’est pas question, certes, qu’elle soit *objet aimé*, seulement *substance de mélancolie*, image [...] de tout ce qui me manque [...] pénétré que je suis de l’idée qu’une muse est nécessairement une morte, une inaccessible ou une absente” (AH, 156). Indeed, while he struggles to get to the heart of the mode of being that Emawayish embodies – stressing the “frénésie intellectuelle avec laquelle [il] tente de pénétrer ce que pense Emawayish” – at no point does he succeed in escaping the position of detached, intellectual observer. Like the Gaddian male, then, who, as I shall explore, is forced into the position of distanced onlooker in the face of an incomprehensible female other, Leiris observes a mode of being in Emawayish to which he is himself firmly denied access. And at no point, indeed, does Leiris’s relationship with her ever become sexual, a situation that he attributes to a critical failing on his part: “impossibilité

même de jouir, faculté seulement de m’inventer de prestigieux tourments.” Like his relationship with Kay, Leiris’s ambivalent relationship with Emawayish points once again to the critical ‘vide’ that, for the author, underpins the experience of human desire itself. This is summed up when, after Leiris asks her to write her songs down for him, Emawayish questions, “*Est-ce que la poésie existe en France*”, followed by an interrogation to which Leiris can find no response: “*Est-ce que l’amour existe en France?*”.

As Lisa Neal explains in her analysis of the question of desire within Leiris’s thought, the author’s autobiographical project – as I shall explore in greater depth in Chapter Three – might be seen to be grounded on an intrinsically impossible attempt to eradicate this critical sense of void inherent to human experience: “L’acte de Leiris vise à faire acte de présence”, she explains, “mais, tout comme le langage qui le constitue, l’acte littéraire ne suffit jamais à abolir le manque. L’autobiographie est née et morte du même désir pour un objet auquel l’auteur tente vaillamment de s’unir.”<sup>165</sup> And, returning to the ambivalent relationship between *identification* and *possession* explored earlier, Neal goes on to suggest that, within Leiris’s writing, any attempt to bring about a total identification with, or rather possession of, the ‘sacred’ object of desire is shown to result in the destruction of the object of desire itself: “Si à la fin on pouvait atteindre l’objet de désir par une identification parfaite, on profanerait en quelque manière le sacré. L’objet ne serait plus étranger au sujet si les deux constituaient la même entité”. This is illustrated by Leiris’s assertion, as quoted earlier, that “l’amour [...] implique sa propre négation du fait que tenir le sacré c’est en même temps le profaner et finalement le détruire” (AH, 176). Given that any complete identification with the desired other must necessarily entail the latter’s destruction, Leiris explains that “la seule chance pratique de salut est l’amour voué à une créature assez personnelle pour que, malgré

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<sup>165</sup> Lisa Neal, ‘Le Couteau de l’Autre, Un Regard Sur Leiris’ (*Ça parle*, Vol. 1, No. 1, ‘The Representation of Otherness’, Fall 1985), 33-45 (p. 43).

l'incessant rapprochement, l'on n'atteigne jamais la limite de la connaissance que l'on peut en fait avoir d'elle" (AH, 177). This conception of the insatiability of human desire is also stressed by Gadda in the suggestion that, "l'amore è un divenire: non si potrebbe eternamente baciare una donna, senza stancarsi: si bacia, e poi si prosegue. Figli, prole, futuro. Il concetto statico di felicità ripugna con tutte le manifestazioni della vita, individuali e collettive, fisiologiche, psicologiche, morali, ecc." (MM, SVP, 643). Describing the process of human desire in terms of a series of stages - from the initial act of seeing the object of desire to the subsequent phases of identification, union, and, at the last instance, differentiation – Neal explains that,

... par le regard le sujet s'identifie d'une manière narcissique avec l'objet; le sujet désire ensuite l'objet (c'est-à-dire le reflet qu'il veut devenir); et enfin, avant que l'union parfait puisse avoir lieu, le sujet subit une violence par laquelle il est arraché avec force de l'accouplement. De cette mutilation résulte la différenciation du sujet qui regarde et l'objet qui le reflète, dès lors imparfaitement.<sup>166</sup>

In 'Miroir de la tauromachie', Leiris sets this in terms of a constant movement backwards and forwards between 'plénitude' and 'vide', involving a destructive experience of rupture for the desiring subject : "De même qu'on est passé du sentiment de plénitude à la désillusion, le vide ainsi produit, la perception d'un manque et tout ce qu'une telle lésion implique d'insupportable ne peut que provoquer une nouvelle aspiration déchirante" (Miroir, 45-46). Involving the temporary dissolution of the barriers between desiring subject and desired object followed by the sudden and violent reinstatement of difference, desire involves a constant alternation between contact and rupture. As illustrated by the phenomenon of the *corrida*, in which the toreador experiences "un bref paroxysme, qui ne dure pas plus qu'un

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<sup>166</sup> Neal, p. 39.

éclair et doit sa fulgurance au fait d’être situé au carrefour d’une union et d’une séparation, d’une accumulation et d’une expérience” (Miroir, 22), Leiris ultimately comes to recognise that any fulfilment of desire is ruled out by the ineradicable “lacune” or “fêlure” at the heart of human experience itself, representing “l’élément sinistre sous sa forme la plus haute: inachèvement obligatoire, gouffre que nous cherchons vainement à combler, brèche ouverte à notre perdition” (Miroir, 31).

Far from the sacred ‘bond’ envisaged together with Laure, then, for Leiris the relationship between desiring (male) subject and desired (female) subject, the source of a crippling sense of disempowerment for the desiring subject, is in fact grounded on its own impossibility. To what extent, then, might the experiences of Gadda’s series of autobiographical male doubles be seen to offer a corresponding representation of the dysfunctionality of desire itself, as well as an illustration of the intrinsic association, within the author’s mind, between woman and fear, Eros and crime?

## **Gadda**

### *Freud’s theory of ‘abnormal love’ and Gadda’s polarised women*

In the study ‘The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life’ (1912), Freud makes a distinction between what he terms ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ love. In opposition to its ‘abnormal’ equivalent, Freud explains that ‘normal’ love must be based on a balanced combination of the two equally fundamental poles of ‘sensuality’ and ‘affection’. In order to ensure what he describes as a “fully normal attitude in love”, he elaborates, “two currents of feelings have to unite – we may describe them as the tender affectionate feelings and the

sensual feelings.”<sup>167</sup> For Freud, ‘normal’ love must thus necessarily be based on a healthy combination of the sexual (the realm of the sensual) and the non-sexual (the realm of affection), with the failure to integrate these two poles necessarily entailing one of two equally detrimental outcomes. In the first case, where sensual love is absent and the relationship with the desired other is approached purely on the basis of feelings of affection, the experience of love takes on what Freud describes as an unnatural heavenly form, bereft of all trace of sensuality. This failure to incorporate the drive of sensuality results in what Freud understands as an “aim-inhibited sensuality”, consisting of an experience of what Santas has described as “sexual energy that has been diverted away from its original sexual aims”.<sup>168</sup> This approach is also typically associated with the notion of ‘sublimation’, as most commonly experienced in the love of abstract entities or ideas. For, while feelings of affection and devotion to abstract, non-physical objects are indeed an integral aspect of love, Freud insists that even such emotions are necessarily directed at the goal of sexual union, with any endeavour to eradicate such a drive representing an unnatural, and ultimately dangerous, diversion. Hence, he elaborates in the essay ‘Suggestion and Libido’,

The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists (and this is what is commonly called love, and what the poets sing of) in sexual love with sexual union as its aim. But we do not separate from this – what in any case has a share in the name ‘love’ – on the one hand self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas. Our justification lies in the fact that psychoanalytic treatment has taught us that all these tendencies are an expression of the same instinctual impulses; in relations between the sexes these impulses force their way towards sexual union,

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<sup>167</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, p. 49.

<sup>168</sup> Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, *Plato and Freud: Two Theories of Love* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 98.

and in other circumstances they are diverted from their aim or are prevented from reaching it, though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognisable (as in such features as the longing for proximity, and self-sacrifice).<sup>169</sup>

While apparently driven by disparate impulses, Freud suggests that all forms of love are ultimately directed toward the goal of sexual union. He proposes elsewhere, in 'Being in Love and Hypnosis', that one of the most common results of this fixation on affection at the expense of the sensual is a state of male psychic impotence, an experience that might be seen to stand at the base of both Leiris's and Gadda's approach to the sphere of sexuality: "A man of this kind will show a sentimental enthusiasm for women whom he deeply respects, but who do not excite him to sexual activities, and he will only be potent with other women whom he does not "love" and thinks little of or even despises."<sup>170</sup> The result of this prioritisation of the sensual, Freud explains, is the inception of a damaging association of sexual desire and feelings of hatred for the desired object. One is reminded here of the question posed by Elio Gioanola, in relation to Gadda's polarised representation of women around the typologies of base sexual object and idealised, sublime other: "Come si può sposare colei che [...] è rappresentante degradatissima della pura sessualità?".<sup>171</sup> In line with this division between the poles of sensuality and affection, a clear division is at work within both authors' writings, as already explored in relation to Leiris, between two distinct categories of women, corresponding to two divergent experiences of desire for the male subject. As Sbragia suggests, "the absence of a successful integration of affection and sexuality results in an obligatory idealisation or denigratory deformation of his female

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<sup>169</sup> Freud, 'Suggestion and Libido', in *Group Psychology*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>170</sup> Freud, 'Being in Love and Hypnosis', in *Group Psychology*, p. 73.

<sup>171</sup> Gioanola, *L'uomo dei topazi*, p. 79.

characters."<sup>172</sup> While within Leiris's writings this is illustrated most clearly by the dualistic categorisation of the female figure around the binary pairing of Judith and Lucretia discussed above, within Gadda's writings, this strategy of polarised categorisation finds its equivalent in a seemingly clear-cut opposition between the lower-class women that fill the backdrop of his fictional narratives, and the contrasting nucleus of idealised, unattainable female figures, who evoke feelings of affection, respect and guarded desire in the male desiring subject. Yet to what extent might this dichotomous opposition be complicated, as is the case for the seemingly clear-cut Judith-Lucretia pairing, by an *overarching* association between (female) sexuality and fear, Eros and crime?

In accordance with the dualistic Judith-Lucretia pairing, critics have tended to stress the clear-cut polarisation of Gadda's women around a number of diverging typologies. Sbragia, for example, presents this in terms of an opposition between the categories of the high and the low, suggesting that, "Female characters are polarised into "high" and "low" archetypes: woman as (threatening) sexual physicality and woman as idealised and untouchable sublimity."<sup>173</sup> Elio Gioanola also makes the case for this hierarchical dichotomy between the spheres of the high and the low, proposing that throughout the author's works, "Gadda costruisce le sue figure femminili non tanto in base a quel generico misoginismo che gli è stato subito ricostruito, ma a partire dalla fondamentale distinzione di una tipologia idealizzata e di una, al contrario, degradata."<sup>174</sup> Lucilla Sergiacomo has posited that Gadda's women are typecast around the classical angel/demon opposition, which she sets in terms of an opposition between the idealised, genteel figure of "la signorina" and the base stereotype of woman as sexualised "oggetto di desiderio", "l'eterno femminile" con le sue

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<sup>172</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 152.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>174</sup> Gioanola, *L'uomo dei topazi*, p 64.

degenerazioni.”<sup>175</sup> Within the context of an overarching opposition between Logos and Eros, Sergiacomo suggests that, within Gadda’s writings woman is the object of either sublimation or hatred: “Nella tradizione italiana, dunque, la donna assume nei secoli le sembianze della madre consolatrice e buona o si riduce a carnalità animalesca, oggetto di desiderio o di piacere o ancora diviene simbolo di astrazione pura, retorica impersonificazione della bellezza.”<sup>176</sup> Expanding on this dualistic categorisation of woman, Sbragia goes on, however, to note a further sub-division of the Gaddian woman *within* the category of the ‘low’. This is articulated through a division between the typology corresponding to the physically repulsive hag (as epitomised by Zamira) on the one hand, and that of the youthful, sexually vivacious female figure on the other (as represented, for instance, by the figures of Assunta and Virginia). As he explains, “Whether incarnated in grotesque hags or stupendous servants, the lower sphere of female sexuality is both transgressive and threatening.”<sup>177</sup>

As is the case for Leiris, however – for whom any clear-cut polarisation of woman is complicated, as discussed above, by the author’s ultimate realisation that “leurs deux gestes, apparemment distincts, étaient au fond identiques” (AH, 142) and that the two figures represent an equally dangerous form of threat to him as desiring male subject - any such a clear-cut categorisation of Gadda’s women into the opposing categories of threatening sexual being and idealised, sublimated other is arguably precluded by the overarching association at work within his thought between (female) sexuality and violence, woman and crime, which comes to encompass the entire sphere of the female, from the grotesque figure of Zamira to the ideal, sublimated Liliana.

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<sup>175</sup> Sergiacomo, p. 18.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>177</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 152.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the overarching association between sexuality and violence within Gadda's writings is to be found in the typology of woman as sexually voracious other, corresponding to the position occupied by Judith within Leiris's thought. Gadda's works are populated by a long series of sexually attractive, voluptuous female figures, ranging from Liliana's line of adopted nieces, to the host of maids, peasants and prostitutes that fill the backdrop of his narratives. Of all of his fictional works, however, the text that illustrates the importance of this particular female typology with greatest clarity is the semi-autobiographical novel *Quer pasticciaccio de via Merulana*. Within the course of the narrative, Gadda presents the reader with a plethora of female figures defined first and foremost by their sexuality. And one of the most striking of these figures is to be found in the sexually voracious figure of Virginia. Before being replaced by their subsequent protégé, Assuntina (known to all as Tina), Virginia was the Balducci's adopted niece, one of a series of girls adopted by Liliana in a failed attempt to satisfy her thwarted desire for a child. For the overtly autobiographical Commissario Francesco Ingravallo, Virginia figures as the very epitome of exuberant female sexuality: "La Virginia! (l'immagine fu un lampo di gloria, un repentino fulgore nella tenebra) [...] E le serve!" (QP, RR II, 23). Perfectly embodying the overarching association between desire and fear that defines Leiris's depiction of the figure of Judith, Virginia is looked upon by male characters as both an object of desire and a fearful threat:

La terza, la Virginia! Don Lorenzo abbassò le palpebre, guardando a terra, benché uomo fatto, poi levò gli occhi ar cielo mezzo seconno come a dì: nun fatemi parlà!  
[...] La sua procace bellezza, la sua salute, de diavola de corallo dentro de quela pelle

d'avorio, i suoi occhi! davvero c'era da crede che avesse ipnotizzato marito e moje...

(QP, RR II, 134-5)

The suggested connection here between female sexuality and a form of maleficent witchcraft is a recurrent one within Gadda's representation of women. Suggestions of Virginia's latent sadism are further stressed in the following proclamation, for example, in which her statuesque physical beauty is seen to go hand in hand with a threatening form of female malevolence:

Del resto, ammappela! du fianchi in gloria, du seni de marmo: du zinne toste che ce voleva lo scarpello: con quel dar di spalle a ogni tratto, superba, e quello spregio der labbro, come a di: merda a voi! Sissignori. Dopo mute ore la bizzarra protervia, la crudele risata: con quei denti bianchi a triangolo come d'uno squalo, come dovesse laniare er core a quarcuno. Quegli occhi! da sotto le frange nere delle cigli: che sfiammavano a un tratto in una lucidità nera, sottile, apparentemente crudele: un lampo stretto, che sfuggiva a punta, de traverso, come una bugia delatrice della verità, che non anco proferita vorrebbe già smorire sul labbro. (QP, RR II, 136)

Consistent with Leiris's fascination with the typology of woman capable of instilling fear in the male subject ("des femmes qui m'attirent dans la mesure où elles [...] me paralysent et me font peur" (AH, 151)), an intrinsic association is established here between sexual (female) attraction and aggression. Virginia is presented to the reader as at once stupendous and contemptuous, a figure simultaneously menacing and captivating whose appeal lies in large part in her pitiless dominance over others and ruthless sexual aggression. On the basis of this association of sexuality and fear, a clear parallel with Leiris's presentation of Judith emerges. Like Virginia, Judith, the pitiless "ogresse en délire", is defined by the aura of threatening

sexuality that surrounds her, and pitiless defeat of the male other: “la figure de Judith, image de ce châiment à la fois craint et désiré” (AH, 202).

As the symbol of sadistic female sexuality, rumours of Virginia’s malevolence abound in the local community, with local hearsay coming to establish her as a quasi-demonic figure: ““Quella? quella cià er diavolo da la parte sua’, diceveno l’amiche. ‘Quella cià Farfarello in corpo’” (QP, RR II, 136). This propensity for cruelty is particularly well illustrated in her treatment of Liliana. Hovering constantly on the borderline between the playful and the sadistic, this culminates in the following scene:

La baciava come po bacià una pantera, dicennole: ‘Sora mia bella Liliana, voi site `a Madonna pe mme!’ poi, basso basso, in un tono di ardore anche più soffocato: ‘Ve vojo bene: bene, te vojo: ma una vorta o l’altra me te magno: e le strizzava il polso, e glie lo storcava, fissandola: je lo storcava come in una morsa, bocca contro bocca, de sentisse er fiato der respiro in bocca, l’una co l’altra, zinne contro zinne. [...] Un giorno, in un accesso d’amor filiale, davvero je mozzicò un’orecchia: che Liliana se spaurì, quela volta. Madonna! aveva provato un dolore! (QP, RR II, 137)

Virginia is characterised, therefore, not only by the provocative, almost mocking manner that she adopts towards others (“come a di: merda a voi!”), but also by a degree of physical force and severity characteristic of the classical figures of antiquity frequently pointed to by Leiris as a unique source of erotic charge. Leiris in fact repeatedly presents antiquity, cruelty and the erotic as intrinsically intertwined: “Peut-être dois-je en déduire simplement”, he explains at one point in *L’Age d’homme*, “que, pour moi, l’idée d’*antiquité* est liée à celle de *nudité*, pour peu que soit mêlée à cette dernière une certaine cruauté?” (AH, 64). Discussing his love of allegories, he explains at another point that “Il n’y avait cependant pas que de gracieuses allégories [...] semblables à des nymphes ou à des fées; il y en avait d’abstraites et de

sévères” (AH, 55). As highlighted by the parallel between Gadda’s Virginia and Leiris’s Judith, then, an intrinsic association between female sexuality and aggression underpins both authors’ thought, revolving around a shared fascination with a form of female sadistic eroticism and its association with the severity of classical antiquity and a threatening form of female witchlike malevolence.

Another such figure within the context of *Quer pasticciaccio* can be found in the character of Assunta, or ‘Tina’ as she is known familiarly within the Balducci household. Assunta is first introduced to the reader during the dinner party described in the opening scene of the novel. Characterised by her voluptuous physicality and sexuality, she stands in stark contrast with the almost ethereal appeal attributed to Liliana in this scene. The narrator purposefully draws the reader’s attention to the contrast between the two figures, further highlighting the two contrasting modes of desire that they produce in the male subject. This opposition is most clearly expressed through the narrator’s description of Ingravallo’s attempt to use Liliana as a form of self-defensive screening device, in order to protect himself against the threat of Assunta’s dominant, threatening sexuality:

Cercò di reprimere l’ammirazione che l’Assunta destava in lui: un po’ come lo strano fascino della sfolgorante nipote dell’altra volta: un fascino, un imperio tutto latino e sabellico, per cui gli andavano insieme i nomi antichi, d’antiche vergini guerriere e latine o di mogli non reluttanti già tolte a forza ne la sagra lupercale, con l’idea dei colli e delle vigne ... [...] I Principi di Santa Romana Chiesa Apostolica. E al centro quegli occhi dell’Assunta. [...] Al centro... di tutto il sistema... tolemaico: già, tolemaico. Al centro, parlanno co rispetto, quer po’ po’ de signorino. (QP, RR II, 20)

Like Virginia, Assunta is characterised by a hard, almost imperial beauty here that leads Ingravallo to conjure up the image of “antiche vergini guerriere e latine o di mogli non

reluttanti già tolte a forza ne la sagra lupercale”. This form of savage beauty is very far, however, from the ideal feminine charms presented by the figure of Liliana. Ingravallo thus looks to Liliana, who is characterised by a harmonious, melancholic musicality, as a means of protecting himself against the more threatening sexuality of Assunta: “Gli bisognò reprimere, reprimere. Facilitato nella dura occorrenza dalla nobile malinconia della signora Liliana: il di cui sguardo pareva licenziare misteriosamente ogni fantasma improprio, istituendo per le anime una disciplina armoniosa” (QP, RR II, 20). A parallel divergence can also be seen in the short-story ‘Socer Generque’, in which a stark opposition is established between the figures of Miss Bargon and Elettra. For while Miss Bargon embodies the form of intellectual, idealised beauty represented by Liliana, Elettra’s appeal, like that of Virginia and Assunta, is purely physical: “Lei gli piaceva nel pensiero, la Elettra lo elettrizzava [...] sognava la sfolgorante carne, l’ascosa fenditura nelle penombre del sesso [...] Oh, divina bambola!” (SG, RR II, 800). The likeness between Miss Bargon and Liliana is striking, with the former being described, at one point, as “d’una estrema e tacita riservatezza [...] Quando si soffermava, lo guardava un po’ triste [...] sembrava palesare un certo imbarazzo e insieme un certo disinteresse, una timida o malinconica perplessità” (SG, RR II, 799), in parallel with the corresponding description of Liliana as a “Donna quasi velata ai più cupidi, di timbro dolce e profondo: con una pelle stupenda: assorta, a volte, in un suo sogno” (QP, RR II, 28). Elettra, by contrast, like Assunta and Virginia, is said to exude “quel *ginger* vitale che rendeva gli elettrici così sapientemente, così elettricamente protervi” (SG, RR II, 800).

A third example of this form of voluptuous, threatening female sexuality exists in the figure of Zoraide, in *La meccanica*. Like Virginia, Assunta and Elettra, Zoraide is characterised primarily by her physical vigour and sexuality: “[l]a stupenda Zoraide”, we read, “era seduta in un certo modo succinto e piccante da far venire l’acquolina in bocca a’ suoi non pochi ammiratori, oltreché ai più inveterati buongustai” (M, RR II, 469). Equally,

like Virginia, whose quasi-majestic beauty is perceived in threatening, sadistic terms by both Ingravallo and the wider local community, Zoraide's beauty takes on an almost menacing form in the narrator's description:

Da quel tristo specchio l'immagine femminile di Zoraide risfolgorava per i più cupi romanzi: un d'annunziano in ritardo ci regalerebbe seduta stante il suo spropositato capolavoro. Difatti, nel ravviarsi che fece, il suo corpo era passato dall'aspetto squisito della pacatezza cui, con un lieve respiro, s'era abbandonata ricamando, a una linea di fierezza fisica da dar dei brividi a un cane. (M, RR II, 471)

Like Judith, then, who for Leiris constitutes the very epitome of threatening female sexuality, Zoraide belongs to a line of female figures within Gadda's writings characterised by a severe form of classical, statuesque beauty. Moreover, in parallel with Leiris's own persistent sense of inferiority in the face of a threatening female other, it is without doubt Zoraide, rather than her male interlocutor, Gildo, who holds the power in the interaction that ensues. In contrast with Gildo, who is presented to the reader as floundering and inept, Zoraide figures as the very picture of physical strength and vigour:

Serrati i talloni, alle caviglie tendinee succedeva la simmetria delle gambe dentro la calza attilata, cui sapienti muscoli rendevano vive per ogni spasimo, e amoroso soccorso. Poi una corta gonnella, corta per la miseria, non per la moda: e non faceva mistero di quel che celasse. Erano le proposizioni vive dell'essere, compiutamente affermate, che rendono al grembo come una corona di voluttà deglutitrice: fulgide per latte e per ambra si pensavano misteriose mollezze da disvelare per l'elisia e impudica serenità del Vecellio, con drappo di dogale porpora, e d'oro: le quali non dico facilità o desiderio, ma sagace e volente dominazione. (M, RR II, 471)

Far from being invigorated by Zoraide's vivacity, Gildo finds himself disempowered in the face of his threatening female counterpart: "davanti alla bella sentì la sua volontà smarrirsi ancora ed ancora, sopraffatta da uno sgomento strano. Gli parve di essere malato" (M, RR II, 475). Leiris describes a corresponding experience of disempowerment in his confession, in *L'Age d'homme*, as noted in the previous section, that: "je suis, devant une femme, toujours en état d'infériorité [...] ce n'est jamais à moi qu'échoit le rôle normal du mâle qui conquiert mais toujours moi qui représente, dans cette joute de deux forces, l'élément dominé" (AH, 158). For, in stark contrast with the vitality of his female interlocutor, Gildo is left physically weakened. In contrast with the physical and psychical impotence of Gildo, Zoraide herself comes to embody life itself: "Zoraide", we thus read, "volle essere vita, vita fulgida, vera, davanti la finta" (M, RR II, 481). While Gildo embodies an experience of "vita finta", then, the "vita fulgida, vera" that Zoraide herself represents takes the form not only of a vigorous physical health, but also of a mode of truth firmly rooted in a healthy bodily experience: "Zoraide aveva in sé la sua verità salda, la fede profonda e sola: sentiva vivere splendidamente il suo corpo certo" (M, RR II, 488). Indeed, references to Zoraide's corporeal vigour abound in the text. Hence we read at one point, for example, that "Nel caldo mattino il suo meraviglioso corpo viveva: il dolce sangue, su dal suo cuore, batteva giocondamente a ogni polso ed era festa, passando, a ogni vena: e i muscoli parevano agognare esultanze e fervori e remote lassitudini" (M, RR II, 489). A parallel experience is also embodied by the character of Adalgisa, in Gadda's eponymous text, who is presented to the reader as the prototypical "donna di popolo: sana e buona e con la lingua spiccia" (A, RR I, 535). Defined by her vigorous health and pragmatism, she belongs to a long line of "meravigliose donne lombarde che il proprio vigor di cervello manifestano in pragma."

A more complicated embodiment of this classification of woman as threatening sexual other is to be found, however, in the ambivalent figure of Ines Cionini, to whom we

are first introduced when she is called into the police office for questioning after being arrested on suspicion of prostitution. And again, as in the cases of Zoraide, Assunta and Virginia, it is primarily in relation to her sexualised physicality that Ines is defined in the eyes of her male onlookers. Yet what sets Ines apart from the three female figures already discussed, who might be seen to represent an uncomplicated form of physical vigour and sexual appeal, is the unique combination of attraction and repulsion that Ines invokes in those around her. Embodying a form of raw, almost visceral appeal, she is presented to the reader as “una ragazza piuttosto provveduta del suo, con du meravigliosi occhi nel volto, luminosissimi, lucidi: ma incredibilmente sudicia e scarruffata [...] Una ventata di selvatico, a non dir peggio, alitò nella stanza: un odore!” (QP, RR II, 145). Hers is an almost animalesque sexual appeal, which is accentuated by its acute contrast with the cold setting of the police questioning room:

Era molto bella, a rimirla, non ostante lo squallore della stanza, la mucida luce sull’ammattionato: e bianca nel volto e nella gola tra le gore e le sfrangiature del sudicio: con tumidi, rossi labbri: quasi di silfide bambina, ma precocemente infastidita della pubertà: e alquanto ondulativa nel volgersi, o nel porgere, e dogliosa di volumi (un po’ alla maniera di certe Sante, di certe monache ritenute spagnole) come d’un inoppugnabile incarico, d’una soma greve, eterna: impostale da libito antico della Natura. (QP, RR II, 146-7)

Combining sexuality and squalor, the adult and the childlike, vitality and submissiveness, Ines exemplifies an ambivalent series of contradictory characteristics. Contrary to the relative languor of her male onlookers, moreover, she emanates a visceral, bodily energy that can be likened to the vitalistic energy and ‘salute’ of Zoraide: “emanava da lei, con il notato olezzo, il senso vero e fondo della vita dei visceri, della fame: e del calore animale” (QP, RR II, 147). Based on a raw experience of her own physicality, Ines thus offers an intense experience of

corporeality that is entirely alien to her male onlookers, and which they perceive in terms of an ambivalent form of “felicità”, “gioia” even, which is at once beguiling and threatening:

I suoi occhi-gemme, di pupa, enunciarono a tutti quei maschi di poca cena il nome  
d’una felicità tuttavia possibile: d’una gioia, d’una speranza, d’una verità  
superordinata alle cartoffie, ai muri squallidi, alle mosche secche del soffitto, al  
ritratto del Merda. [...] No, non pareva malata: se non di fame, di bellezza, di pubertà,  
di sporcizia, di sfrontaggine, di abbandono. Forse di sonno, di stanchezza [...]  
L’amore, dopo averla insudiciata, l’aveva regalata alla ventura della fame. (QP, RR II,  
147)

Once again, the intense experience of physical vigour personified by Ines is presented as a unique form of ‘verità’, which her male onlookers struggle to comprehend. Contrary to the sense of inertia and physical debility experienced by the typical Gaddian male, Ines enacts a positive explosion of the corporeal: If she can be called ill, the narrator proposes, it is only “di fame, di bellezza, di pubertà di sporcizia, di sfrontaggine, di abbandono”. Ines is denied the position of active agency enjoyed by Zoraide, however, by the objectifying male gaze inflicted upon her in this scene. Reversing the power dynamic of dominant female subject to passive male object at play during the interaction between Zoraide and Gildo, the established procedure of the police interrogation – which necessarily involves the assertion of a dominant gaze upon the (passive) subject under questioning – is manipulated by the male characters in this scene in order to assert their control over the threat posed by the menacing agency of Ines’s female subjectivity. A parallel might thus be drawn between this scene and the later examination of Liliana’s corpse, which will be discussed in greater detail below. Involving the infliction of a reductive, objectifying male gaze on the (passive) female other, both of these scenes illustrate the response of the Gaddian male to the threat posed by an incomprehensible, menacing female other.

Embodying a series of contradictory characteristics – from the squalid to the beautiful, the adult to the childlike – Ines offers a useful bridging point with another key typology of woman in Gadda's writings: that of the base, physically repulsive figure of female sexuality, the most striking representation of which is provided by the ill-famed Zamira Pacori, in *Quer pasticciaccio*. Hovering ambiguously between the roles of hag, dressmaker, clairvoyant and sorceress, Zamira embodies a strikingly repugnant image of female sexual physicality:

Della Zamira, sì: nota a tutti, tra Marino e Ariccia, per la mancanza degli otto denti davanti [...], quattro sopra e quattro sotto: di che la bocca, viscida e salivosa, d'un rosso acceso come da febbre, si apriva male e quasi a buco a parlare: peggio si stirava agli angoli in un sorriso buio e lascivo, non bello, e, certo involontariamente, sguaiato. [...] Talora, in certi pomeriggi, aveva occhiolini sfavillanti e pur molli, gonfi, sotto, come du vesciche sierose, pieni d'una stordita e un po' imbambolata malizia: sbronzetta, era: lo si vedeva: lo si sentiva al fiato: le rughe allora si apppianavano come a spiro di Favonio. [...] come di maga antica in sacerdozio d'abominevoli sortilegi e di ràdiche, proprio radici cotte, di cui s'inveschi d'anima a Lucano, a Ovidio. (QP, RR II, 147-8)

Notorious within the wider community firstly for the alarming gaping black hole produced by her lack of front teeth, the significance of which Diaconescu-Blumenfeld has discussed in detail in her study of gender and representation in *Quer pasticciaccio*, Zamira represents a repulsive, perverse form of female sexual power.<sup>178</sup> Stressing the importance of the withchlike qualities ascribed to her by the author, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld explains that "As

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<sup>178</sup> Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld notes that Zamira's mouth is often described in terms that evoke feelings of repulsion and fascination simultaneously: "In short, it is a *vagina dentata*. The *vagina dentata* is a projection of male castration anxiety." (Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, *Born Illiterate: Gender and Representation in Gadda's Pasticciaccio* (Market Harborough: Troubador, 1999), p. 45).

witch, Zamira has a special function in Gadda's treatment of the feminine. Magic, Gadda's text makes clear, is related to the feminine."<sup>179</sup> References to this form of grotesque physicality abound throughout the description of Zamira. We later read, for example, of her "labbri sizienti, infiebrati come le gencive, aridi o viscidì: che sguerniti d'ogni taglio dell'antico avorio, parevano oggimai la soglia, la libera anticamera d'ogni amorosa magia. [...] Il diavolo non resisteva all'appello" (QP, RR II, 153), in a reassertion of the diabolic qualities already alluded to in Gadda's earlier comparison of Zamira to an ancient sorceress reeling off a barrage of "abominevoli sortilegi" directed at those around her. Equally repellent are her swollen eyes, which the author likens to a pair of blisters brimming with "una stordita e un po' imbambolata malizia". Together with her dishevelled hair, the deep wrinkles that furrow her face and her dark, maleficent smile, Zoraide's physical appearance arouses a powerful effect of revulsion in her onlookers, leading the author to compare her to the devil himself.

The wider symbolic significance accorded to the figure of Zamira within the narrative is illustrated, in particular, by the author's detailed narration of an erotic dream described by Superintendent Pestalozzi while he is on his way to interrogate Zamira, in which she appears in the form of the sorcerous Circe. The narrator accords considerable space to the relation of this extended dream sequence, which revolves around a series of strange metamorphoses undergone by a topaz. The narrator begins by offering a dictionary definition of the word 'topaz' itself, before then proceeding to narrate its various transfigurations, into a lamp, lantern, sunflower, and, lastly, an obscene rat. The sequence ends with this grotesque rat creature fleeing along a railroad, where it is chased by a train, before leaving the tracks and fleeing into the fields. Described interchangeably as "marchesa" and "contessa", the dream sequence features a frenzied female character screaming out obscenities who is at one point

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<sup>179</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, pp. 44-5.

transmuted into the “Contessa Circe”, a sorceress strikingly reminiscent of the figure of Zamira. This transformation is followed by the description of the “alunne” who are interrupted in their naked dancing when the “topaccio” suddenly falls between their legs. In a grotesque account, the narrator describes how the Countess’s mouth splits open into a vile “fenditura”, as she proceeds to invoke the devil. With her gaping mouth and grotesque sexuality, the associations between this abhorrent figure and Zamira are clear. As Diaconescu-Blumenfeld explains: “Circe opens to ecstasy, her face splitting open like a watermelon, linking her to the toothless mouth of Zamira, and to Liliana’s slit throat.”<sup>180</sup> A correlation might be identified here, moreover, with Leiris’s own description of the nefarious figure of Circe, in *Frêle bruit*, as the very embodiment of a form of disquieting ‘merveilleux’ that is at once troubling and enticing, through her contrast with the idealised figure of Cosmage, the heroine of a tale by Edy Legrand (*Macao et Cosmage, ou l’expérience du bonheur*):

... je regarde ainsi Cosmage en l’opposant à une figure plus trouble qui m’a longtemps fasciné, la Circé nègre qui a pour attrait, outre ses abandons de bête ou de démons (ainsi que veut le préjugé), l’exotisme de son physique et sa capacité de m’imprégner du merveilleux auquel elle croit... (FB, RJ, 856)

In opposition to the sublimated image of woman as “sœur consolatrice”, embodying an idealised “retour à l’âge d’or”, Zamira, whose troubling, grotesque physicality links her within Gadda’s complex associative network to the sinister figure of Circe, therefore provides the ideal embodiment of the fear of female sexuality that underpins both authors’ conception of the female other.

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<sup>180</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 45. For a wider discussion of this, see Italo Calvino, ‘Introduction to *That Awful Mess*’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/babelgadda/babeng/calvinointromess.php>>.

*The Gaddian male, and the “pervasive male inferiority complex”*

Be it in the sexually seductive, vivacious figures of Virginia and Assunta, the ambivalent, raw physicality of Ines Cionini, or else the grotesque, malevolent form of female physicality embodied by Zamira, the female figure within Gadda's narrative thus represents an object of both fear and desire for the male desiring subject, in opposition to whom he finds himself relegated to the position of passive onlooker capable of entering into a position of agency only through the imposition of a violent, objectifying male gaze. Crippled by a persistent sense of self-doubt, an unending array of physical failings and a paralysing experience of psychological debilitation, Gadda's doubles embody an experience that stands as the very opposition to the agency of a dominant female other characterised by a form of an aggressive, at times sadistic, sexuality.

Indeed, the parallels between these disempowered male subjects and the author's own biographical experiences are indisputable. That Gadda was himself plagued throughout his life by neurosis, hypersensitivity, and a debilitating mania for order, is testified to not only by his own descriptions of his character, but also by a series of comments made in his regard by others. Piero Gadda Conti, for example, once described him as an “abisso di contraddizioni [...] spesso di carattere ombroso, scontroso e sospettoso, pieno di timori imaginari e di scrupoli grotteschi”,<sup>181</sup> while Italo Calvino has characterised him as a man “whose life was always unhappy, tormented by neurosis, by the difficulty of relations with others, by the anguish of death.”<sup>182</sup> It is in the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, though – defined by Sbragia as “perhaps Gadda's most reliable analysis of his neuroses and their etiology”<sup>183</sup> – that we find the clearest testimony of the psychoneuroses, obsessions and difficulties that

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<sup>181</sup> Piero Gadda Conti, *Le confessioni di Carlo Emilio Gadda* (Milan: Pan, 1974), p. 12.

<sup>182</sup> Italo Calvino, *Recovering Gadda*, trans. by William Weaver, *Salmagundi*, No. 65, (Fall 1984), 97-103 (p. 100).

<sup>183</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 48.

came to determine the author's relationships with others and, by extension, those of his overtly autobiographical fictional male protagonists. As well as providing a detailed catalogue of many of the flaws that continued to plague Gadda throughout his life, however, the text also provides a useful illustration of the stark opposition at work between his own deeply flawed experience of (male) selfhood and the positive experiences of a series of ideal figures of male virility against which he models himself. In the *Giornale di guerra*, in which he repeatedly stresses his inability to relate to others, his indecisiveness, obsessive need for order, and incapacity to inspire respect in those around him, Gadda quickly establishes a clear contrast between his personal failings and the heroic qualities of a series of idealised military heroes, an important example of which can be found, for instance, in the heroic figure of Lord Kitchener. Unlike these figures of military bravura, who are characterised by their authority, valour and assertiveness, Gadda is himself tormented by his own weakness of character: "La mia situazione nel reparto, creatami dalla mia debolezza, non migliora certo: scarsa autorità ho presso tutti, e la mia eccessiva longanimità mi procura noie e forse ingiustizie" (GGP, SGF II, 603), he proclaims, before going on to assert that, "Mi manca l'energia, la severità, la sicurezza di me stesso, proprie dell'uomo che non pensa troppo, che non si macera con mille considerazioni, che non pondera i suoi atti col bilancino, ma che agisce, agisce, agisce a furia di spontaneità..." (GGP, SGF II, 631). One might draw a connection with a similar declaration by Leiris, when he laments his incapacity to act without excessive reflection. "Je suis incapable", the author bemoans, "d'agir sans réticence et sans remords, je ne me livre jamais sans une arrière-pensée de me reprendre et, si je reste replié sur moi-même, ce n'est jamais sans le regret d'un abandon" (AH, 137). Gadda's *Giornale di guerra* can thus be seen to mark the initiation of a critical opposition between real and ideal self that later comes to dominate the experiences of both the author himself and the array of autobiographical male protagonists that populate his fictional narratives.

It is in Gadda's depiction of his idealised younger brother, Enrico, that this opposition is most clearly expressed. Described at one point by Gadda as "la parte migliore e più cara di me stesso" (GGP, SGF II, 850), Enrico is presented as possessing all those qualities that he himself lacks. One might deduce, Elio Gioanola proposes, that "Enrico diventa per eccellenza, nella proiezione che ne fa Carlo, il simbolo della vita stessa, in una specie di attribuzione a lui di tutte le qualità di cui lo scrittore si sente privo. Perciò gli viene in un certo senso affidato di vivere lui per tutt'e due."<sup>184</sup> While Gadda himself fails to engage in successful relationships with others, Enrico succeeds with effortless ease. As such, he comes to be perceived by Gadda not only as an ideal other against which to model himself, but also the object of envy and adulation. Within the context of his fictional narratives, a number of parallel oppositions emerge. One might cite, for example, the contrast, within *La meccanica*, between the disempowered figure of Gildo and the voracious Zoraide. For just as Enrico is assigned the job of *living*, where Gadda himself fails, Zoraide represents a form of corporeal truth in the face of Gildo's passivity and physical disempowerment. An even more striking equivalence can be identified, however, in the disparity between Gildo and the virile figure of Franco Velaschi. The correspondences between Franco and Enrico are indeed numerous. For while Enrico, in opposition with the author himself, represents the ideal figure of masculinity, Franco is described by the narrator as "alto, magro, fortissimo: con caviglie di tendini soli, con gambe dove si disegnavano i fasci del cestatore o del discobolo, con un torace ampio e lineato quasi nell'anelito dell'Adamo, risorgente dall'ombra e dai misteri cupi della Sistina" (M, RR II, 534). Like Enrico, Franco possesses excellent social skills and is quick to establish social bonds with others; "era con loro gioviale, quasi affettuoso" (M, RR II, 534). It is in his relationship with his mother, however, that the parallel with Enrico is most striking. Contrary to Gadda's own troubled relationship with his mother, for whom he ultimately comes to

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<sup>184</sup> Gioanola, *L'uomo dei topazi*, p. 24.

embody “la prova difettiva di natura, un fallito esperimento delle viscere dopo la frode accolta del seme” (CD, RR I, 678), Franco is the apple of his mother’s eye: “Quel figlio era fra tutti il suo orgoglio splendido, era il suo figlio maggiore, il più saldo, il più intelligente, il più bello, era un lei che continuava fulgidamente nel mondo” (M, RR II, 535).

Gadda’s relationship with his younger brother Enrico therefore provides a useful autobiographical basis for the extended opposition at work between the myriad of flawed autobiographical male protagonists at the centre of his fictional narratives and the array of socially successful, virile male figures against which they are modelled. And it is again to *Quer pasticciaccio* that one must turn for the clearest illustration of this division. A clear-cut opposition is quickly established within the narrative between a select group of secondary male figures defined by their masculinity, success with women, and easy integration into the wider social community, and the novel’s two central autobiographical protagonists, whom Matt Roberts has described as “two sides of the same coin”:<sup>185</sup> the highly neurotic, feminised Angeloni, and the philosophising detective Ingravallo.

Like the majority of Gadda’s male doppelgangers, Ingravallo is plagued by neurosis, great difficulty in relating to others and a resultant sense of isolation from the wider social sphere, a debilitating attachment to the level of the theoretical at the expense of the concrete pragmatism typical of his more successful male counterparts, and a persistent sense of his own physical inadequacy. Ingravallo is first introduced to the reader through the narrator’s negative description of his physical appearance, in which the focus is laid heavily on his lack of virility: “Di statura media, piuttosto rondo della persona, forse un po’ tozzo [...] aveva un’aria un po’ assonnata, un’andatura greve e dinoccolata, un fare un po’ tonto come di

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<sup>185</sup> Matt Roberts, ‘Quer pasticciaccio brutto... de Carlo Emilio Gadda: Reflections of a damaged author in his most famous work’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* (2000)  
<<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/coursematerial/studentportfolio/EH1999-2000/mattroberts.php>>.

persona che combatte con una laboriosa digestione” (QP, RR II, 15). A parallel might be drawn here with the equally unforgiving account with which Leiris opens his self-portrait in *L’Age d’homme*, as already commented upon in the previous section, wherein we read that, “Au physique, je suis de taille moyenne, plutôt petit. [...] mon teint est coloré; j’ai honte d’une fâcheuse tendance aux rougeurs et à la peau luisante” (AH, 25), evidence, the author suggests, of a corresponding weakness of character: “mes mains sont maigres, assez velues, avec des veines très dessinées; mes deux majeurs, incurvés vers le bout, doivent dénoter quelque chose d’assez faible ou d’assez fuyant dans mon caractère” (AH, 25). Moreover, in keeping with Leiris’s fraught relationship with his body, Ingravallo’s sense of his own physical inadequacy comes to light first and foremost through his highly dysfunctional relationship with women, whom he remains incapable of either understanding or relating to throughout the text. For while he is described early on as enjoying a certain degree of theoretical understanding of women – “Una certa praticaccia del mondo [...] doveva di certo avercela: una certa conoscenza degli uomini: e anche delle donne” (RR II, QP, 15) – at no point does he actually succeed in entering into a successful, concrete relationship with any of the female figures in the narrative. Diaconescu-Blumenfeld suggests that, “Derailed in his desire for Assunta, frustrated in his desire for Liliana, by his declassment and his dislocation, Ingravallo is forced into theorising.”<sup>186</sup> Equally, while Ingravallo theorises on the erotic basis that he believes to stand at the base of all crimes – “soleva dire, ma questo un po’ stancamente, ‘ch’i femmene se retroveno addó n’i vuò truvà’” (RR II, QP, 17) – he proves incapable of actually solving the crime at hand. As illustrated during two scenes that have already been discussed – namely, the dinner at the Balducci household and the police interrogation of Ines Cionini – Ingravallo finds himself forced into the position of marginalised onlooker when faced with an incomprehensible female other, which places him

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<sup>186</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 19.

on a long line of Gaddian male protagonists cut off from the female other. Such figures, Emilio Manzotti suggests, “non amano, non posseggono: desiderano, semmai, e soprattutto guardano, osservano.” They are the victims, the critic continues, “di un vano desiderare, di quel ‘disperato lirismo’.”<sup>187</sup> As the subjects of a thwarted experience of desire wherein the desiring subject remains at all times cut off from the desired object, the Gaddian male finds himself forced into the position of voyeuristic outsider. Within the Gaddian narrative universe, Sbragia proposes, “Eros becomes an essentially voyeuristic enterprise” in which the desiring male subject is degraded to the level of “[a] puppet: an infertile man, with a big, fake, carnivalesque head. An implement that is of no use: a gimlet with its threads worn out.”<sup>188</sup> In this light, one might recall a similar confession by Leiris in which he stresses the sense of anguish by which he is overcome when alone with a woman:

Quand je suis seul avec un être que son sexe suffit à rendre si différent de moi, mon sentiment d’isolement et de misère devient tel que [...] je me mets, faute d’un autre sujet, à parler de moi-même [...] plus mon trouble présent m’angoisse, plus je parle de moi d’une manière angoissée, appuyant longuement sur cette sensation de solitude, de séparation avec le monde extérieur, et finissant par ignorer si cette tragédie par moi décrite correspond à la réalité permanente de ce que je suis ou n’est qu’expression imagée de cette angoisse momentanée que je subis sitôt entré en contact avec un être humain et mis, en quelque manière, en demeure de parler. (AH, 157-8)

Throughout the narrative, woman comes to represent an impenetrable source of mystery for Ingravallo; an object “à la fois craint et désiré”, to quote Leiris. And it is in the figure of Liliana, the primary female protagonist of *Quer pasticciaccio*, that the

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<sup>187</sup> Emilio Manzotti, ‘Carlo Emilio Gadda: Un Profilo’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 5 (2007), Supplement no. 5,

<<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/supp5archivm/ragioni/ragionimanzottiprofilo.php>>.

<sup>188</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 150.

incomprehensibility of woman comes most clearly to the fore. In Ingravallo's eyes, Liliana represents an impenetrable source of mystery from the very beginning of the novel. At the dinner at the Balducci household, for instance, we witness him speculating fruitlessly as to the cause of Liliana's melancholy, while Liliana herself remains firmly encased in her own melancholic reflection: "Donna quasi velata ai più cupidi, di timbro dolce e profondo: con una pelle stupenda: assorta, a volte, in un suo sogno [...] Aveva occhi ardenti, soccorrevoli, quasi, in una luce (o per un'ombra?) di malinconica fraternità..." (QP, RR II, 26-7). Even before her death, at which point she becomes the central focus of an investigation fraught with obscurity, Liliana is therefore already masked in mystery for Ingravallo. So impenetrable is she, in fact, that even her husband cannot comprehend her: "Si sarebbe detto, a voler fantasticare, ch'egli, il Balducci, non avesse valutato, non avesse penetrato tutta la bellezza di lei: quanto vi era in lei di recondito: e allora... i figli non erano arrivati" (QP, RR II, 21). One is reminded here of the following declaration, in *Racconto italiano*, in which, pondering the impenetrable whims of the female protagonist Nerina, the narrator speculates as to the incomprehensibility of women more generally:

Ma chi capisce qualche cosa, nel cuore delle donne? Anche l'oste gli assicurava di non aver mai capito che cosa fosse sua moglie! Ma Nerina lo amava o non lo amava? Quella bocca gli pareva un pezzo di ghiaccio non lo amava, non lo amava. Era una strega! (RI, SVP, 501)

On the question of the incomprehensibility of woman, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld has identified a direct association within Gadda's writings between the issue of gender and the difficulties inherent in the act of representation itself. As that which resists explanation and representation, woman can be seen to represent, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld explains, not only the unknowability of the other but rather the very impossibility of knowledge itself: "the quest for knowledge is the search for a woman, for women. Women represent the object of

Ingravallo's quest for knowledge, a quest that like the desire determining it, must remain unfulfilled, since to make an object of knowledge is to create a mystery."<sup>189</sup> This correlation between the impenetrability of woman and the impossibility of knowledge itself has also been stressed by the critic De Benedictus, who suggests that "l'impossibilità della conoscenza, se non nella forma della cognizione, si lega all'idea, come Gadda enuncia in un altro testo, 'del voler ad ogni costo approfondire, infrangendo i più solenni divieti, i misteri bio-psichici dell'organizzazione femminile'."<sup>190</sup> For Gadda, the act of representation, which involves an impossible endeavour to possess the other by means of a thwarted process of "cognizione", is therefore ruled out by the unbridgeable division that separates the desiring/known subject from the desired/known object. The problem of representation for Gadda, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld thus explains, is also the problem of woman:

If the intuition mediating representation is male, the representation of female subjectivity is bound to the problem of representation itself: to make something an object of knowledge is to feminise it, to render it woman. Woman, in this sense, is always the object of knowledge, theory, representation, and the theorising intelligence, always male. The author and the reader are men talking together, reconstructing woman, creating her, denying her.<sup>191</sup>

The case of Ingravallo, for whom woman represents an abstract object of theory at all times out of reach, thus epitomises the distance within Gadda's narrative universe not only between the desiring subject and desired object, but also between 'theory' and the 'object' of that theory.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 21.

<sup>190</sup> Maurizio De Benedictus, *La piega nera: groviglio stilistico ed enigma della femminilità in C. E. Gadda* (Anzio: De Rubeis, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>191</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 38.

<sup>192</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld proposes that this is also an issue of class difference for Ingravallo. For, when faced with the figure of Liliana, who belongs to the middle-class nobility, Ingravallo is relegated to the position of *de-*

In his dysfunctional relationships with women and experience within the sphere of desire, Ingravallo finds his match in the highly neurotic Filippo Angeloni, another of Gadda's overtly autobiographical figures. Like the author himself, Angeloni shuns the company of others, and displays an unhealthy proclivity for pensive reflection and a comic tendency for excessive, gluttonous behaviour. As a middle-aged, overweight man who lives alone and is visited by a constant stream of delivery boys bringing him a seemingly unending supply of gastronomic delicacies, Angeloni quickly becomes a natural source of suspicion and derision for other characters in the novel. And, of the many negative characteristics associated with him, it is his perceived femininity that represents the greatest source of ridicule for others. Suggestions of his lack of masculinity recur throughout the narrative, with repeated references to his lack of vigour, submission to his physical whims (he displays an almost comic obsession with food), and fear of confrontation with others. Diaconescu-Blumenfeld has offered a useful analysis of the importance of language in this process, suggesting that one of the primary means by which Angeloni is feminised in the narrative is through Gadda's careful selection of the terminology used to depict him. It is thus that Angeloni is described as making the rounds of local *botteghe* to pick up different delicacies, "Giusto pe levasse na *svojataura*". The word *svojataura*, which means whim or caprice, is also related, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld points out, "to *scapricciatura*, satisfaction of whim, and specifically refers to "delicious and dainty little morsel" to satisfy the 'whim' (*voglie*) of pregnant women."<sup>193</sup> It is in the scene of his inquisition at the police office, however, that the feminisation of Angeloni becomes most evident. A clear-cut power dynamic is quickly established here between the interrogator (Ingravallo) and the individual under interrogation (Angeloni), in an encounter

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*classed* outsider. This also causes a division, Diaconescu-Blumenfeld proposes, between Ingravallo and the series of idealised male figures in the novel: "All those men operate on one class level, their own, while Ingravallo is alienated, declassified. The reason for his frustration is the desire to transcend his own class, the desire to get a woman of a different class." (p. 47).

<sup>193</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 36.

that provides the former with a rare opportunity to assume the dominant role traditionally accorded to the male observing subject. Angeloni reacts to the situation through an involuntary display of physical unease that is so exaggerated as to verge on the comic:

Una incredibile angoscia pareva essersi impadronita del commendatore. Andò a finire che soffiò il naso: occhi rossi, trombettò come una vedova. [...] Solo, seduto sur una scranna della questura, con addosso tutte le sofisticherie della squadra mobile (così pensava), gli si velarono gli occhi. La sua povera faccia, di poveruomo che desidera che non lo guardino, con quel nasazzo al mezzo che non dava licenza un minuto alle inesprese opinioni d'ogni interlocutore, la sua faccia parve, a Ingravallo, una muta disperata protesta contro la disumanità, la crudeltà d'ogni inquisizione organizzata. (QP, RR II, 44)

With the emphasis being placed on Angeloni's aversion to confrontation, his attempts to shield himself from his interrogator's penetrating gaze, and his inability to control his bodily reactions, a parallel might be drawn between this scene and that of Ines's interrogation, as already described above. Like Ines, Angeloni is quickly cast in the role of the passive, feminised object of investigation. Subjected to the objectifying effect of an aggressive male gaze, he is robbed of all subjective agency and reduced to a state of almost comic discomfort. Like the police officers that question Ines, Ingravallo manipulates the traditional power dynamic at work between interviewer and interviewee in this scene in order to assume a position of active agency that is otherwise denied to him. As such, he is able to reappropriate the active position of desiring (objectifying) male subject in his subjection of Angeloni to what Diaconescu-Blumenfeld describes in terms of a "process of deflowering".<sup>194</sup> Once again, then, it is by only by means of a process of violent, visual objectification, achieved

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<sup>194</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 37.

through the imposition of a reductive male gaze, that the disempowered Gaddian male subject is able to control the subjective agency of the (female/feminised) other.

In stark opposition to the overtly autobiographical figure of male disempowerment embodied by Ingravallo and Angeloni, however, Gadda establishes a long line of idealised male figures in his fictional writings who, like Enrico, are characterised by their virility, success with women, and ease in the social sphere. Serving to further highlight the sense of disempowerment experienced by his autobiographical doppelganger, such figures serve a parallel role to the idealised figures of masculinity that figure within Leiris's autobiographical writings. And, in parallel with the relationship between Gadda and Enrico, it is with a mixture of admiration and envy that such figures are looked upon by Ingravallo:

C'era, duole dirlo, in don Ciccio, una certa freddezza, come un'astiosa gelosia verso i giovani, specie i bei giovani, e tanto più i figli dei ricchi. [...] lui, no, no, non era 'bello': e nemmeno gli riusciva di consolarsi con quel proverbio che aveva udito a Milano da una ragazza, al dispensario celtico di via delle Oche: 'I òmen hin semper bèi' (QP, RR II, 25)

Broadly speaking, they can be divided into two distinct categories: on the one hand, the authoritative, paternalistic figure typified by Liliana's husband, Remo Balducci, and Maresciallo Santarella; and, on the other, that of the young, handsome womaniser epitomised by such figures as Diomede Lanciani and Giuliano Valdarena. Despite their disparities, what unites these two models of masculinity, and establishes them firmly in opposition to the autobiographical Gaddian male, is their shared success with women and possession of a level of physical vigour entirely lacking in autobiographical figures such as Ingravallo and Angeloni. The most striking example of the second of these two categories – that of the young, virile womaniser – is to be found in Liliana's cousin, Giuliano Valdarena. Like Enrico, Giuliano

embodies all the qualities that Ingravallo himself lacks: good looks, effortless charm, an easy confidence with others and, perhaps most importantly for Ingravallo, seemingly persistent success with women. Faced with this archetype of youthful masculinity, Ingravallo suffers a debilitating attack of self-doubt:

Un bel ragazzo, er signorino Giuliano, dellà: piuttosto fortunato co le donne.

Piuttosto. Già. Che lo perseguitavano a sciame, a volo radente: e gli precipitavano poi addosso tutte insieme, e in picchiata, come tante mosche sur miele. Lui sapeva puranche fare: ci aveva un bìnolo, uno specchietto a rota, un suo modo così naturale e così strano, ar medesimo tempo... che te le incantava co gnente. Dava a dividere de trascuralle, o di sentirsene magari annoiato: troppe, troppo facili! d'aver sottomano ben altro. (QP, RR II, 66)

In stark contrast to Ingravallo, Giuliano exudes a natural charm that affords him an easy success with women: “Giocava a far er cocco. Antre vorte ghiribizzoso come una banderola” (QP, RR II, 66); “tirava a far er bello, sicché, a fa lo strafottente. Con tutte” (QP, RR II, 78). Another such figure is to be found in the authoritative Maresciallo Santarella, who represents the very prototype of masculine physicality for the women with whom he comes into contact: “Metteva gioia in core a vederlo. Le ragazze, certe notti di luna piena, sognavano ‘o maresciallo. [...] Quando arrivava lui, puttana il diavolo, tiravano un respiro [...] finita ogni pena, gli riprendeva la gioia, dentro, poveri ragazzi! [...] impartiva ordini, a cui tutti obbedivano” (QP, RR II, 157). In contrast to Ingravallo, who lives in a house from which women are strictly excluded (as his landlady’s advert in the local paper – “donne escluse” – firmly dictates), Santarella spends his time surrounded by a seemingly unending plethora of women: “No, no, no, in casa sua... tutt’al contrario: donne erano: e donne sarebbero” (QP, RR II, 157). A parallel opposition is also established, in *La cognizione del dolore*, between the central autobiographical character of Gonzalo - “quel figlio, così appartato, e così lontano

da tutti, a Lukones, che lo si sarebbe detto un misantropo, o peggio, un nemico del popolo” (CD, RR I, 596) - who lives in a state of unhealthy isolation with his mother, cut off from the rest of the community, and his doctor, Felipe Higueróa, whose household comprises no less than five women: “femmine, cinque: una più signorina dell’altra” (CD, RR I, 596), with whom he endeavours, without success, to match up the unmarried Gonzalo: “Celibe era di certo, come Beethoven e anche più se fosse stato possibile immaginarlo: ma di quella paura della moglie pareva ancora in tempo a potersi emendare, per poco che osasse: e sapesse padroneggiarsi” (CD, RR I, 596).

A further example of this typology of the virile young male in *Quer pasticciaccio* can be found in the figure of Diomede Lanciani, whose physical appearance and defiant bearing immediately establish him in the narrator’s eyes as the prototype of the Fascist ideal of the virile male:

Un tipo! Un viso di quelli, proprio, che il quindicinale ‘Difesa della razza’, quindici anni dopo, avrebbe recato a testimonianza di arianesimo splendido: della gente latina e sabellica. Per copia conforme: sì. Era biondo, certo: la foto lo asseriva: un volto maschio, un ciuffo! La bocca, un taglio diritto. Sopra al vivere delle gote e del collo du occhi fermi, strafottenti: che promettevano il meglio, alle ragazze, alle serve, il peggio a’ loro depentolati risparmi. Un tipo spavaldo, fatto per essere accerchiato e conteso, inseguito e raggiunto, un po’ da tutte, secondo le disponibilità di ciascuna. Uno da rappresentare in bellezza il Lazio e la sua gioventù, al Foro Italico. (QP, RR II, 167)

Once again, the focus is placed heavily on Diomede’s success with women, which makes him a target of both envy and adulation for Ingravallo: “‘Anche lui, anche lui!’ dolorò Ingravallo in suo sentire. ‘Nel novero de’ fortunate e felici, anche lui!’ Il volto gli si fece tetro. ‘Anche

lui! Perseguito dalle donne!’” (QP, RR II, 165). Ingravallo is once again tormented by the stark contrast between himself and Diomede in this regard, which merely exacerbates his sense of his own lack of virility: “Già odiava, in cuor suo, quel figuro, per biondo che fosse: e la solita strizzatina di denti, o strizzatona di mascelle, accompagnò l’apparire e il non subito vanire dell’immagine. Era, nella sua capoccia di diorite, un’abominevole imagine. Una sporca, una misera cosa, quel bellimbusto: chillo gigolò!” (QP, RR II, 177). Far from being limited to *Quer pasticciaccio*, however, Gadda’s writings feature a number of other such figures. One might recall, for instance, the figures of Paolo Velaschi in *La meccanica*, Gigi in ‘San Giorgio in Casa Brocchi’, and Enea Retalli in *Quer pasticciaccio*, each of whom, with their seemingly effortless success with women and embodiment of a prototypical form of virility, serve to further highlight the experience of male disempowerment represented by Gadda’s autobiographical doppelgangers.

Despite their apparent success with women, however, even these prototypes of ‘successful’ masculinity are ultimately prevented from entering into any real, concrete union with the female other, further reinforcing the impossibility of any successful relationship between (male) self and (female) other. As has been identified by Sbragia, each of these figures is, for varying reasons, firmly cut off from his female counterparts: “the sexually stunning men in the novel are segregated from its stupendous women (Diomede Lanciani and Enea Retalli are fugitives while Giuliano Valdarena is detained).”<sup>195</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld suggests that *Quer pasticciaccio* might thus be interpreted as being devoid of any successful human relationship at all, with each of the characters remaining cut off from the others, regardless of their status or seeming successful integration into the wider community. As he explains, “It could be argued that there are no real relations in *Pasticciaccio* at all. Neither canny nor courtly love gives us a relation. Each of the characters is intermeshed with others,

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<sup>195</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 50.

but no relationship has reality, presence, in the book.”<sup>196</sup> While the narrative is structured around a myriad of intersubjective networks – which can be taken as a narrative reflection of the complex “grumo di relazioni” described in *Meditazione milanese* - at no point do any of these networks give rise to a real, concrete relationship between one individual and another.

As a symbol of impenetrable mystery and of the impossibility of any authentic relationship between (individual) self and other, the female other therefore comes to stand at the base of a crippling experience of gendered disempowerment for the Gaddian male, leading to an intrinsic connection, within Gadda’s oeuvre, between Eros and crime, female sexuality and violence. Playing out Ingravallo’s assertion, in *Quer pasticciaccio*, that all crime is rooted in a quantum of Eros – “un certo movente affettivo, un tanto o, direste oggi, un quanto di affettività, un certo “quanto di erotia”” (RR II, QP, 17) - it is in Gadda’s anti-Fascist tract, *Eros e Priapo*, that this overarching denunciation of the sphere of the female finds its clearest expression.

*“Un quanto di affettività, un certo ‘quanto di erotia’”: the crime of ‘Eros’*

In his biographical study, *Il gran lombardo*, Giulio Cattaneo notes that Gadda entertained a life-long fascination with crimes driven by a sexual motive, as is illustrated, he specifies, by the fact that he remained an avid and regular reader of newspapers reporting such crimes throughout his life.<sup>197</sup> A number of critics have remarked upon the importance of the association between (female) sexuality and crime within Gadda’s writings. In *L’uomo dei topazi*, for instance, Elio Gioanola suggests that an intrinsic connection between violence and erotic sadism underpins the author’s writings, proposing that each and every instance of

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<sup>196</sup> Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, p. 46.

<sup>197</sup> See Giulio Cattaneo, *Il gran lombardo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1991).

criminality within his writings can unfailingly be linked to the sphere of the erotic: “In Gadda l’immaginazione del furto e del delitto, che notoriamente tiene un ruolo dominante nella sua narrativa, è sempre accompagnata, senza alcuna eccezione, da una componente sadica, che erotizza più o meno evidentemente gli atti di violenza”.<sup>198</sup> Peter Hainsworth has also highlighted this link, suggesting that, throughout Gadda’s oeuvre, “Woman is associated most inevitably with forbidden and dangerous desires, provoking, perhaps inadvertently, an aggression which may be directed against others or against herself.”<sup>199</sup> This is reiterated in Sbragia’s suggestion that, “Every act of violence in Gadda’s narrative universe is an unfulfilled sexual act”,<sup>200</sup> which he sets in terms of an overarching association between Eros and death. A correlation might be drawn here, moreover, with the recurrent association drawn by Leiris between eroticism and death, as illustrated in his assertion, in *L’Age d’homme*, that:

J’en arrive à penser que l’amour et la mort – engendrer et se défaire, ce qui revient au même - sont pour moi choses si proches que toute idée de joie charnelle ne me touche qu’accompagnée d’une terreur superstitieuse, comme si les gestes de l’amour, en même temps qu’ils amènent ma vie en son point le plus intense, ne devaient que me porter malheur. (AH, 28-9)

For Gadda, this association is based on a philosophical denunciation of the destructive force of Eros, as is most clearly set out in the anti-Fascist pamphlet *Eros e Priapo*. As part of his fierce retrospective critique of the errors of Fascist philosophy, Gadda offers an extended analysis of the role played within society by the negative drive of Eros, which is intrinsically tied up with the question of narcissism. In this text, he describes what Sbragia has called a

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<sup>198</sup> Gioanola, *L’uomo dei topazi*, p. 45.

<sup>199</sup> Hainsworth, ‘Fascism and Anti-Fascism’, p. 232.

<sup>200</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 157.

“three-way psychic grid”,<sup>201</sup> structured around the central drives of Eros, Logos and Priapus. It is important to note, however, as specified by Sbragia, that Gadda’s critique is in fact directed not at Eros in its own right, but rather at an inhibited form of Eros. According to his analysis, Eros is destructive inasmuch as it has remained trapped at the level of Priapus, that of self-indulgent narcissism, rather than progressing naturally towards the superior state of Logos, which represents the rational, productive side of the human psyche. As Sbragia explains, “Eros, or the subjective and instinctual libidinal force, can either be sublimated into Logos or remain trapped in an exhibitionist and self-indulgent narcissism, Priapus”.<sup>202</sup> For Gadda, then, when trapped at the level of Priapus, Eros represents a destructive energy with no greater purpose than the satisfaction of immediate, individual desires. Intrinsically associated with the female realm, this form of Eros represents the primary cause for the failings of Fascist psychology: “Eros nelle sue forme inconscie e animalesche, ne’ suoi aspetti infimi, e non ne’ sublimati e ingentiliti, ha dominato la tragica scena. Vent’anni. Logos è stato buttato via di scena dalla Bassaride perché inetto a colmare la di lei pruriginosa necessità” (EP, SGF II, 246). Consistent with Ingravallo’s theory, as quoted above, that all crimes are rooted in an underlying erotic cause, Gadda sees Eros as standing at the base both of the failings of the Fascist regime and of a wider incapacity on the part of society itself to progress beyond the negative state of ‘Priapus’:

‘La causale del delitto’, cioè i torbidi moventi che hanno costituito per la banda euforica l’impulso verso una serie di azioni criminali, è una causale non esclusivamente ma prevalentemente ‘erotica’ (nel senso lato che, come avrete avvertito, io conferisco al vocabolo) nel suo complesso: segna il prevalere di un cupo e scempio Eros sui motivi di Logos. (EP, SGF II, 244)

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<sup>201</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 165.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p. 165.

For Gadda, Eros has thus come to pervert not only individual actions but rather the base of collective being itself, ruling out the possibility of any form of integrated communal action and standing as a kind of pernicious force at the basis of all human activity:

Latenze erotiche subsistono, operatrici indefesse, al nostro vivere e al nostro morire d'ogni giorno [...] Movono i diportamenti 'normali' de le genti 'normali', delle persone ragionevoli e della società ragionevole. Eros è alle radici della vita del singulo e della mente individua: ed è fonte all'istinto plurale e a la sociale pragmatica d'ogni socialità e d'ogni associazione di fatto, e d'ogni fenomeno qual vo' vu' dite 'collettivo'. (EP, SGF II, 236)

Throughout the text, Gadda insists on the critical importance of reinstating the forces of logic and rationality in the face of this overwhelming submission to the irrational, disorderly force of Eros, as is illustrated, he suggests, by society's collective acceptance of illusion in the place of scientific truth. The failure to sublimate Eros to Logos is thus seen to preclude social progress towards what Gadda elsewhere terms "*il bene di 2° grado*". For while Logos involves a constant progression towards a higher state of being, Eros represents a static state of unsublimated narcissism: "L'io collettivo è guidato ad autodeterminarsi e ad esprimer sé molto più da gli istinti o libidini vitali, (che sono le fasi acquisite e le arcaiche e di già compendiate del divenire), cioè in definitiva da Eros, che non da ragione o da ragionata conoscenza (che d'è la fase in atto, o futura che tu te ne fabbrichi)" (EP, SGF II, 238-9). Logos, by contrast, is intrinsically associated with a focus on the future and active progression: "quel tendere al meglio (vero o supposto), quel cercare e volere la non ancora nota e non ancora determinata 'forma'" (EP, SGF II, 274).

Of particular interest, here, however, is the extended association drawn in this text between Eros and the female psyche. For while Logos corresponds to the prototypical *male*

attributes of rationality, logic and forward-thinking, Eros, for Gadda, is intrinsically associated with female psychology. One manner in which this extended association between Eros and the female is expressed in the text is through the direct correlation between the static state of *non-essere* described above and the female psyche. For while man, Gadda explains, tends towards a preference for *becoming* over *being*, woman remains bound to her current state of being, lacking any capacity for constructive progression: “La donna, in genere, non crea il futuro: porta a perfezione il passato con un certo ritardo di fase più o meno apprezzabile, rispetto al reperto delle avanguardie maschili (Virgilio, Eneide, donne abbandonate nell’isola)” (EP, SGF II, 256). It follows, Gadda explains, that woman is also incapable of any act of novelty or creative exploration, lacking as she does all sense of curiosity or creative drive: “Le scavallate verso la tenebra de’ doveri nuovi, le incursioni nel mondo delle conoscenze e de’ modi nuovi, sono disciplina *nuova* de’ maschi” (EP, SGF II, 256). Proceeding along this line of thought, Gadda goes on to conclude that, “Il maschio sembra essere ‘più in là’ nel cammino della specie” (EP, SGF II, 256). The contrast between (male) Logos and (female) Eros is further elaborated through the author’s suggestion that while man represents ‘form’, woman is ‘matter’: “Se il maschio è ‘forma’ o detiene la momentanea ‘forma’, la femina sembra essere la elaborata ed elaborante ‘materia’ della specie (Bergson, L’*évolution créatrice*)” (EP, SGF II, 256). This is also demonstrated, the author posits, by woman’s pronounced susceptibility to authority. Drawing a direct link between the female psyche and the psychology of the crowd, Gadda concludes that “le femine sono più facili da tenere e da catechizzare, amano paravole e frasi che vengano pronunziate da vocione autoritario di maschio [...] Sono anime più ‘docili’ (da ‘doceo’) e più utili al proselitismo” (EP, SGF II, 251). Lacking all strength of character of her own, woman, for Gadda, cannot but seek to model herself against a stronger, active male subject. As such,

he proceeds to stress the dangers inherent in any attempt to accord woman a place in society beyond that of serving her male counterparts:

Ora tutto ciò è Eros, non Logos. Non nego alla femina il diritto ch'ella 'prediliga li giovini, come quelli che sono li più feroci' (Machiavelli, *Il Principe*) cioè i più aggressivi sessualmente; ciò è suo diritto e anzi dirò suo dovere. Non nego che la Patria chieda alle femine di adempiere al loro dovere verso la Patria che è, soprattutto, quello di lasciarsi fottare. E con larghezza di vedute. Ma 'li giovani' se li portino a letto e non pretendano acclamarli prefetti e ministri alla direzione d'un paese. E poi la femina adempia ai suoi obblighi e alle sue inclinazioni e non stia a romper le tasche con codesta ninfomania politica, che è cosa inzita. (EP, SGF II, 245-6)

Embodying the negative, destructive drive of Eros, woman thus comes to constitute the very personification for Gadda of the state of unsublimated narcissism that stands at the base of the failings of Fascist philosophy, and of society's collective incapacity to progress towards the superior state of Logos. As Gioanola proposes: "Gadda deforma grottescamente le figure di donna nella misura in cui le sente portatrici di quello che egli chiama 'narcisismo' e che altro non è, nella sostanza, se non mera sessualità."<sup>203</sup> Drawing a correlation between Eros and the female psyche, *Eros e Priapo* thus sets out the theoretical basis for the overarching association between woman and crime that can be seen to subtend Gadda's wider approach to the sphere of the female.

And while the question of eroticism occupies a fundamental place within a large proportion of Gadda's works of narrative fiction, it is again in *Quer pasticciaccio*, which Sbragia has described as "a summa of Gadda's narrative treatment of Eros",<sup>204</sup> that we find

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<sup>203</sup> Gioanola, *L'uomo dei topazi*, p. 77.

<sup>204</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 149

the clearest expression of this correlation between woman and crime. The scene in which this association is most clearly elaborated in the text is to be found in the inspection of Liliana's corpse. In this passage – the wider significance of which has been the subject of extensive critical analysis<sup>205</sup> – the reader is provided with a detailed account of the police inspection of Liliana Balducci's corpse, following her brutal murder in her home that same day. And it is once again through the viewpoint of an objectifying, voyeuristic male gaze that the female other is represented by the observing (male) subject. For Jean-Paul Manganaro, the relationship between observing subject and observed object at work in this scene forms part of an overarching philosophy of failed desire within the author's thought, highlighting the unbridgeable divide between desiring subject and desired object. As he explains:

“[Ingravallo] ne sera jamais accordé de passer à un acte dicté par les sens, sauf l'acte – abstrait et distant – du voyeur dont l'objet de désir sexuel se trouve être ici éternellement différé par l'éternité de la mort, et *immédiatement* différé dans le corps même de la morte.”

For, he elaborates, “à travers sa mort, s'achève la possibilité de l'histoire d'amour, et s'ouvre la virtualité du récit amoureux.”<sup>206</sup> It is only through the eradication of the agency of female subjectivity, then, be it through her death or via her violent objectification through the aggressive male gaze, that the Gaddian male, as epitomised here by Ingravallo, is able to confront the threat of female sexuality. Sbragia goes so far as to liken the effect of this voyeuristic male gaze to an act of rape, suggesting, in line with Gioanola's assertion that “Every act of violence in Gadda's narrative universe is an unfulfilled sexual act”,<sup>207</sup> that, “Liliana's slaughter is also a rape, a defloration, which is truly completed only after her

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<sup>205</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this scene, see: Elena Past, *Methods of Murder: Beccarian Introspection & Lombrosian Vivisection in Italian Crime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Manuela Bertone, ‘Murderous Desires: Gaddian Matricides from *Novella seconda* to *La cognizione del dolore*’ in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 111-131.

<sup>206</sup> Jean-Paul Manganaro, ‘Les yeux vigilants de l'amour (Lecture d'une scène du *Pasticciaccio*)’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/babelgadda/babfrench/manganyeux.php>>.

<sup>207</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 157.

actual murder, by the desirous gaze that roves between her sex and her fatal wound.”<sup>208</sup> With its violent, objectifying force, the male gaze would thus constitute a sadistic force akin to the actual act of aggression perpetrated against Liliana itself.<sup>209</sup> And indeed, in a clear exemplification of the association between female sexuality and crime, the scene is steeped in sexual imagery. Liliana’s body is presented with such a wealth of scientific detail as to verge on the technical. This is illustrated, for instance, by the detailed, objective description of the body with which the narrator opens the scene: “Il corpo della povera signora giaceva in una posizione infame, supino, con la gonna di lana grigia e una sottogonna bianca buttate all’indietro, fin quasi al petto: come se qualcuno avesse voluto scoprire il candore affascinante di quel dessous, o indargarne lo stato di nettezza” (QP, RR II, 58). Faced with this minute degree of scientific detail, Meriel Baines has suggested that an interesting comparison might be drawn between this scene and the short narrative ‘Anastomòsi’,<sup>210</sup> in which Gadda offers a painstakingly detailed description of a surgical procedure taking place at the university hospital clinic in Milan, from the detached standpoint of a student observing the scene.

Far from isolated incidents, however, Baines submits that these two scenes in fact form part of an on-going investigation within Gadda’s writings into the theme of violence on bodies in general. On this basis, she goes on to propose that a tentative association might be drawn between the visual violence of Gadda’s writings and Caravaggio’s paintings, establishing a parallel between Gadda’s description of Liliana’s corpse and Caravaggio’s *Death of the Virgin*: “Caravaggio’s paintings often address the theme of violence on bodies,

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<sup>208</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 157.

<sup>209</sup> Far from a position of authoritative control, however, Ingravallo is subject in this scene to a series of negative emotional and physical reactions akin to those experienced by Angeloni during his interrogation: “Ingravallo, pallido, emise un mugolo strano, un sospiro o un lamento da ferito. Come se sentisse male pure lui. Un cinghiale co una palla in corpo” (QP, RR II, 57).

<sup>210</sup> Meriel Baines, ‘Elements of Caravaggio in Gadda’s Prose’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 1 (2001), <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/coursematerial/studentportfolio/HD2000-2001/merielbaines.php>>.

most vividly expressed through scenes of decapitation: *Judith and Holofernes*, the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, *Salome*. Gadda shares this interest in aggression and homicide and violent death characterises *Quer pasticciaccio* and *La cognizione*.<sup>211</sup> A clear correlation might also be drawn, in this light, between the association between corporeal violence and sexuality illustrated within Gadda's description of Liliana's corpse, and Leiris's on-going fascination with Lucas Cranach the Elder's depiction of the figures of Judith and Lucretia, as already discussed in detail in the previous section. A clear affinity emerges between Leiris's description of "la tête d'Holopherne, quand elle baigne ignominieusement dans le sang et le vin suri, près de la robe éclaboussée d'une Judith romantique" (AH, 195), and Gadda's own description, in this scene, of "il sangue, nella bocca, e [...] quegli occhi, non più d'uomo, sulla piaga: c'era ancora da lavorare: un colpo ancora: gli occhi! della belva infinita. La insospettata ferocia delle cose...le si rivelava d'un subito...brevi anni!" (QP, RR II, 68).

In both of these scenes, the threat of female sexuality is neutralised through its transmutation into a pictorial image to be gazed upon, transfigured and consumed by the male (desiring) observer. For Leiris, this forms part of a continued fascination with woman as image, as is illustrated by his life-long fixation with the pictorial depictions of a series of female figures – from Cleopatra to Judith and Lucretia, and from Salome to the Medusa – as well as a life-long penchant for allegorisation. "J'ai toujours été séduit par les *allégories*", he confesses in *L'Age d'homme*, "leçons par l'image en même temps qu'énigmes à résoudre, et souvent attirantes figures féminines fortes de leur propre beauté et de tout ce qu'un symbole, par définition, a de trouble" (AH, 53-4).

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<sup>211</sup> Baines, 'Elements of Caravaggio'.

Describing the reasons that led to Leiris's involvement in the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission, Peter Phipps suggests that the author was driven by a life-long sense of psycho-sexual frustration and a thwarted quest for an unattainable contact with the other: "the same endless quest for self-knowledge and satisfaction through an experience of the other that always escapes him."<sup>212</sup> And it is in precisely these terms, I have proposed, that one might interpret the relationship with the female other set out in the works of both Gadda and Leiris. As the unattainable object of an impossible desire for possession and comprehension, woman comes to stand at the centre of a complex web of suffering and disempowerment within both authors' works. Faced with a female other who is at once feared and desired, it is only through a violent act of visual objectification that the threat of female sexual agency might be controlled. In his analysis of the investigation of Liliana's corpse, Dombroski describes this process of visual objectification in terms of an act of "fetishisation" intended to neutralise the threat of the other: "The fetishisation and desecration of the body that produces here the grotesque is the means Gadda uses to transform his deepest anxieties and desires into a surface reality, a soulless piece of written matter devoid of affect, that is, into a negation-repression of the obscure."<sup>213</sup> By means of a violent, objectifying gaze, woman as threatening, active sexual other is reduced to the harmless, empty status of the written word: "Liliana, therefore, allegorically speaking, 'is' nothing but literature: the more she is defiled by the gaze of the Other, the more suggestive (seductive) she becomes."<sup>214</sup>

Excluded from the possibility of entering into any successful relationship with the female other, woman thus becomes a symbol, for both Gadda and Leiris, of the very unfulfillability of desire itself. As the source of a crippling experience of gendered

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<sup>212</sup> Peter Phipps, 'Michel Leiris: Master of Ethnographic Failure', in *Celebrating Transgression: Method and Politics in Anthropological Studies of culture*, ed. by Ursula Rao and John Hutnyk (New York: Berghahn, 2006), 183-194 (p. 189).

<sup>213</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 72.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

disempowerment, a direct association is established within both authors' thought between the sphere of the female and a destructive form of Eros. Contrary to the ideal sacred bond envisaged by Leiris together with Laure and Bataille, the erotic relationship, like the relationship between individual and collective other, is based not on an exhilarating experience of unity, but rather on a heightened experience of individual fragmentation and isolation, which for Leiris is linked with a debilitating sense of 'vide' inherent to all human experience, and which for Gadda gives rise to the debilitating experience of male psychic impotence described by Freud.

## CHAPTER 3

### **‘Lo scherno solo dei disegni e delle parvenze era salvo’: Writing as ‘écran de protection’ or ‘strumento della vendetta’**

Knowledge kills action, action requires the veil of illusion – it is this lesson which Hamlet teaches [...] Not reflection, no! – true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth [...] In the consciousness of the truth once perceived, man now sees everywhere only the terror or the absurdity of existence; now he can understand the symbolism of Ophelia’s fate, now he can realise the wisdom of the sylvan god Silenus: and he is filled with loathing.

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Leiris declares at one point in *L’Age d’homme* that, for him, one of the key purposes of the act of writing is to “se forger des mythes”, since it is only by shrouding the self beneath a protective ‘mask’ that he can face living: “Comment oserais-je me regarder”, he questions, “si je ne portais pas soit un masque, soit des lunettes déformantes?” (AH, 156). “Il est bien entendu”, he goes on to proclaim in *Biffures*, “que si je tiens à tracer, de façon à peu près satisfaisante, les festons d’une calligraphie [...] c’est que cela me tient lieu –à mes propres yeux – de parure ou de masque pour mon existence” (B, RJ, 277). Taken together with the strict tauromachic code set out in ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, in

which he declares writing to be a valid enterprise *only* if it eschews all trace of the imaginary and involves an uncompromising submission to a strict set of rules, this presentation of writing as self-defensive process of (self-)transfiguration points, I would argue, to a fundamental tension that underlies his autobiographical project. Leiris describes this as a tension between the conflicting poles of ‘fiction’ and ‘réalité’, an opposition that represents one of the key dilemmas of his life: “Lustre adamantin de l’art et nudité houleuse de la vie, fiction et réalité, *là-bas* et *ici même* dont la conjugaison [...] est peut-être mon grand problème” (F, RJ, 659). Hovering ambiguously between a series of antitheses – “En porte-à-faux entre présent et passé, entre imagination et souvenir, entre poésie et réalité” (B, RJ, 116) – Leiris would appear to be riven between two conflicting desires: the urge to embark on a direct and courageous confrontation with the sphere of ‘réalité’, on the one hand, understood here in the sense of his own subjective ‘reality’, and the desire to withdraw into the realm of the ‘imaginary’ on the other. In line with this opposition between the poles of the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’, and conception of writing as self-defensive tool of (self-)transfiguration, critics have tended to interpret Gadda’s use of the genre of semi-autobiographical fiction as a means of shielding the reader from an underlying tragic ‘reality’ through the creation of a protective veil of ‘fiction’. While Sbragia sets this in terms of a self-protective “transparent mask of autobiography”<sup>215</sup> designed to enable Gadda to express the inexpressible, Dombroski conceives of this as a process involving “the modelling of a fully shaped allegorical figure”.<sup>216</sup> Critics thus point to the existence of a two-tiered structure within Gadda’s works, between the comic sphere of ‘fiction’ on the one hand, and the tragic sphere of ‘reality’ on the other.

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<sup>215</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 111.

<sup>216</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 6.

Contrary to such interpretations, which are based on an opposition between the poles of ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’, I would argue that what unites the negative vision of subjectivity set out in both authors’ writings is the ultimately tragic *inseparability* of these two seemingly contradictory poles. For while they might each be seen to alternate between a desire to engage in a direct confrontation with the sphere of the ‘real’ and an opposing urge to shield themselves behind the protective veil of ‘fiction’, I would contend that any such an attempt to separate these two poles is inevitably forestalled by the realisation, in Leiris’s words, “que tout est théâtre, simulacre, illusion, et qu’en somme tout n’est que vanité” (FB, RJ, 986). Within Gadda’s writings, this is expressed through a repeated critique of the “bacio bugiardo della Parvenza” or illusory “vane immagini” (CD, RR I, 703) on which social reality is based, and a tragic recognition – as embodied by the experiences of the autobiographical figure of Gonzalo – of the ultimately self-destructive nature of any attempt to pierce through this illusory sphere in order to gain access to a more ‘authentic’ mode of being. This chapter will examine the implications of this unresolved tension between the poles of ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ in Gadda’s and Leiris’s semi-autobiographical and autobiographical writings, respectively, questioning the extent to which they might be seen to use writing as a means both of defending against and of exposing an intrinsically flawed experience of subjectivity.

## Leiris

‘Ni seul ni pas seul, / ni avec tous ni avec certains, / ni ici ni là, / ni dedans ni dehors, / ni mort ni vivant, / ni quelqu’un ni personne, / ni moi ni lui, / ni chaud ni froid.’

Michel Leiris, *Frêle bruit*

### ‘Langage communicatif’ vs ‘langage privé’

In her study of theatricality in Leiris’s writings, *L’autobiographie et ses aspects théâtraux chez Michel Leiris*, Catherine Masson describes this central dichotomy between ‘réalité’ and ‘fiction’ as a tension between ‘la poésie’ on the one hand and ‘le monde’ on the other, suggesting that there is an unresolved friction at the base of the author’s thought between the poetic act and the concrete ‘reality’ to which it refers. His entire oeuvre might be seen to revolve, she suggests, around two coexisting yet contradictory drives: “à la fois volonté d’échapper grâce à la poésie au monde auquel il a été livré (comme un désir de mort à la société) et en même temps volonté de changer ce monde en renversant des idées reçues (désir de révolte et donc de vie).”<sup>217</sup> Leiris himself repeatedly presents writing, as suggested above, as a means of escaping the concrete sphere of his own quotidian reality, as illustrated by his description of poetry, in *Biffures*, as “une façon de me situer en marge, de fuir ce qui, immédiatement, eût défini ma place parmi les autres, d’annihiler pour moi le cadre menaçant des métiers ordinaires, voire même de nier le cloisonnement des classes ou d’en faire table rase en me situant en dehors et comme au-dessus d’elles” (B, RJ, 221). In relation to the

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<sup>217</sup> Masson, p. 66.

second of these two drives, however – the desire for a concrete engagement with the real – one might equally recall his insistence on the need to “établir entre la réalité et [s]oi le contact le plus direct” (B, RJ, 75), as part of an extended endeavour to evade sterile narcissistic reflection. It is interesting to note, moreover, that Masson describes the first of these two propulsions – the desire to withdraw from the sphere of the ‘real’ through a retreat into the sphere of the ‘imaginary’ – as an attempted “mort à la société”. For it is in precisely these terms that Gadda establishes the attempted (yet ultimately thwarted) retreat from society enacted by the overtly autobiographical figure of Gonzalo Pirobutirro, in *La cognizione del dolore*. For while, as I shall examine in the following section, Gonzalo ultimately rejects social ‘reality’ as nothing more than an empty, superficial façade made up of a series of illusory “parvenze non valide”, he is at the same time cripplingly aware of the self-destructive implications of any attempt on the part of the individual to exist in isolation from it.

In line with this unresolved dichotomy between the spheres of ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, Leiris explains in *Fibrilles* that one of the initial motives behind his writing consisted in the need to “*faire coïncider, avec le monde nu et criant de l’oiseau tombé du nid, le monde magique des aventures du langage [...] faire coïncider avec quelque chose d’une gravité vitale le jeu frivole qui s’opère entre les mots*” (F, RJ, 745). This assertion points to one of the clearest means through which this opposition between ‘réalité’ and ‘fiction’ is expressed throughout his oeuvre: namely, an on-going tension between two opposing models of language, which Joëlle de Sermet has termed ‘le langage communicatif’ and ‘le langage privé’. Within this division, ‘le langage communicatif’ stands for language as an objective, intersubjective tool devised for the pragmatic purpose of transmitting information, while ‘le langage privé’ represents a contrasting conception of language as a personal instrument of expression. Analysing the ongoing influence that Surrealist thought exerted on Leiris’s

understanding of language, de Sermet suggests that language is divided throughout Leiris's writings by a wider series of tensions:

le langage [...] porte en son sein la marque d'une division. Prenant en charge la dichotomie entre extérieur et intérieur qui scinde le psychisme du sujet et l'appelle tour à tour au repli narcissique ou à la dissolution dans l'impersonnel, le langage privé s'oppose au langage communicatif.<sup>218</sup>

With its focus on the productive potential of language and its quest, in Seán Hand's words, to "explode the ossified logic of a realist epistemology and give free representation to the unconscious",<sup>219</sup> Surrealism exerted a decisive influence on Leiris's conception of the question of language. In line with his interest in the notion of the 'merveilleux', as explored in Chapter One, as a means of breaking with normality and overturning established modes of thought, Leiris celebrates Surrealism's rejection not only of established linguistic systems but also of the associated, rationalist mode of thought which seeks to *impose* fixed, pre-established dictionary definitions. In opposition to this structured system of meaning, he praises the movement's espousal of a productive model of language free from the restrictions of established thought and etymology, based on the premise that,

Le sens usuel et le sens étymologique d'un mot ne peuvent rien nous apprendre sur nous-mêmes [...] En disséquant les mots que nous aimons, sans nous soucier de suivre ni l'étymologie, ni la signification admise, nous découvrons leurs vertus les plus cachés et les ramifications secrètes qui se propagent à travers tout le langage, canalisées par les associations de sons, de formes et d'idées. Alors le langage se

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<sup>218</sup> Joëlle de Sermet, *Michel Leiris: poète surréaliste* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997), p. 78.

<sup>219</sup> Hand, p. 16

transforme en oracle et nous avons là (si tenu qu'il soit) un fil pour nous guider, dans la Babel de notre esprit.<sup>220</sup>

Words, once divested of their external, imposed meaning (“canalisées par les associations de sons, de formes et d'idées”) would thus provide the speaking subject with a means of gaining access to a far more valuable, hidden site of meaning, with the Surrealist model of language coming to be conceived by the author as a means of escaping the restrictive, utilitarian use of “le langage communicatif” and related intellectual “cloisonnement”.

While Leiris would appear here to be endorsing a model of language divested of its communicative, social functions here, his adherence to any such a theory is nonetheless complicated by his recognition of the impossibility, as explored in Chapter One, of any removal of the individual from the sphere of the social. A clear illustration of this friction is to be found in the Surrealist-inspired text, *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses*. Published in 1925, *Glossaire* takes the form of a Surrealist anti-glossary, which explores the analogies between words and their physical properties. Described by Lejeune as a “marvellous game of language [...] from which one can elaborate both a way of looking at language and a method for reading autobiography”,<sup>221</sup> the text provides the reader with an interesting insight into the equivocal nature of Leiris's early endorsement of Surrealist conceptions of language, and a key basis for understanding the wider tension between ‘réalité’ and ‘fiction’ that continues to underpin his thought. In line with Surrealist practice, Leiris's overt intention in this text is to break open the fixed structure of pre-established dictionary definitions, in order to grant the subject access to a series of hidden, and hence more ‘valuable’, meanings. In his examination of the word games elaborated in *Glossaire*, Lejeune draws attention to the author's

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<sup>220</sup> As quoted by de Sermet in *Michel Leiris, poète surréaliste*, p. 67 (originally appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste* (No. 3, 15 April 1925), p. 7).

<sup>221</sup> Philippe Lejeune and Alan Stoekl, ‘Glossaire’ in *SubStance*, Vol. 4, No. 11/12 (1975), 116-130 (p. 116).

valorisation of what he describes as ‘networks’ of meaning, suggesting that “If language is a network, a word is a knot”.<sup>222</sup> For Leiris, the value of the Surrealist approach to language might thus be seen to lie primarily in the boundless productivity granted to individual words, each of which comes to take the form of what Sheringham describes as “a microcosm within whose folds a larger reality is enclosed.”<sup>223</sup> While everyday usage of language employs only a limited number of these networks, in what Lejeune describes as a “mania” of distinctions, Leiris seeks to bring to light the existence of new, boundless associations, determined “par opposition à la définition normative du dictionnaire [...] pour mieux se faire l’instrument subversive de transmission d’un sens plurivoque et secret”.<sup>224</sup>

Any such an attempt to break away completely from fixed, social meaning is however immediately problematised in this text by the fact that there can be no deviation or associative ‘networks’ without a fixed source of meaning from which to depart. Each individual gloss, De Sermet suggests, “ne se détermine que par opposition à la définition normative du dictionnaire”.<sup>225</sup> While on the one hand the text appears to involve an attempt to liberate meaning from set definitions, in a valorisation of endless individual production of meaning, it therefore nonetheless remains grounded on an inescapable need for socially-conditioned stability. The result of this tension between ‘personal’ and ‘social’ language, within the *Glossaire*, is an inescapable opposition between freedom and restriction, boundless productivity and fixed meaning. The notion of language as an infinitely productive source of meaning is also forestalled here, moreover, by the format adopted in the text. For, while it is conceived with an aim to disrupt, the text in fact presented in precisely the form it purports to reject: the dictionary. An opposition is thus apparent from the start between the intention

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<sup>222</sup> Lejeune and Stoekl, p.117

<sup>223</sup> Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography, Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 251-252,

<sup>224</sup> de Sermet, p. 67.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

behind the text and the form in which it is presented, as highlighted by Kleiber's, who has suggested that, "Il s'agit pour lui d'annexer les mots, soit – comme il le dit explicitement – de se les approprier. Mais cette appropriation passe par la forme d'écriture la plus didactique et la plus instrumentale qui soit, la forme du dictionnaire."<sup>226</sup> What results, Kleiber elaborates, is a dichotomy "entre un occultisme poétique et une pédagogie, entre une écriture autotélique, qui obéit à un code particulier, et une écriture transitive [...] et tout l'enjeu de *Glossaire* est de concilier ces deux orientations."<sup>227</sup> For, "not content with opening the word, undoing the knot and then leaving everything suspended", the text in fact itself, Lejeune suggests, "continue[s] the work to the point of recomposing the word itself in another form from the elements of its decomposition."<sup>228</sup>

In *I viaggi la morte*, a collection of essays dedicated to a number of the core questions central to Gadda's thought – from language, to subjectivity and the issue of writing itself – Gadda grapples at length with this tension between these two contrasting linguistic models: language as social tool, on the one hand, and language as autonomous means of personal expression, on the other. Like Leiris, however, while Gadda remains drawn to an autonomous model of language independent of its social environment and capable of endless, individual creation, he resolutely dismisses any such a vision as an impossible ideal. Intrinsically connected to the "pazza istoria degli uomini" (VM, SGF I, 437) of which it is part, language, like the self, is always, for the Milanese author, an inherently social phenomenon: "Le frasi nostre, le nostre parole", he explains in 'Come lavoro', "sono dei momenti-pause: (dei pianerottoli di sosta) d'una fluenza (o d'una ascensione) conoscitiva-espressiva" (VM, SGF I 437). As Roscioni posits in an essay dedicated to the question of knowledge in Gadda's

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<sup>226</sup> Pierre-Henri Kleiber, *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses de Michel Leiris et la question du langage* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

<sup>227</sup> Ibid, pp. 11-12.

<sup>228</sup> Philippe Lejeune and Alan Stoekl, 'Glossaire', p. 118.

thought, as against a conception of words endowed with their own reality, Gadda invites the reader to “rimergere le parole nel flusso della vita”.<sup>229</sup> Any attempt to separate language from its social function, it follows, is to be rejected as an inherently narcissistic act: “Mi studio di evitare”, he proclaims in this same essay, “per altro, ogni slittamento verso innovazioni meramente narcisistiche” (VM, SGF I, 437). Nonetheless, just as Leiris might be seen to remain drawn throughout his writings to a Surrealist conception of language as an individual tool generative of subjective meaning, Gadda recognises the existence of a fundamental tension between the necessity to limit oneself to the level of social meaning and the desire to engage in a form of personal creation outside of that context. In ‘Le belle lettere e i contributi espressivi delle tecniche’, this is set in terms of a tension between “l’impulso coordinatore-espressore proprio e originale d’ogni singolo e la necessità di adoperare, per la comunicazione, un materiale espressivo già definito in termini, già concreto in figurazioni comuni” (VM, SGF I, 476). What results, for the author, is an on-going and inescapable friction between personal and social truth, described in “‘Amleto’ Al Teatro Valle’ as,

...un dibattito: il ritardante, lacerante contrasto fra le promesse della vita consueta, del mondo com’è, degli usi civili, ossia regali, e diplomatici, della menzogna acquiescente, del patto ignominioso datore di salute fisica e di pace fisica, e il senso invece dell’incarico e del conseguente adempimento cui siamo astretti dalle ragioni profonde del ‘cuore’, cioè dall’impero etico d’una ragione sopraindividuale: la coscienza etica dell’eternità. (VM, SGF I, 539-40)

Just as Gadda firmly refutes the possibility of any autonomous act of communication – “Nego [...] che l’espressione, le più volte, pervenga a costruire verità e bellezza per sé, identica soltanto a se stesso, prescindendo l’artefice dalla materiale” (VM, SGF I, 489) – so too,

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<sup>229</sup> Gian Carlo Roscioni, ‘Conoscenza e deformazione’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/classics/roscionidisarmonia.php>>.

therefore, does *Glossaire j'y serre mes gloses* highlight Leiris's own ambivalent adherence to the Surrealist model of language. Corresponding broadly to the central opposition between the personal and the social, Leiris appears to be torn in this text between a strictly utilitarian conception of language ("l'utilisation normative des mots") as social tool, and the endless linguistic freedom granted by the Surrealist linguistic model ("leur détournement à des fins personnels").

In the context of his later autobiographical project, it is in the 'Reusement' episode, which has been discussed already in Chapter Two, that this disjunction between language as personal expression and language as pragmatic, social tool finds its clearest expression. As a pure moment of personal expression, existing prior to the acceptance of language as a pragmatic tool of intersubjective communication, the 'Reusement' outburst might be seen to belong firmly within the category of De Sermet's "langage privé". Like the model of self-sufficient infant subjectivity on which it is based, however, it also represents an impossible autobiographical ideal, which Seán Hand has described in terms of a "prediscursive state of pure feeling".<sup>230</sup> It is thus significant that it is with this incident that Leiris elects to begin his autobiographical tetralogy as a whole, since by placing this episode at the very beginning of *Biffures*, he is illustrating a critical limitation intrinsic to the act of representation itself. Since, according to Lacanian theory, representation can begin only at the point of the subject's entry into the realm of the symbolic, it follows that Leiris's act of self-representation can commence only at the moment of his 'fall' from childhood into adulthood. Pure self-representation – like the form of monadic subjectivity denounced by Gadda in *Meditazione milanese* – is refuted as an impossible ideal. For while the advent of adult subjectivity, and ensuing loss of the subjective autonomy of infancy, is experienced by the young Leiris in overtly negative terms, taking the form of both a loss and a violent assault, he

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<sup>230</sup> Hand, p. 97.

nonetheless recognises that the alternative – namely, a form of unethical narcissistic retreat – is both untenable and dangerous:

...face au *il* ou aux *ils* des objets devenus menaçants – à tout le moins étrangers – il ne reste que le *je*, enfermé dans son alvéole. Mais qu'est-ce qu'un *je* – un *je* unique et isolé – sans un *tu*, sans un *nous*, sans un *il* gravitant autour de lui et fournissant matière à une hiérarchie dont il occupe le sommet, personne première et singulière? Arraché du *je-tu-il*, retranché du *nous-vous-il* (sans parler du *je-tu-ELLE*), le *je*, dans d'aussi évidemment absurdes conditions, n'est plus guère qu'un enfant qui, voulant se compter tout seul, récite *am-stram-gram pic-et-pic-et-colégram bour-et-bour-et-ratatam mis-tangram* et tourne indéfiniment en rond dans cette combinaison de paroles et de mouvements réduite à un vain bredouillement, puisqu'il n'y a pas là de compagnons à la fois opposés et associés à lui pour justifier un dénombrement et façonner, en dressant devant lui le rôle d'autrui, les limites qui lui confèrent une existence en tant que corps séparé? (B, RJ, 71)

Leiris insists here that there can be no communication without an audience, just as there can be no self without an other. Any attempt on the part of the individual to exist outside of the sphere of social relations is therefore denounced by Leiris – in accordance with the theory of identity set out in Gadda's *Meditazione milanese* – as an intrinsically self-destructive act. This is further highlighted in the following declaration, in *Fibrilles*, in which, emphasising the inherently social nature of language, Leiris stresses the impossibility of conceiving of the (speaking) self outside of the web of social relations to which he/she belongs:

...l'existence du langage en tant que réalité extérieure me dépassant, ce dont il faut déduire que l'*on ne parle pas tout seul* (les autres même absents étant impliqués dans l'acte de parler puisque c'est leurs mots qu'on emploie) et que dès l'instant que l'on

parle – ou écrit, ce qui revient au même – on admet qu'en dehors de soi il existe un autrui, de sorte qu'il serait absurde de récuser, si l'on parle ou écrit, les nœuds qui vous attachent au cercle indéfini d'humanité que par-delà les temps et les lieux votre interlocuteur sans visage représente ? (F, RJ, 607)

With its insistence on the impossibility of existing outside of the endless series of 'knots' that make up the intrinsically interrelated network of intersubjectivity, this assertion has much in common with Gadda's own explanation, in *Meditazione milanese*, of the impossibility of conceiving of any one individual unit outside of the endless "grumo di relazioni" to which it belongs:

Ma è pensabile un fattore deformante da solo? Una causa da sola? No: ciò è un non senso. Un atto deformante non è un individuo ma una sinfonia di relazioni intervenienti: abbiamo visto che uno spostamento in un sistema è spostamento, alloiosis, di tutti gli elementi di un sistema: non è concepibile una mutazione d'un elemento, da solo: perché nel mondo delle relazioni non esistono monete tesaurizzate nell'arca e dimenticate dalla pulsazione vitale, ma tutte si muovono e rappresentano soltanto rapporti. (MM, SVP, 649)

Far from being limited to the question of language, however, De Sermet submits that this tension between private and social models of language forms part of a far wider series of "aspects antithétiques" at work within Leiris's oeuvre as a whole.<sup>231</sup> One such antithesis, which has important wider implications within the author's thought, is to be found in the ongoing tension between the key Leirisian notions of 'jeu' and 'règle'. When discussing the significance of his toy soldier falling from the table in the 'Reusement' episode, Leiris

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<sup>231</sup> See Guy Poitry, *Michel Leiris, dualisme et totalité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995). For Poitry, Leiris's oeuvre is structured around a fundamental *dualisme*, which the author is driven by an on-going desire to overcome. As he explains, "s'il est une constante dans cette oeuvre, c'est assurément celle du modèle dualiste et de l'aspiration à le dépasser" (p. 10).

informs the reader that, “l’essentiel n’était pas qu’un soldat fût tombé [...] c’était qu’il y eût quelque chose m’appartenant qui fut tombé, et que cette chose m’appartenant fût un jouet” (B, RJ, 4). The true significance of the incident would therefore lie not in the loss of the toy soldier as a specific, concrete object per sé, but rather in its status as a symbol of the world of play at large, and in the implications that such a loss holds, more generally, for the child’s experience of subjectivity. In this single moment, he is catapulted from the childhood realm of play into the adult realm of intersubjective relations. The wider significance accorded to the notion of play within Leiris’s thought is illustrated when, drawing a link between the question of play and the world of inventions, he suggests that, “le monde des inventions représentait un lot d’espèces un peu à part, une zone douée de son soleil propre, telle que l’était pour moi à l’origine, le monde merveilleux des jouets” (B, RJ, 106).

Discussing the wider significance attributed to the concept of play by Leiris, Jeffrey Mehlman suggests that, in order to understand the experience of selfhood portrayed within the author’s writings, it is first necessary to grasp the various meanings of ‘jeu’ on which it is based. The notion of play, in its various interpretations, is, he posits, central to Leiris’s understanding of the question of identity from an early age. Stressing the complexity of the “textual interplay between the various meanings of *jeu*”<sup>232</sup> at work within *La Règle du jeu* as a whole, Mehlman suggests that a fundamental opposition can be identified within Leiris’s writing between two conflicting models of play: firstly, the autonomous, innocent act of play related to childhood diversion and, secondly, the inauthentic, self-defensive act of simulation central to adult intersubjective relations. “When the fictive closure of the play world is threatened”, Mehlman explains, “when its stable unity is broached, the ensuing play is

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<sup>232</sup> Mehlman, p. 102.

experienced as dangerous and consequently to be denied. This, in turn, implies a protective (self-)deception: *jouer, feindre, simuler*.”<sup>233</sup>

This opposition between two divergent notions of play – the one relating to the innocent, autonomous model of subjectivity embodied by the infant, the other to the protective, performative nature of adult intersubjective relations – might also be taken as a useful model for considering two contrasting models of subjectivity. For while the pre-discursive infant embodies an autonomous model of subjectivity, uncorrupted by the dictates of social being, adult subjectivity hinges both for Leiris and for Gadda on the adoption of a constructed persona necessary for the individual’s integration into the social sphere. In an entry from his journal dated 7 February 1943, Leiris goes so far as to describe the irreconcilable conflict between these two opposing modes of identity as the tragic base of human existence itself:

Ce qui constitue l’authentique tragédie, c’est qu’il n’y a pas seulement déchirement mais *conflit*: antagonisme, dans tout homme, entre l’individu biologique et le personnage social, - c’est-à-dire, en dernière analyse, entre la créature particulière dont toute la vie est nullité absurde (du seul fait qu’à la fin elle disparaît) et ce qu’elle représente en tant que parcelle de l’humanité en devenir, - conflit manifesté concrètement par cette dualité: d’une part, le moi égoïste et animal (hanté par l’idée de la mort): d’autre part, le minimum de règles morales ou esthétiques auquel bon gré mal gré, il souscrit. (Journal, 376)

A parallel might also be identified here between Leiris’s insistence on the egotistic nature of biological selfhood, which involves an untenable rejection of the social and attempt to exist outside of the interrelated web described above, and the theory of identity and narcissism

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<sup>233</sup> Mehlman, p. 102.

proposed by Gadda in his theoretical treatise *Meditazione milanese*. For Gadda, as suggested in Chapter One, the concept of the monadic self, or “‘io’ pacco postale”, is to be refuted as a notion that is at once erroneous and unethical. As he explains, “Il sistema  $n + 1$  sarebbe una più vasta coinvoluzione di idee o relazioni rispetto a  $n$ : per esempio l’uomo che si pensa come cittadino ( $n + 1$ ) rispetto a chi si pensa come nucleo fisiologico-psicologico ( $n$ )” (MM, SVP, 755). It follows, he argues, that any individual who attempts to remain outside of the social sphere represents not only a burden, but also a threat, to social cohesion: “Ogni uomo che non può attuare il doveroso  $n + 1$  grava sulla collettività e vive in essa come cosa morta o come perturbazione retrogradiente. Esso è il ‘dissoluto’ dal compito, dal futuro e possibile  $n + 1$ ” (MM, SVP, 774). A further parallel can be found between Gadda’s description of this failure to integrate as a form of sterility, or inaction, and Leiris’s own denunciation, in *Biffures*, of sterile, narcissistic contemplation as a cowardly retreat on the part of the individual into the sphere of the imaginary at the expense of a concrete engagement with the ‘real’:

Pourquoi suis-je donc toujours hésitant devant l’idée d’un franc plongeon et continue-je ainsi à virevolter, au lieu de me jeter carrément dans ce lac dont les eaux dormantes m’attirent, seul moyen d’échapper à une contemplation stérile de Narcisse qui ne bouge pas, prend des poses en regardant venir et se regarde prendre des poses? Contemplation qui ne cessera que quand je me serai lancé d’un bond au sein des eaux et me serai fondu, d’un coup, avec l’image qu’auparavant je m’obstinais à curieusement considérer, préférant à une plongée saine et virile les esthétiques rêvasseries, à peine coupées de vagues flâneries dont le seul résultat était de me conduire d’un point à un autre point du bord. (B, RJ, 97)

An on-going tension can thus be identified within Leiris’s writings between the conflicting poles of ‘jeu’ and ‘règle’, which might be linked to a broader division between two opposing

models of selfhood. This is evidenced not only by the author's ambivalent adherence to two contradictory models of language, relating to the spheres of the individual and the social, respectively, but also by the on-going interplay at the base of his writings between two contrasting notions of play. To what extent, though, does this unresolved tension between the poles of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' come to shape the experience of subjectivity put forward within his autobiographical writings?

A particularly striking illustration of this tension between the conflicting poles of 'réalité' and 'fiction' can be found in the contrast between the strict code set out in the preface to the 1946 edition of *L'Age d'homme*, 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie', and the main body of the text itself. In a sustained rejection of empty 'aestheticism', Leiris uses this preface to retrospectively set out the tauromachic code around which his autobiographical project would ideally be ordered. Stressing his desire to engage in a complete suppression of the imagination, and a corresponding eradication of all superfluous aesthetic detail, Leiris explains that it is only through an evasion of the imaginary and contrasting engagement with the author's own 'reality' that writing might escape the category of the gratuitous: "Du point de vue strictement esthétique, il s'agissait pour moi de condenser, à l'état presque brut, un ensemble de faits et d'images que je me refusais à exploiter en laissant travailler dessus mon imagination" (AH, 15). As part of his commitment to engaging in an unforgiving exposure of his 'real' self, he goes on to state his determination to "ne pas mésuser du langage et faire par conséquent en sorte que sa parole [...] soit toujours vérité" (AH, 23).

As a result of its rejection of empty aestheticism and repudiation of the imaginary, this preface has led some critics to interpret the progression from Leiris's early Surrealist phase to the beginning of his autobiographical project as a transition on his part from 'jeu' to

‘règle’, otherwise set in terms of a movement away from the realm of ‘la poésie’ towards an engagement with ‘la réalité’. Indeed, the choice of war-torn Le Havre as the setting of the text would certainly appear to offer a fitting framework for such an attempt to start again, “comme s’il s’était agi de renouveler [...] la fameuse opération cartésienne” (AH, 11). One such a view is to be found, for instance, in Denis Hollier’s interpretation of the opposition between ‘fiction’ and ‘réalité’ in Leiris’s writings. Suggesting that, in contrast with early texts such as the Surrealist novel *Aurora* and his poetic collection *Simulacre* (1925), the beginning of his autobiographical project marks a movement away from the imagination towards a commitment to reality, Hollier declares that “on one side lies the imaginary [...] but this is now behind him. Before him lies reality.”<sup>234</sup> Hollier then goes on to describe Leiris’s autobiographical works in terms of a “mournful goodbye to poetry”, written in what is interpreted as a “journey to the end of unreality”.<sup>235</sup> This identification of a transition from ‘imagination’ to ‘reality’ is further corroborated by James Clifford’s suggestion that Leiris ultimately abandons “imagination, both Surrealist and romantic, in favour of a ‘*parti pris de réalisme*’.”<sup>236</sup> According to such interpretations, the author’s decision to embark upon his autobiographical project would correspond to a clear-cut decision on his part to move away from the sphere of the imaginary towards a new, concrete engagement with the ‘real’.

One might posit, however, that such readings overlook the continued, unresolved, interplay between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ within Leiris’s thought. For while his intention, as set out in ‘De la littérature’, to “faire un livre qui soit un acte” may appear to chart a clear-cut shift from Surrealist experimentation to a concrete engagement with the ‘real’, the relationship between these two positions remains far from straightforward. Hollier

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<sup>234</sup> Denis Hollier, ‘Poetry... up to Z’ in *On Leiris*, ed. by Marc Blanchard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 77-91 (p. 73).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>236</sup> James Clifford, ‘The Tropological Realism of Michel Leiris’, *Sulfur* 15 (1986) 4-20 (p. 15).

does in fact concede that while Leiris may have turned away from poetry itself in his autobiographical texts, “[his] prose finds mourning for poetry to be a surprising resource for increasing poetic build.”<sup>237</sup> This is illustrated, for instance, by the author’s decision to dedicate the text to Bataille (‘À Georges Bataille, qui est à l’origine de ce livre’), as well as by his reference, in the preface, to his continued adherence to certain precepts of the Surrealist movement: “j’eus l’idée de cet ouvrage où se trouvent confrontés souvenirs d’enfance, récits d’événements réels, rêves et impressions effectivement éprouvées, en une sorte de collage surréaliste ou plutôt de photo-montage puisque aucun élément n’y est utilisé qui ne soit d’une véracité rigoureuse ou n’ait valeur de document” (AH, 16). Equally, as noted by Hand, while Leiris’s project to “faire un livre qui soit un acte” seems to call for an act of concrete engagement, what Leiris is in fact proposing here is less an act of socio-historic commitment than a complete engagement of the self, as demonstrated by his assertion that, “Il s’agissait moins là de ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler ‘littérature engagée’ que d’une littérature dans laquelle j’essayais de m’engager tout entier” (AH, 15).

Post-dating the original publication of the text itself by ten years, this preface, which sets Leiris’s autobiographical undertaking in terms of what Seán Hand describes as a “self-imposed existential project”,<sup>238</sup> thus offers a pre-emptive challenge to our reading of the body of *L’Age d’homme* itself, standing in an uneasy relationship with the self-portrait that follows. For despite his intention to eradicate all trace of the imaginary through a scrupulous obedience to a strategy of “véracité rigoureuse”, the account that Leiris in fact proceeds to offer his reader is based on a myriad of literary, biblical and mythological reference points. Indeed, far from mere imaginary embellishments, these fictional reference points in fact come to constitute not merely a series of empty symbols but rather the very base on which Leiris

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<sup>237</sup> Hollier, ‘Poetry... up to Z’ in *On Leiris*, p. 74.

<sup>238</sup> Hand, p. 67.

grounds his experience of selfhood itself. While in the preface he declares it to have been his intention to abide by a strict set of rules based on veracity and a courageous engagement with the ‘real’, what he in fact presents us with, then, is an autobiographical text characterised by its grounding on the processes of theatricality, allegory, acting, and mythologisation.

### *Theatre, allegory, and the process of self-transfiguration*

One of the means by which this is illustrated in *L’Age d’homme* is through the strong focus on theatricality throughout the text. In a detailed analysis of importance of the theatre for Leiris, Robert Brechon suggests that, from an early age, it exerts a dual influence on his approach to reality, affecting both his self-image and perception of external reality, and his own role within it: “il se donne en spectacle (il se projette sur le théâtre), mais aussi le monde est pour lui un spectacle (il s’identifie aux personnages). Si l’on veut, il est à la fois exhibitionniste et voyeur.”<sup>239</sup> According to Brechon’s analysis, Leiris’s fascination with the world of the theatre thus leads the author to engage in a dual process of theatrical transfiguration involving both external reality and his experience of selfhood. At once ‘voyeur’ and ‘exhibitionniste’, Leiris observes, experiences and engages with reality as he would the realm of theatrical representation. Indeed, in accordance with the tendency to “se donne[r] en spectacle” highlighted by Brechon, Leiris frequently discusses identity in terms of a theatrical role to be played. Drawing a direct correlation between his own life and the experience of an actor, he proclaims in *Fibrilles* that, “enragé de théâtre j’ai, tel un acteur, mon rôle que je veux jouer, m’attachant seulement à jouer un rôle qui me ressemble et ne m’oblige pas, ensuite, à le désavouer” (F, RJ, 663). This tendency to simulate in fact dates all the way back to Leiris’s early childhood. Even as a young boy, he confesses to having

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<sup>239</sup> Robert Brechon, *L’Age d’homme de Michel Leiris* (Paris: Hachett, 1973), pp. 155-156.

engaged in a process of theatrical self-transfiguration as a means of dissimulating his own flawed sense of self and thereby controlling the way he was seen by others: “je tendais – malgré mon peu de goût pour le clinquant – à me composer une figure derrière laquelle dissimuler tout ce que je sentais chez moi de méprisable” (F, RJ, 403). Driven by the desire to improve others’ perception of him, Leiris begins casting himself in a series of roles from an early age, with the experience of selfhood coming to assume the form of a theatrical role to be played and manipulated at whim. The perils of such a process are made clear, however, by his confession to having quickly lost the capacity to distinguish between his ‘real’ identity and the self-fashioned persona with which he presented himself to others. Even as a young boy, he confesses to having found it difficult at times to distinguish between when he was being authentic and when he was merely acting out a particular role for the purpose of pleasing others: “Il me serait à peu près impossible de dire à quels moments, même très jeune, j’étais vraiment naturel, à quels moments j’incarnais un personnage” (AH, 149). This is further demonstrated, in the “Antiquités” section of *L’Age d’homme* – in which Leiris groups together a series of memories around the overarching theme of the theatrical – when he again confesses to having often found it impossible to draw a distinction, as a child, between that which was real and that which was merely theatre. Outside of the theatre hall, he explains, he would often continue to cast external events in terms of the theatrical, “Je voyais tout comme au théâtre [...] toutes choses m’apparaissant sous un angle tragique” (AH, 51).

Discussing the importance of ‘symbols’ in the context of theatrical representation, Leiris explains, towards the end of *La Règle du jeu*, that he is engaged in a persistent quest to establish a series of fixed ‘repères’ or ‘images’ against which to model his own identity:

Au théâtre, ce sont deux flambeaux allumés et un crucifix honorant un cadavre qui veulent dire *Tosca*, une tête sur un plat qui signifie *Salomé*, une statue en marche qui raconte *Don Juan*, une cassette dont on entend seulement parler qui résume *L’Avaro*,

un crâne tenu entre deux mains qui récapitule *Hamlet*. Non symboles, mais images rendant immédiatement sensibles situations ou nature des personnages, et assez fortes pour créer presque une hypnose.

Fouillant ma vie, j'aimerais pouvoir y trouver quelques images de cette espèce, qui seraient par rapport à moi, sinon ce qu'est le dragon terrassé à saint Georges ou le Rubicon à César, du moins des repères auxquels je pourrais solidement m'accrocher.

(FB, RJ, 971)

Like Gadda, whose autobiographical personae, as shall be explored in the following section, are so heavily loaded with literary allusion as to be rendered incapable of sustaining any one unified identity, Leiris structures his autobiographical account around a multitude of such symbolic reference points that the line between 'real' and 'constructed' selfhood quickly becomes blurred.<sup>240</sup> Catherine Masson provides a useful analysis of this process when, drawing a comparison between the author as writing subject and written object, she proposes that just as in his real life Leiris loses the capacity to distinguish between the role in which he presents himself to others and the 'real' identity behind this, so too in his writing do the series of fictional personae with which he identifies eventually come to overshadow the authentic 'person' behind them:

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<sup>240</sup> One might draw a connection here with Jules de Gaultier's earlier theory of *Le Bovarysme: la psychologie dans l'œuvre de Flaubert* (1892), which is centred on an examination of "le pouvoir départi à l'homme de se concevoir autre qu'il n'est". Gaultier suggests that within each individual, a certain distance, which he terms 'l'indice bovaryque', separates the poles of the 'real' and the 'imaginary': "l'écart qui existe en chaque individuel entre l'imaginaire et le réel, entre ce qu'il est et ce qu'il croit être" (p. 16). Drawing on the example of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Gaultier explains that this discrepancy can however prove so marked in certain individuals as to render them incapable of distinguishing between their 'real' and 'fictional' selves. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, this leads to image prevailing so definitively over reality that any authentic, underlying self behind the self-constructed image is lost: "Ce besoin de se concevoir autre qu'elle n'est constitue sa véritable personnalité, il atteint chez elle une violence incomparable et s'exprime par un refus d'accepter jamais aucune réalité et de s'en contenter. Rien n'a action sur elle qui ne soit image." So strongly developed is the self-fashioned 'persona' that she constructs for herself, that all trace of the 'person' behind it is lost. (Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme: la psychologie dans l'œuvre de Flaubert* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989)). As Francis Marmande suggests in his comparative study of Leiris and Bataille: "l'homme peut prendre son moi accessoire pour son moi supérieur et réel, le personnage pour la personne" (Francis Marmande, *Bataille-Leiris: l'intenable assentiment au monde* (Paris: Belin, 1999), p. 15).

D'une façon générale, Leiris tient à se présenter comme une victime de sa comédie. Il a comparé sa vie à celle de Merlin victime de ses propres enchantements. Il n'est plus capable de dire quand il était naturel et quand il incarnait un personnage. Leiris joue un personnage parce qu'il éprouve le besoin de se grandir aux yeux des autres. Nous voyons la même attitude adoptée dans l'écriture puisqu'au lieu de se raconter en usant du JE direct, Leiris se regarde jouer le rôle d'Holopherne et nous assistons à la mise en scène de ce regard sur lui-même. Dans la façon de présenter ses attitudes, Leiris montre que c'est ce regard jeté sur lui qui fait de sa vie un théâtre ou une œuvre d'art puisqu'elle est présentée dans *L'Âge d'homme* comme un 'radeau de Méduse'.<sup>241</sup>

In contradiction with the strategy described in 'De la littérature', in which Leiris sets out his (retrospective) project to offer a self-portrait removed of all trace of the 'imaginary', the account that he in fact presents to his reader is characterised by what Blankeman terms "une forte présence du thème du mensonge, du masque et de l'affabulation."<sup>242</sup> Driven by a self-declared, life-long "incapacité à accepter la banalité de la vie" and "besoin de la transfigurer", Leiris in fact frequently presents the goal of self-transfiguration as one of the primary motives behind his writing project itself. Describing his initial decision to embark upon a literary career, for example, he explains that if "*j'ai souhaité être un poète [...]* ce fut plutôt pour me hausser jusqu'au rang que j'assignais à celui qui use du langage comme une manière de pythie proférant ses oracles, qualité d'inspiré qui pour son bien comme pour son mal l'écarte de l'existence vulgaire et fait de lui une sorte de demi-dieu (ou quart de dieu)" (F, RJ, 756). Unable to accept the banality of the everyday, he initially envisages writing as a means of dissociating himself from the realm of the quotidian through a liberating process of self-transfiguration: "l'acte crucial est pour moi celui-ci: me projeter dans la zone *off limits* où le

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<sup>241</sup> Masson, p. 45.

<sup>242</sup> Bruno Blankeman, *Lectures de Leiris: l'âge d'homme*, ed. by Blankeman and others (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004), p. 96.

langage écrit sera ma pensée devenue chose et moi-même arraché aux vicissitudes de la vie” (F, RJ, 771).

Another key aspect of this process of transfiguration is to be found in the notion of ‘allegorisation’, the importance of which Leiris stresses repeatedly. Confessing to a deep-seated *need* to allegorise, he goes so far at one point to suggest that it is the process of allegorisation that constitutes the very base of *L’Age d’homme* itself: “cet ancien amour pour les ‘allégories’ [...] je suis convaincu qu’il faut rapprocher également de ce dernier l’habitude que j’ai de penser par formules, analogies, images, - technique mentale dont, que je le veuille ou non, le présent écrit n’est qu’une application” (AH, 55). For him, ‘allegorisation’ represents a process of active transformation of the everyday which is driven, once again, by an intrinsic need to transfigure the mundanity of quotidian reality: “Quoi qu’il en soit, quand je disais ‘allégorie’ c’était assez pour tout transfigurer: quelle que fût la nature du contenu exprimé (gai ou triste, rassurant ou effrayant), quel que fût l’aspect même de l’image empruntée, le simple fait qu’il y eût allégorie était là pour tout arranger” (AH, 54). The importance of this process is again illustrated in the following statement, in which Leiris suggests that it is only through an active process of self-transfiguration, via the creation of a series of myths, that he is able to continue living:

... cette rencontre toute récente m’a révélé à moi-même d’une manière si abrupte que c’est tout juste si je peux continuer à rédiger cet écrit, tant j’ai maintenant conscience de me trouver au pied du mur, dans un état de dénuement excluant toute possibilité de me forger des mythes, ou de ces pôles à demi légendaires auxquels – si ardemment qu’on aspire à la sincérité – l’on se réfère toujours, parce qu’eux seuls permettent de vivre. (AH, 156)

Be it through the composition of a series of symbolic reference-points or the transformation of the mundanity of quotidian reality through a process of allegorisation, for Leiris writing thus comes to represent a means of constructing the allegories or myths that alone make it possible to live, a process perfectly encapsulated in the following statement:

En tous points, je suis semblable au petit-bourgeois qui se donne l'illusion d'être Sardanapale en allant au bordel. J'ai d'abord voulu jouer le rôle de Rolla, ensuite celui d'Hamlet; aujourd'hui celui de Gérard de Nerval. Lequel demain? J'ai toujours choisi des masques qui n'allaient pas à la sale gueule du petit-bourgeois que je suis et je n'ai copié mes héros que dans ce qu'ils ont de plus facile à imiter [...] Comment oserais-je me regarder si je ne portais pas soit un masque, soit des lunettes déformantes? (AH, 155-6)

And, in line with the many literary reference points around which Gadda constructs the overtly autobiographical figure of Gonzalo – from Shakespeare's Hamlet to Molière's *Misanthrope* and *Avare*, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Cervantes's Don Quixote - it is first and foremost via his identification with a series of fictional figures, gleaned primarily from the sphere of mythology and biblical reference, that Leiris effects this process of literary self-transfiguration:

Songeant à des heures troubles, je me suis plu parfois à me concevoir Oreste racinien que déchirent ses fureurs. Trop tragique pour convenir au Pierrot effaré que je serais plutôt, fantoche à la souquenille couleur de lune et non héros aux muscles durs, la comparaison ne tient pas. [...] Voulant donc rectifier mais répugnant à sacrifier Racine et son Oreste, je me suis borné à changer l'éclairage – cette lueur pourpre qu'irradiait l'évocation des Atrides – et j'ai fait glisser mon projecteur du noble

Racine à notre comique patenté Molière, autre étoile du siècle du Roi-Soleil et autre grand classique étudié à l'école. (FB, RJ, 931)

Far from a positive process of active transfiguration, however, this act of self-allegorisation is perceived as a cowardly failing on his part. Standing in stark contrast with the strict code of writing set out retrospectively in 'De la littérature', which, for Leiris, would alone enable the writer to transform the act of writing into a genuinely heroic act, this reliance upon allegory involves a cowardly retreat from the sphere of the 'real'. In line with Leiris's denunciation of the strategy of self-allegorisation as a symptom of his own cowardice, it is primarily against the figure of the anti-hero that the author models himself, as illustrated by his identification with the figure of Mercutio, not, he explains, as a result of any particular resemblance, but rather, "pour la raison inverse qu'il illustre ce qui me manque. [...] Scandaleux Mercutio, conteur de balivernes, anti-héros que n'aime nul esprit de sacrifice non plus qu'aucune dévotion à quelque cause juste ou injuste, mais qui se risque par jeu!" (FB, RJ, 895) The clearest example of this negative process of literary association is however to be found in the author's extended identification with the central figure of Holofernes, whom Camilla Krone has described as "Leiris's autobiographical alter-ego in love".<sup>243</sup> As the male victim to the dominant female figure of Judith, Holofernes constitutes a pivotal axis of signification around which Leiris seeks to construct his own (negative) gendered identity: "Tel Holopherne au chef tranché", he explains at one point, "je m'imagine couché aux pieds de cette idole" (AH, 144). For Poirier, Holofernes represents Leiris's "moi mythologique"; a fully-fashioned mythological alter-ego who, like Gadda's autobiographical doubles, allows him to grapple with the otherwise unfrontable issue of his masculinity. "Devenir Holophernes", Poirier suggests, "c'est être au fond un 'homme femme' [...] c'est rejouer, comme avec Kay, le jeu du travestissement; c'est pouvoir, sous le masque de la virilité [...] s'assumer en

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<sup>243</sup> Krone, p. 61.

‘courtisane’.”<sup>244</sup> Just as when he elsewhere pictures himself in the socially marginalised role of the courtesan – “une de ces personnes un peu en marge sans doute, bien qu’elles eussent à coup sûr quelque chose de royal” (AH, 57) – Leiris’s identification with the figure of Holofernes might be interpreted as an attempt to grapple with the problematic question of his own sexuality through the self-defensive shield of fiction, establishing a parallel with Gadda’s own process of negative self-fictionalisation around the overtly autobiographical figures of Gonzalo Pirobutirro, commendator Filippo Angeloni and Don Ciccio.

A further illustration of this process of literary self-transfiguration is provided by Leiris’s account of his brief stationing as a soldier in the North African desert during the ‘drôle de guerre’, which forms part of an extended examination of the significance of the expression “il était une fois”. This traditional literary formulation – “formule traditionnelle évoquant des temps en marge de l’histoire” (B, RJ, 128) – which conjures up images of an idealised mythic past in Leiris’s mind, leads the author into a detailed consideration of such questions as the significance of the fairy-tale, childhood as a mythic sphere of being, and the possibilities of conceiving of the self as a fictionalised other. Far from a factual account, however, Leiris proceeds to recount his military experience in the form of a fairy-tale that hovers ambivalently between the personal and the mythological. Describing himself in the third person, he begins by stating that, ‘Il était une fois un soldat coiffé d’un calot sous le soleil d’Afrique et ce soldat s’appelait Julien-Michel Leiris’ (B, RJ, 132). He then proceeds, after according himself the title of “moi-soldat-au-désert”, to structure the entire account in the form of a fabled description of a legendary figure: “Il me sembla aussi que le personnage drôlement costumé et situé qu’en cet instant j’étais – soldat coiffé d’un calot sous le soleil d’Afrique [...] devenait objet de légende, héros possible d’un récit” (B, RJ, 132). In an extended illustration of what he terms his life-long “goût pour la fiction”, Leiris informs the

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<sup>244</sup> Jacques Poirier, ‘Reversibilité: d’une Judith l’autre’, in *Lectures de Leiris*, 153-169 (p. 165).

reader that, “je me voyais, sans sortir du présent, transformé en un être ressortissant du domaine de la mythologie ou à celui, non moins merveilleux bien que réel, de l’histoire. Figure projetée hors de moi, comme pour l’ébauche d’une statue future” (B, RJ, 132). Casting his self-portrait in the form of a ‘sketch’ that will lay the basis for a future statue of himself, Leiris transplants his memory of his past self onto the sphere of mythology here, thereby transfiguring his own image into a blank canvas onto which any number of identities might be transposed: “mannequin susceptible d’endosser les déguisements de maintes rêveries, de se parer de maintes défroques psychologiques” (B, RJ 133). Described in terms of a series of ‘déguisements’, these identities correspond, moreover, to an array of symbolic personae that offer Leiris a means by which to fix his own identity:

Condamné de droit commun, aventurier ravagé par l’alcool et les fièvres, costaud à la tête brûlée, mercenaire de la Légion, telles étaient les figures auxquelles, puérilement, je jouais à m’identifier et dont les modèles littéraires m’avaient été fournis, à l’origine, par le ‘forçat intraitable sur qui se reforme toujours le bagné’, ‘l’Emigrant de Landor Road’ et tant d’autres expressions, qu’ont trouvées les poètes et les romanciers, de l’incapacité dans laquelle l’homme vraiment digne de ce nom est de s’accommoder de notre vie moderne. (B, RJ, 136).

A further example of this process of literary self-transfiguration can be found in the author’s description of his decision to take part in Griaule’s ambitious ethnographic expedition across Africa. Discussing the reasoning behind his involvement, Leiris explains, in *Fibrilles*, that it was less the intellectual and scholarly merit of the expedition that motivated him to take part than the opportunity, at the personal level, to act out a number of imaginary roles corresponding to a series of key fictional personae: “il est sûr”, he explains, “que je m’apprêtais à jouer [...] divers héros conradiens: le marin déchu puis régénéré de *Lord Jim*, le parfait gentleman en complet tropical d’*Une victoire*, la tête brûlée que dans le *Coeur des*

*ténèbres* le narrateur découvre nigrifiée *aux avant-postes de la civilisation*” (F, RJ, 597).

Insisting that he valued this undertaking more for the opportunity that it offered to *be seen* than to *see*, Leiris expands upon this network of literary allusions by casting his wife in the role of Penelope, patiently awaiting his return: “J’étais parti moins pour voir que pour être vu voyageant, prenant sans rien trancher un peu de large vis-à-vis de celle qui suivrait ma course avec des yeux de Pénélope et tenant, certes, à être un solitaire, mais à ne l’être que pour un temps” (F, RJ, 594). From the Conradian figure of Lord Jim to the mythological Odysseus, Leiris envisages this expedition as a unique opportunity to escape the restrictions of his flawed identity through a liberating moment of self-transfiguration. The same process can be witnessed, moreover, when he later describes another key incident from his past: the period of convalescence that he spends in hospital following his failed suicide attempt, as described in the third volume of his autobiographical tetralogy, *Fibrilles*. Rather than confronting his memory of this tragic period of his past head-on, Leiris once again calls upon the protective veil of fictional allusion by casting his past self in a series of fictional roles:

Dans cet hôpital bruxellois où des anonymes me soignaient j’étais quelque chose comme un Peter Ibbetson que ses fers de prisonniers séparent de la duchesse de Towers, un amant d’opéra captif de la faction rivale en chantant sa complainte, un pauvre Tom sur qui se sont refermées les portes de Bedlam ou tout autre reclus dont la peine, ancrée dans la profondeur d’un cœur souverainement sensible, a de quoi faire pleurer les pierres. (F, RJ, 622)

From du Maurier’s Peter Ibbetson to Tom O’Bedlam, Leiris again evokes a series of fictional figures here as a means of transforming this bleak recollection into an opportunity to cast himself in the role of the symbolic tragic persona: “J’avais joué le grand jeu”, he proclaims, “J’étais le ténébreux, le veuf, l’inconsolé qui traite de pair à compagnon avec la mort et la folie” (F, RJ, 623). This process is then further developed by the author’s subsequent

description, in the same account, of a pair of English writers, one female and one male, with whom he identifies almost interchangeably during his stay: “deux êtres se substituaient, le plus naturellement du monde, à ma personnalité ordinaire: je cessais d’être Michel Leiris pour devenir [...] un couple d’écrivains anglais très snobs, m’identifiant tantôt à l’homme tantôt à la femme selon que je reposais étendu sur le côté gauche ou sur le côté droit” (F, RJ, 625). He goes on to elaborate upon this complex process of identification through an extended identification with the figure of Hamlet, thereby establishing a parallel with Gadda’s Gonzalo, for whom Hamlet represents a key axis of signification throughout *La Cognizione*:

Comme par chance, elle me donnait en effet une apparence conforme à l’esprit de ce personnage dont je subis depuis longtemps l’attrait: quelqu’un qui, sans être un bohème non plus qu’un déclassé, reste en marge faute de coller exactement aux choses et – tel Hamlet toujours à la charnière du monde commun et d’un autre – se meut dans la zone équivoque où le fantastique prend naissance; selon une alchimie toute moderne, quelqu’un qui, s’imbibant jour et nuit d’une drogue exquise et dévorante (poésie, amour, érotisme, alcool, n’importe), exalte sa vie boitillante jusqu’à la douer, par-delà ses hauts et ses bas, d’un éclat souverain quoique (évidemment) dérisoire. Au-dessous et au-dessus du monde plutôt qu’au vrai niveau et tendu à l’extrême pour mater ma faiblesse, j’étais dans la peau du rôle sans avoir à composer mon personnage. S’il y avait comédie, c’était innocemment que je la jouais et porté par des circonstances complices: un accoutrement presque fortuit, parachevant les effets de mon état physique. (F, RJ. 691)

Identifying with the prototypical Hamletian figure inasmuch as he is ambivalently situated “à la charnière du monde commun et d’un autre” and thus embodies a series of privileged experiences that enable the individual to escape the sphere of the quotidian, Leiris is

reminded at this point of a similar incident from his childhood, “bien avant l’âge où l’on se plaît à voir toutes choses – à commencer par soi-même – sous des couleurs expressément romantiques”, when, “en m’aidant d’un doigt de vin (peut-être du champagne) et, je crois, d’un bonnet rouge de Méphistophélès – accessoire de cotillon en papier dont j’étais coiffé [...] je me pris à incarner un personnage qui, obscurément, m’apparaissait celui d’un débauché” (F, RJ, 692).

*‘Il est nécessaire de construire un mur autour de soi’: writing as a means of clothing the self*

In line with his self-professed need to “tout transfigurer”, this incident points to a key element of Leiris’s life-long attempt at self-transformation: clothing. For Leiris, the act of dressing represents a powerful tool for self-transformation, with the simple process of selecting an outfit enabling the individual to entirely re-fashion his or her sense of self. Discussing an outfit that he wears during his period of convalescence, for example, he explains that this was a “Tenue [...] qui (je dois le dire) ne répondait que trop bien à un certain montage dramatique de la situation: le repêché qui marque encore la griffe de la mort et qui se met n’importe quoi sur le dos pour courir, pantelant, à son colloque d’amour” (F, RJ, 691). For Leiris, clothing comes to figure as a means of fashioning a form of shield between the self and other. As he explains at the end of *L’Age d’homme*: “il est nécessaire de construire un mur autour de soi, à l’aide du vêtement” (AH, 208). An intrinsic association is also established in the author’s mind, moreover, between writing and clothing, as illustrated by his presentation of writing, in *L’Age d’homme*, as a form of body armour designed to fashion a stable, fortified sense of self: “j’aurais voulu me faire une sorte de cuirasse”, he explains, “réalisant dans mon extérieur le même idéal de *roideur* que je poursuivais poétiquement” (AH, 185). Returning, in *La Règle du jeu*, to the importance of clothing as a

means of self-transformation, Leiris once more stresses the importance of creating a protective mask with which to present oneself to others when he asserts that: “l’habillement qui me recouvrait lorsqu’on me traita de ‘vieux pauvre’ était, littéralement, la *face de moi-même que je présentais aux autres*: mur mitoyen, surface de contact, écran de protection qu’il m’eût fallu bien plus beau car le regard d’autrui aurait pu alors s’y briser, s’y dissoudre dans l’envie” (F, RJ 196).

A direct association is thus established within Leiris’s writings between the acts of dressing and writing the self, both of which can be seen to provide the individual with a means of erecting a form of shield between himself and others: “L’affection fétichiste que j’ai pour mes vêtements”, Leiris proclaims towards the end of *La Règle du jeu*, “qui représentent comme mes écrits un constituant de ma personne telle qu’elle apparaît aux autres” (FB, RJ, 980). This desire to shield or fortify the self through the construction of an external screen is further reflected in Leiris’s habit of covering his face in a thick layer of white powder, which he describes in a journal entry as an endeavour to dissimulate his appearance behind a carefully controlled, immobile surface: “Ayant la peau fréquemment irritée par le feu du rasoir, j’avais pris l’habitude de poudrer mon visage (et cela dès ma quinzième année) comme s’il s’était agi de le dissimuler sous une espèce de manque et d’achever d’empreindre ma personne d’une impassibilité égale à celle des plâtres” (AH, 185). This corresponds, he goes on to explain, to a life-long “tentative symbolique de *minéralisation*, réaction de défense contre ma faiblesse interne et l’effritement dont je me sentais menacé” (AH, 185). In her analysis of Leiris’s autobiographical project, *Autobiographie et cure analytique*, Anne Brun stresses the wider import of the concept of ‘mineralisation’ in Leiris’s thought, identifying this attempt to solidify or mineralise the self as one of the primary driving force behind his literary undertaking as a whole: “Toute l’œuvre de Leiris pourrait ainsi se condenser: il s’agit de se minéraliser pour ne pas s’effriter, pour ne pas tomber en poussière, de porter sur son

visage un masque, le masque d'un mort, ou plutôt d'une morte, ce que suggère le terme se poudrer – comme une femme.”<sup>245</sup> If Leiris is drawn to the act of writing the self, she explains, it is first and foremost inasmuch as it offers him a means of combating an otherwise all-consuming “angoisse catastrophique de mort psychique”, which takes the form of a sense of “effritement, d'une dissolution, ou d'un écroulement du Moi.”<sup>246</sup> And indeed Leiris repeatedly describes writing as an act of solidification, undertaken in response to a deep-seated sense of subjective frailty. In his *Journal*, for example, he speaks of a desire to sculpt his past, as part of an attempt not to “ressasser le passé, par masochisme de mémoire”, but rather to “le ressusciter, le sculpter aussi ressemblant que possible, en faire une sorte de solide” (*Journal*, 288). This is reiterated, in ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, in the author’s description of *L’Age d’homme* as an endeavour to condense his life into “un seul bloc solide (objet que je pourrais toucher comme pour m’assurer contre la mort, alors même que, paradoxalement, je prétendais tout risquer)” (AH, 20).

Contrary to the retrospective project set out in ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, then, in which Leiris stresses the importance of eschewing all trace of the ‘imaginary’ in order to engage in a courageous confrontation with his own ‘reality’, the self-portrait that is presented to the reader in *L’Age d’homme* is in fact structured around a series of fictional reference points, coming to constitute what might be described in terms of a self-defensive literary ‘mask’; a solidified statue designed to compensate for the author’s fragmented sense of selfhood. Leiris describes this alternately as an act of mineralisation undertaken in response to the threat of self-dissolution or ‘effritement’, an endeavour to solidify the self through the creation of a form of statue-like object, and an attempt to clothe the self in a self-protective “écran de protection” or “mur autour de soi”. In line with the

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<sup>245</sup> Anne Brun, ‘Autobiographie et cure analytique dans l’œuvre de Michel Leiris, L’évolution psychiatrique’, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Oct-Dec 2006), 745-757 (p. 748).

<sup>246</sup> Brun, p. 747.

extended analogy that he draws between clothing and writing, the act of writing comes to constitute a means of protecting the self against an inherent sense of lack or insubstantiality: “Ne s’agit-il pas aussi”, Anne Brun thus ponders, “de protéger la chair à vif en s’entourant de la seconde peau de l’écriture?”.<sup>247</sup>

The problem that the author encounters, however, is that far from being in control of this process, the text comes to assume a direct power over him as writing subject: “machine tournant à vide, cet ouvrage qui ne m’apporte aucune maîtrise et dont je ne suis pas même le maître (puisque ce qui sans moi le fait en sous-main, c’est ce que sans lui je suis et fais)” (FB, RJ, 970). Gadda makes a similar assertion in ‘Come lavoro’, in which, overturning the established hierarchy between writing subject and written object, he explains that, “L’io giudicante non preesiste in una attesa logica, o in una incubazione partenogenetica, alla cosa giudicata”. Rather, he posits, “L’io ha veste di modo, di strumento potenziale del giudizio: e nel giudizio soltanto si manifesta, come termine polare della tensione fra lui e la cosa, che è l’altro termine” (VM, SGF I, 430). Instead of a dominant “io giudicante” in control of a passive object of knowledge, Gadda presents a scenario in which the thinking self does not exist prior to the act of reflection itself: “Mentre si concede all’io (alla umana vanagloria dell’io) riconoscere in sé medesimo il duellante migliore, che ha inchiodato al muro e alla disperazione il proprio antagonista, cioè la cosa giudicata, è bene spesso la cosa giudicata, viceversa, che ha inchiodato al muro lo scrittore, il critico” (VM, SVP, 430). As part of an extended crusade against the fallacious notion of the “io rappresentatore-creatore veduto nella sua saldezza”, Gadda debunks the concept of an organising, controlling thinking subject itself. Instead, he posits that it is as much the *cosa giudicata* as the *persona giudicante* that is in control of the process.

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<sup>247</sup> Brun, p. 748.

As against the strict tauromachic code set out in ‘De la littérature’, which would involve an uncompromising submission of *jeu* to *règle*, *fiction* to (subjective) *réalité*, Leiris ultimately arrives at the recognition that it is in fact perhaps only *through* the imaginary that any form of existence within the sphere of the *real* can be sustained: “aimant à jouer les toreros”, he confesses, “mais sans qu’il y ait jamais en face de moi un vrai taureau, et les don Juan, sans conquêtes ni défi au Commandeur; n’existant plus que par écrit” (F, RJ, 349). Any attempt to draw a clear division between the spheres of the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’ is invalidated by the author’s recognition that:

Que tout soit jeu, cela veut dire que tout est théâtre, simulacre, illusion, etc., et qu’en somme *tout n’est que vanité*. Sûr de cela comme je le suis, je pourrais être un pataphysicien conséquent, qui tiendrait pour allant de soi que toutes les solutions sont imaginaires, donc égales entre elles et finalement égales à zéro (car une solution, pour être quelque chose, doit être la solution juste, à l’exclusion des autres). (FB, RJ, 986)

“Et c’est pourquoi”, he concludes, “l’on ne peut parler que de ‘jeu’”. Despite this recognition, however, Leiris remains incapable of reconciling himself to a definitive renunciation of ‘règle’ for ‘jeu’: “le fait est”, he laments, “et là est ma contradiction – que j’éprouve un désir impérieux de justifier objectivement ce système subjectif [...] ce qui revient à vouloir transformer le jeu en quelque chose de sérieux, de non gratuit, et donc récuser le côté ‘bon plaisir’ sans lequel il n’y a pas de jeu” (FB, RJ, 986).

In the following section, I will explore the extent to which, as against Leiris’s *on-going* (yet ultimately frustrated) quest to reconcile the conflicting poles of ‘réalité’ and ‘fiction’, and to deploy the act of writing as a means of defending against his own sense of self-dissolution, Gadda’s semi-autobiographical fictional narratives can be seen to be rooted in a preceding, definitive denunciation of the possibility of achieving any experience of

subjective authenticity or unity within a social reality grounded on its own lack of meaning. To what extent might the Milanese author be seen to deploy the act of writing the self, through the medium of a series of overtly autobiographical fictional doubles, as a means of exposing the impossibility of separating individual subjectivity from the illusory social reality of which it is part?

## Gadda

*‘D’intorno a me, d’intorno a noi, il mareggiare degli eventi mortiferi, il dolore, il lento strazio degli anni. Il concetto di volere si abolisce, nel lento impossibile. L’oceano della stupidità.’*

Carlo Emilio Gadda, ‘Come lavoro’

*‘Nulla esiste più, nulla è più possibile socialmente: soltanto sono reali gli impulsi di una fuggente individualità.’*

Marking what might be taken as the starting point for Gadda’s subsequent progressive isolation from others, the end of the *Giornale* records, as suggested in Chapter One, a violent sense of disillusionment on the author’s part with both subjective and external reality. Presaging the main concept behind *Racconto italiano* – namely, the defeat of the individual in the face of “l’insufficienza dell’ambiente sociale” (RI, SVP, 397) - Gadda declares himself defeated by an abhorrent, all-consuming external reality: “la realtà di questi anni, salvo alcune fiamme generose e fugaci, è merdosa: e in essa mi sento immedesimare ed annegare” (GGP, SGF II 863). The definitive trigger in this progressive process of disillusionment is in fact dealt by the death of Gadda’s younger brother, Enrico, which the critic Giuseppe

Papponetti has set in terms of “il referente di ogni tipo di caduta di valori, il trauma determinante per una lettura totalmente in negativo del reale e del sociale.”<sup>248</sup> Gadda himself describes the critical moment of discovery as “il più orrendo dolore della [sua] vita” (GGP, SGF II, 867), bringing about a trauma from which he can envisage no possible recovery.

In addition to this loss of faith in his external and subjective reality, however, this tragic event also leads Gadda to declare a loss of faith in the act of writing itself: “Non voglio più scrivere”, he proclaims, “ricordo troppo. Automatismo esteriore e senso della mia stessa morte: speriamo passi presto tutta la vita [...] È troppo, è troppo” (GGP SGF II 850). This is then reiterated in his subsequent assertion that: “Non noterò più nulla, poiché nulla di me è degno di ricordo anche davanti a me solo. Finisco così questo libro di note” (GGP, SGF II, 867). Insistent here that there can be no validity in a written act undertaken by a writing subject who is himself devoid of value (“nulla di me è degno di ricordo anche davanti a me”), Gadda would appear, with these words, to be announcing a definitive renunciation both of writing and of himself as writing subject: “io sono finito”, he decrees, “come un cadavere”. Charting a loss of faith not only in social and external reality, then, but also in the writing subject charged with the representation (and hence control) of that same reality, the *Giornale di guerra* can therefore be seen to represent a key basis for the subsequent negative vision of subjectivity at stake in this chapter. Walter Pedullà describes this usefully in terms of the “racconto di una storia in cui l’uomo che è contro tutti si accorge d’essere in guerra con sé stesso. Così tutto torna ma intanto ora si è diversi. Si è pronti a morire.”<sup>249</sup>

Rather than his death as a writer, however, I would suggest that this critical moment of disillusionment in fact marks an important *transition* in Gadda’s approach to writing. For

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<sup>248</sup> Giuseppe Papponetti, ‘Il congedo del superuomo’, *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue3/booknews/pappdannbkn3.php#anchor-papsupd25>>.

<sup>249</sup> Walter Pedullà, *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Il narratore come delinquente* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997), p. 10.

while in the *Giornale di guerra* Gadda still writes in order to record, on the basis of a waning yet still residual faith in his own capacity and authority, as writing subject, to impart a quantum of order or control over an otherwise disordered reality, his subsequent writings are grounded on a loss of faith in the authority of the writing subject himself. With the transition from the *Giornale* to his extended project of semi-autobiographical fiction, Pedullà suggests that “Un narratore ‘mediocre’ va a combattere sul fronte della letteratura quella battaglia che l’‘imbecille’ aveva perso a Caporetto.”<sup>250</sup> This notion of writing as a weapon of revenge against a hostile reality is supported by Gadda’s description of the written act, in ‘Intervista al Microfono’, thus: “Nella mia vita di ‘umiliato e offeso’, la narrazione mi è apparsa, talvolta, [...] lo strumento della rivendicazione contro gli oltraggi del destino e de’ suoi umani proietti: lo strumento, in assoluto, del riscatto e della vendetta” (VM, SGF I, 503). Rather than a means of recording and imparting order upon the object of study, writing comes to constitute a means of both denouncing a reality, both external and subjective, that is itself fundamentally flawed.

In this section, I will thus examine the extent to which Gadda can be seen to use the medium of semi-autobiographical writing as a means of exposing the notion of authentic individual subjectivity for the empty “menzogna” that it really is. With a focus on the experiences of Gadda’s most strikingly autobiographical double, Gonzalo Pirobutirro, this process of ironic (self-) denunciation will be examined in relation to two key processes of characterisation whereby the author successfully reduces the autobiographical subject to the level of an empty, inauthentic ‘symbol’, as part of an extended crusade against the authenticity of subjective reality itself: firstly, the reductive relegation of Gonzalo, alongside a number of more marginal autobiographical figures, to the status of caricatured types and,

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<sup>250</sup> Pedullà, p. 21.

secondly, their transmutation into empty literary ‘masks’ through the imposition of such a heavy weight of literary references as to rid them of any one sustainable, unified sense of self.

*‘Meglio essere un disadattato che integrarsi in una società tanto volgare’: caricature and the typology of the social outcast*

From relatively minor figures such as Rineri in the short story ‘La Passeggiata Autunnale’, to the central, tragic figure of Gonzalo in *La cognizione del dolore*, Gadda’s fictional texts are populated with a long line of autobiographical doubles, each of whom struggles, to a varying degree, with the very same social difficulties, physical complexes and psychological neuroses as the author himself. The parallels between Gadda’s life and those of his fictional protagonists have in fact been the subject of considerable critical attention. In *La verità sospetta*, for example, Federico Bertoni interprets Gadda’s autobiographical doppelgangers as “un’intera galleria di maschere, doppi, controfigure, autoritratti nella quale Gadda ha voluto rinfrangere o moltiplicare il suo stesso profilo biografico.”<sup>251</sup> For Dombroski, these figures constitute a “folded-out personal unity” that together come to establish a “repository of propositions that contribute to the modelling of a fully shaped allegorical figure”.<sup>252</sup> This narrative strategy is most commonly read, however, as a means of fashioning an autobiographical ‘shield’, which the author employs in order to mask the tragic reality of his own experience. Sbragia has described this process of self-fictionalisation in terms of a “transparent mask of autobiography”,<sup>253</sup> a protective veil deployed by Gadda in order to allow him to express what would otherwise be inexpressible. This is described by Dombroski as “a form of baroque objectification meant to disclose only some traces of what is claimed to

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<sup>251</sup> Federico Bertoni, *La Verità sospetta: Gadda e l’invenzione della realtà* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), p. 188.

<sup>252</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 6

<sup>253</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 111.

be the subject's extraordinary experience."<sup>254</sup> According to this interpretation, Gadda's autobiographical personae would constitute a self-defensive screening device intended to shroud an underlying, unconfontable tragic 'reality'. This is further elaborated in relation to the interpretation of the narrative and linguistic proliferation at work in Gadda's writing as a baroque screening device masking an underlying 'vuoto'. Pedullà, for instance, suggests that, "il linguaggio gaddiano racconta la caduta e insieme costruisce la rete che salverà dall'urto mortale [...] Gadda tesse una prosa fitta e nodosa che lo difenda dalla paura del vuoto."<sup>255</sup>

As against such interpretations, however, according to which Gadda's autobiographical doubles would constitute a form of self-defensive shielding device designed to protect the author from an otherwise unconfontable, underlying tragic 'reality', I would contend that, in line with Leiris's ultimate recognition of the inextricable connectedness of the seemingly opposing poles of 'reality' and 'fiction', and subsequent recognition that reality is itself nothing more than a "théâtre, simulacre, illusion", Gadda purposefully reduces these autobiographical doubles to the level of empty fictional 'masks' as a means of exposing his tragic loss of faith in the notion of authentic subjectivity itself. For the critic Christophe Mileschi, for the disillusioned post-war author, "la vera posta in gioco non è tanto quel cercare scampo ai tormenti, bensì il rinnovarli, il riviverli, il rimetterli in scena: scrivere vuol anche dire castigarsi e fustigarsi."<sup>256</sup> And it is in relation to two key techniques that I wish to consider this use of literature as a castigatory means of unmasking the true inauthenticity of subjectivity itself: the comic caricaturing of the autobiographical double, and his reduction to

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<sup>254</sup> Robert S. Dombroski, 'Overcoming Oedipus: Self and Society in *La cognizione del dolore*', *MLN*, No. 1, Vol. 99 (Jan. 1984), 125-143 (p. 129).

<sup>255</sup> Pedullà, p. 10.

<sup>256</sup> Christophe Mileschi, "'La guerra è cozzo di energie spirituali'. Estetica e estetizzazione della guerra', *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <[http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/war\\_writings/milesggp.php](http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/war_writings/milesggp.php)>.

the status of empty literary mask through the imposition of an unsustainable weight of literary allusion.

While Gadda's fictional narratives are populated by an extensive array of autobiographical figures, they can arguably be reduced to a limited core of caricatured 'types'. The most recurrent of these character typologies, and the one that most clearly reflects the experiences of the author himself, is to be found in the tragi-comic figure of the social outcast, as embodied by the key literary reference point of Molière's *Misanthrope*. Gadda's texts are filled with a long line of autobiographical male protagonists who, either tragically unable or comically unwilling to integrate into wider society and engage in any healthy relationship with others, find themselves cast into the caricatured role of the social "inetto" or "bumbling" buffoon, to use Sbragia's term. This particular character type is in fact so recurrent in Gadda's texts that the critic Pedriali has singled out the theme of social exclusion as the central interpretive key to understanding his narrative universe as a whole:

Della *Comédie humaine* grandiosamente incompleta, rabbiosamente parziale che Gadda è venuto componendo nei suoi sussultosi anni di scrittore 'arzigogolato e barocco', impressiona l'ossessivo ricorrere del tema dell'escluso, chiave a qualunque imbroglio gaddesco, tanto costante e prevedibile da far indugiare alla tentazione di battezzarlo con, si ammetterà, dubbio gusto da psicanalista sbrigativo, complesso di Palinuro.<sup>257</sup>

While each one of Gadda's autobiographical personae might arguably be ascribed to this specific category, one particularly clear example of the figure of the social outcast is to be identified in the protagonist of *Baronfo*, the central character of Gadda's short novel *La*

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<sup>257</sup> Federica Pedriali, 'Il complesso di Palinuro: "La passeggiata autunnale" come narrema', *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, <[http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/early\\_prose/pedrialipaut.php](http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/early_prose/pedrialipaut.php)>.

*Madonna dei filosofi* (1931). Baronfo is one of Gadda's most explicitly autobiographical characters, sharing not only the author's profession (he too is an engineer), but also his philosophical interests, neurotic personality, and tragi-comic lack of success with women. Suffering from a neurotic, anxious temperament clearly reminiscent of that of not only Gadda but also Leiris himself, Baronfo is prescribed total abstention from any form of external stimulus by his doctor in an attempt to control his neurosis. In a scene similar to the consultation between Gonzalo and his doctor towards the beginning of *La cognizione del dolore*, Baronfo's physician orders him to "non eccitarsi con diatribe politiche o filosofiche; non concorrere a premi letterari; ber pochissimo vino [...] e quel che più conta, doveva per un bel po' di tempo studiarsi di apparire, con le ragazze, un tipo strano, il tipo più platonico e più inconcludente che gli venisse fatto" (MF, RR I 83). Equally, like Gadda, Baronfo's deep-seated sense of his own *inettitudine* is ascribed in large part in the text to his array of physical oddities, which come to light through a series of unexplained medical ailments and an excessive penchant for hypochondriacal self-examination: "Qualche volta, dominato dall'idea che 'più ne prendo e più mi fa bene', prendeva delle indigestioni impressionanti, a base di fòsforo o di ferro o d'arsenico, o di tutt'e tre insieme" (MF, RR I, 86). The comic effect produced by these hypochondriacal tendencies is further heightened by Baronfo's excessive indecisiveness. Like Leiris and Gadda, both of whom praise the capacity of others for decided action while fiercely criticising their own weak irresoluteness, Baronfo is almost crippled by his incapacity to make decisions. This is well illustrated, for example, when he proves incapable of reaching a decision one way or the other as to whether or not to respond to an advert placed in the *Corriere della Sera* for a collection of philosophical books of interest to him:

... a furia di sì e di no (la nevastenia mescolata con la filosofia) scrisse, impostò, poi dubitò d'aver dimenticato il francobollo, poi se ne ricordò, poi si pentì e poi si

racconsolò: e poi si pentì e si racconsolò ancora cinque o sei volte: finché arrivò la risposta, con il nome e il recapito dell'offerente. (MF, RR I, 92)

Plagued by neurosis, Baronfo proves incapable of entering into any form of healthy relationship with the world around him, rendering him an easy, comic figure of fun to others: “Povero ingegnere!” (MF, RR I, 85), the narrator proclaims at one point. One is reminded here of Gadda's own repeated avowal of his deep-seated sense of unease and lack of self-assertion in all social situations. One might note, for instance, the discouraging description of his character, in ‘Intervista al microfono’, as follows: “inetto a cicalare con brio, alieno dalla mondanità, io avvicino e frequento i miei simili con una certa fatica e una certa titubanza, con più titubanza e con più fatica i più virtuosi di essi. Davanti a chiunque rivivo gli attimi di uno scolaro all'esame” (VM, SGF I, 504).

Further examples of this character typology include the figure of Palineri in the short story ‘La Passeggiata Autunnale’, Detective Ingravallo and Angeloni in *Quer pasticciaccio*, and Gildo in *La meccanica*, whom I have examined already in Chapter Two in relation to their dysfunctional relationship with women. It is, however, in Gadda's most direct autobiographical double, Gonzalo Pirobutirro, the central figure of *La cognizione del dolore*, that we find the clearest embodiment of this caricatured typology.

The parallels between Gonzalo and Gadda himself are extensive, and remain undisputed in critical interpretations of the text. Both work as civil engineers, both have a highly fraught yet all-consuming relationship with their mother, both suffer from a crippling form of “delirio interpretativo”, both are traumatised by the loss of a younger brother at war, and both are fundamentally and cripplingly socially inept. Throughout the course of the narrative, Gonzalo is engaged in what might be described as an interpretive battle against an unthinking, and ultimately senseless, social and external reality that automatically establishes him, for others,

in terms of a threat to society as a whole. For, by attempting to pierce through the superficial layer of “menzogne salvatrici” and “parvenze non valide” on which he perceives social reality to be grounded, Gonzalo threatens the successful functioning of society itself. And society’s response, as articulated within the text by the voice of the wider community, is to neutralise the threat that he poses by casting Gonzalo in the caricatured role of the comic, anti-social “buffoon”.

The technique of caricature in the novel, wherein the wider community succeed in reducing the complexity of Gonzalo’s character and relegating him to the status of a superficial character typology, is based, in general terms, on a reductive emphasis of the general over the particular, operating by fixing the observer’s attention on one specific character trait or physical feature, which is then magnified to the point of its comic distortion. In his seminal study of humour, *Le rire* (1901), Henri Bergson presents this emphasis on the general at the expense of the particular as a key feature of comedy more generally which, he says, lends itself to the creation of character types. For, he claims, “Non seulement, en effet, la comédie nous présente des types généraux, mais c’est, à notre avis, le seul de tous les arts qui vise au général.”<sup>258</sup> In his essay on the question of humour, ‘L’Umoreismo’ (1908), Luigi Pirandello explains that the process works through a focus on a set number of carefully selected “forme stabili e determinate, dentro e fuori di noi [...] in cui cerchiamo d’arrestare, di fissare in noi questo flusso continuo”;<sup>259</sup> the fixed forms with which we seek to fix an ever-changing reality. Freud has also stressed the importance of this focus on individual traits for the creation of comedy in his essay ‘Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious’ (1905), in which he explains that,

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<sup>258</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le rire: Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940), p. 114.

<sup>259</sup> Luigi Pirandello, *L’Umoreismo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), p. 154.

Caricature [...] brings about degradation by emphasising, in the general impression given by the exalted object, a single trait which is comic in itself but which was bound to be overlooked so long as it was only perceivable in the general picture. By isolating this, a comic effect can be attained which extends in our memory over the whole object.<sup>260</sup>

As part of this process, wherein our attention is fixed on a particular trait, which is then magnified to the point of subsuming the larger object of which it is part, Bergson also stresses the importance of *inelasticity* in comedy, signifying that which cannot, or simply will not, adapt to the ever-changing external environment to which it belongs. Accordingly, the philosopher suggests that “*Les attitudes, les gestes et mouvements du corps humain sont risibles dans l’exacte mesure où ce corps nous fait penser à une simple mécanique.*”<sup>261</sup> It is not moral failings in themselves that make us laugh, he explains, but rather the inelasticity, specifically, of those failings: “Un vice souple serait moins facile à ridiculiser qu’une vertu inflexible. C’est la *raideur* qui est suspecte à la société. C’est donc la raideur d’Alceste qui nous fait rire, quoique cette raideur soit ici honnêteté.”<sup>262</sup> In line with Pirandello’s insistence upon the “*forme stabili*” with which man seeks to present both subjective and external reality, Bergson’s model of the comic thus hinges on the reduction of flux to stability, complexity to simplicity.

In keeping with this process, Gonzalo is characterised (through the voice of the chorus of secondary characters that make up the novel’s backdrop) first and foremost through a set number of key physical oddities and weaknesses. The fixation on set physical characteristics,

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<sup>260</sup> Freud, ‘Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol VIII, trans. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), p. 201.

<sup>261</sup> Bergson, pp. 22-23.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, pp. 105-106.

at the expense of all psychological complexity, is another common feature of the process of comic characterisation, and one which Gadda makes repeated use of in the depiction of his autobiographical doubles. In contrast with tragedy, which typically directs observers' attention away from the corporeal, the comic character is defined primarily by his or her bodily functions. Freud has described this as a process of 'degradation' – a movement from high to low – proclaiming that, "Under the heading of 'unmasking', we may also include [...] the method of degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental functions on bodily needs."<sup>263</sup> In a direct illustration of this process, Gonzalo is quickly established in the eyes of the wider community in the highly caricatured role of the lazy, gluttonous, misogynous social outcast who refuses to adapt to the demands of social integration: "Vorace, e avido di cibo e di vino: crudele: e avarissimo" (CD, RR I, 598). Contary to the productive, integrated members of society who are seen to contribute to the good of the wider community, Gonzalo is presented by the narrator as spending his days "allungato in letto come una vacca: (così diceva il peone) [...] Mentre i contadini, alle otto, sono già dietro da tre ore a sudare" (CD, RR I, 597). And indeed, Gonzalo is perceived by others as being so entirely engrossed in the satisfaction of his physical needs as to acquire almost legendary status in the eyes of the wider community: "La sua cupidigia di cibo, ad esempio, era divenuta favola" (CD, RR I, 600). One source for the local gossip that fuels this reputation is to be found, for instance, in the rumour spread by José the peon "ch'egli avesse dentro, tutti e sette, nel ventre, i sette peccati capitali, chiusi dentro nel ventre" (CD, RR I, 597). This is then bolstered by the rumour, which quickly acquires almost mythical dimensions, that Gonzalo had at one point almost gorged himself to death while feasting on a sea-urchin: "Nel 1928 si era detto dalla gente, e i signori di Pastrufazio per primi, che egli fosse stato per

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<sup>263</sup> Freud, 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious', p. 202.

morire, a Babylon, in seguito alla ingestione d'un riccio, altri sostenevano un granchio, una specie di scorpione" (CD, RR I, 600-601). The story in fact goes through so many stages of transformation in the collective imagination that at one point the sea-urchin assumes almost human-sized dimensions: "La quasi ferale aragosta raggiungeva le dimensioni di un neonato umano" (CD, RR I, 601). This is merely one of a series of such rumours or "barocche fandonie", each of which contributes to further establishing Gonzalo in the caricatured role of the gluttonous, misogynistic social outcast. One might also cite, for instance, rumours of his bursts of rage against his mother, which serve as evidence of his "iracondo" nature, or reports of his bizarre experiment involving dropping a cat from the second floor, perhaps to test a mathematical theory of rational mechanics, or, perhaps out of mere sadistic cruelty: "la povera bestiola", we read, "atterrando, gli diè difatti la desiderata conferma, ogni volta, ogni volta! come un pensiero che, traverso fortune, non intermetta dall'essere eterno; ma, in quanto gatto, poco dopo morì, con occhi velati d'una irrevocabile tristezza, immalinconito da quell'oltraggio. Poiché ogni oltraggio è morte" (CD, RR I, 598).

Characterised by his numerous physical and psychological oddities, Gonzalo is thus quickly cast in the caricatured role of the comic buffoon in the eyes of the wider community. Perhaps the most important aspect of this process of caricature, however, is his apparent total lack of interest in women and subsequent failure to assume what is perceived by the wider community as the individual's social *duty* to marry and produce offspring. Criticised for his refusal to contribute to the collective progress of the wider social unit, Gonzalo comes to be perceived as at best an embittered misanthropist, at worst a dangerous threat to social cohesion. References to his refusal to marry and start a family thus abound in the novel, as illustrated by the suggestion that,

... il figlio della Signora, per quanto misantropo, poteva darsi che non fosse però misogino. Celibe era di certo, come Beethoven, e anche più se fosse stato possibile

immaginarlo [...] E poi non aveva mai voluto prendere moglie [...] E ne aveva una tal voglia, di non prender moglie, che si era affrettato a rifilare alla Peppa il vestito nero di sposo. (CD, RR I, 596-7)

In his theory of humour, Bergson identifies this particular characteristic of unsociability as a particularly rich source of comic effect since, he proposes, it is not an individual's moral failings or status within society that render him comic, but rather his unsociability: "en règle général ce sont bien les défauts d'autrui qui nous font rire – quitte à ajouter, il est vrai, que ces défauts nous font rire en raison de leur *insociabilité* plutôt que de leur *immoralité*."<sup>264</sup> The individual is comic, for Bergson, to the extent that he cuts himself off from social interaction: "Quiconque s'isole s'expose au ridicule parce que le comique est fait, en grande partie, de cet isolement même."<sup>265</sup> In the case of Gonzalo, this characteristic of unsociability, which is intrinsically tied up with his refusal to marry, is one of the primary triggers for the ridicule to which he is subjected by the wider community, as illustrated in the following passage, which draws an explicit connection between his fear of, and rejection by, the other:

Era, forse, un timido. Ma più frequentemente veniva ritenuto un imbecille [...]  
L'antica ossessione della folla: l'orrore de' compagni di scuola [...] Il disgusto che lo aveva tenuto fanciullo, per tutti gli anni di scuola, il disprezzo che nei mesi dopo guerra aveva rivolto alle voci dei cosiddetti uomini per le vie di Pastrufazio s'era veduto cacciare, come fosse una belva, dalla loro carità inferocita, di uomini: di consorzio, di mille. Egli era uno. (CD, RR I, 728)

Gonzalo's unsociability is presented here as stemming from what the narrator describes in terms of a cowardly fear of the other. Sbragia sets this in terms of an overarching fear of the

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<sup>264</sup> Bergson, p. 106.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

‘low’ sphere of society, which is directly connected, he proposes, to Gonzalo’s deep-seated fear of women: “Class and Sexual Others, masses and women come together to haunt the hidalgo in a single tide of the ‘low’.”<sup>266</sup> Even his bearing, the doctor suggests, emanates this fear of the other - “Che egli non compatisse agli umili lo si intuiva dall’andatura, dal portamento” (CD, RR I, 597) – even taking the form, at times, of an acute sense of physical abhorrence:

La turpe invasione della folla... Gli zoccoli, i piedi: nella casa che avrebbe voluto essere sua... I calcagni color fianta, i diti, divisibili per 10, con le unghie... e la piscia del cane vile, pulcioso, con occhio destro pieno di marmellata [...] Un rutto enorme, inutilità gli parvero gli anni, dopo le scempiaggini di cui s’erano infarciti i suoi maggiori [...] La collettività: gli altri; il plurale maschile... L’interminabile processione verso la piscia. (CD, RR I, 732)

With his array of physical oddities, unsociability, refusal to partake in collective life and comic fear of the other, Gonzalo is thus firmly cast in the comic role of caricatured social outcast by the wider community, even by his mother: “Plauto in lui”, she proclaims at one point, “non troverebbe il suo personaggio, forse Molière. La povera madre, non volendolo, rivede le lontane figure del Misanthrope e dell’Avare” (CD, RR I, 682).

The opposition at work throughout the narrative between the voice of Gonzalo and that of the wider community has been interpreted by certain critics in terms of a clear-cut division between the poles of high, classical ‘tragedy’ and low, grotesque ‘comedy’. This interpretation is based on the identification of a two-tiered structure within the text, wherein the collective voice of the novel’s secondary characters would act as a comic, ‘macaronic’ screening device superimposed above the tragic core of Gonzalo’s unconfrontable experience

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<sup>266</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 119.

of isolated subjectivity. Albert Sbragia, for instance, points to the importance of what he describes as the novel's competing codes of "grotesque and tragic discourse",<sup>267</sup> suggesting that *La cognizione* should be read as "a novel that is both tragic and hilariously comic",<sup>268</sup> wherein the tragic element is provided by Gadda's "pitiless exhibition of the self" through the figure of Gonzalo. In accordance with this interpretation, Dombroski draws a division between the narrator and the author in the suggestion that the role of the narrator consists in that of "safeguard[ing] the author from direct exposure through the filter of ironic estrangement."<sup>269</sup> A distinction is thus made between the empty, 'comic' surface of social reality (as articulated by the voice of the wider community) and the tragic core of Gonzalo's individual experience, and, by extension, that of the author himself. Any direct contact with the latter, it follows, is prevented by successfully diverting the reader's attention onto the 'comic', literary surface of the text. Gadda's depiction of Gonzalo through the voice of the wider community would thus serve a role equivalent to that accorded to art in the following assertion by Nietzsche:

When the will is most imperilled, *art* approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress; she alone may transform these horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which man may live. These are the representations of the *sublime* as the artistic conquest of the awful, and of the *comic* as the artistic release from the nausea of the absurd.<sup>270</sup>

Art, according to Nietzsche, would therefore act as a healing force through the protective embellishment of an otherwise inexpressible and unfrontable 'reality'. Shielding man from the underlying "nausea of the absurd", it transmutes the horror of reality into a series of

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<sup>267</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 106.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>269</sup> Dombroski, 'Overcoming Oedipus', p. 132.

<sup>270</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Dover Publications: New York, 1995), p. 23.

confrontable ‘symbols’, akin to the fixed ‘symboles’ or ‘repères’ around which Leiris, as explored above, seeks to structure his sense of self. Leiris himself draws attention to the salvatory function of art when he describes it as a form of protective screening device in the following assertion:

Qu’il rende compte de choses existantes ou procède essentiellement du jeu de l’imagination, l’art n’a-t-il pas pour fonction dernière de nous sauver du désastre en doublant le monde usuel d’un autre monde agencé au gré de notre esprit, selon un ordre intime qui, en tant que tel, tranche sur l’invraisemblable fouillis de la réalité ambiante?<sup>271</sup>

However, just as the line between these ‘mythes’ or ‘symboles’ and any underlying, authentic subjective ‘reality’ ultimately becomes blurred for Leiris, the true tragedy of Gadda’s vision might be seen to lie, I would argue, in the ultimate awareness that there is in fact no deeper tragic core to be accessed behind the comic level of society’s empty, superficial veneer. As Gonzalo’s tragic process of “cognizione” reveals, and as shall be explored in greater detail further on, any attempt to pierce through society’s surface reality results not only in the destruction of society, but also of the self.

*An excess of literary allusion: the autobiographical subject as empty literary mask*

While it is in Gonzalo that we find the clearest embodiment of the caricatured figure of the social ‘escluso’ segregated from the community of which he is part, another clear example of this character typology is also provided by the central protagonist of ‘La passeggiata autunnale’, Rineri. Composed in 1918 during Gadda’s term as a prisoner-of-war

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<sup>271</sup> Leiris, *Francis Bacon* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987), p. 5.

in the *Celle-lager* in Germany, ‘La passeggiata autunnale’ charts the experiences of three primary characters – Stefano, Nerina and Rineri – after a violent downpour forces them to take refuge in an isolated mountain hut. The main axis of the plot revolves around the tragic tale of Stefano – a former smuggler relegated to the status of social outcast as a result of a wrongful accusation of homicide – as recounted by the other characters in the tale. With its themes of social exclusion, self-imposed isolation, and unfulfilled desire, the story condenses many of the key issues at stake for the Gaddian male subject. It is, however, on the mode of characterisation that Gadda employs in order to depict Rineri that I wish to dwell here, inasmuch as it provides an instructive illustration of the second key narrative technique by which Gadda might be seen to denounce the inauthenticity of subjective reality: the use of literary allusion as a means of relegating the autobiographical subject to the level of an empty literary ‘mask’.

Gadda loads the figure of Rineri with such a heavy weight of literary reference in this tale as to transform him into an empty symbolic emblem. This is most clearly illustrated by the direct association that the narrator establishes between Rineri and the tragic figure of Palinurus, the doomed helmsman of Aeneas’s ship, as depicted in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Defeated at the hands of fateful external circumstances which preclude him from achieving any of the heroism of his positive counterpart, Aeneas, Palinurus represents a key literary reference-point for a number of Gadda’s other autobiographical personae. A parallel emerges, for instance, between the hierarchical relationship between Palinurus and Aeneas, and the division between Gadda and his younger brother Enrico. Sbragia has described the association between the semi-autobiographical Palinurus and Virgil’s Aeneas in terms of an on-going process of negative self-construction at work throughout Gadda’s writings. One might also discern a correspondence, here, between this strategy of literary association and the extended parallel drawn by Leiris within *L’Age d’homme* between himself and his

prototypical anti-hero, Holofernes. Like the role played by Holofernes in *L'Age d'homme*, Palinurus constitutes a negative literary parallel for the figure of Rineri; the literary symbol for the defeat of the individual at the hands of a negative external reality. As Sbragia explains,

Gadda's Virgilian self-construction models itself not on triumphant Aeneas but on tragic Palinurus. Palinurus spies Italy but is murdered by native barbarians shortly after; Gadda fights in the war to create a 'real' Italy but is crushed by the insufficiency of the Italian environment. Sublimity for the subjective self in Gadda is an impossibility: the distant community of the elect is an unreachable beyond; there will be no transcendence. Aeneas cannot be appropriated, only his elegiac *pietas*.<sup>272</sup>

It is, however, to the figure of Gonzalo that one must once again turn in order to find the clearest expression of this strategy of negative characterisation through literary allusion. Like Leiris, whose autobiographical account is structured around his identification with a series of symbolic figures taken from the spheres of literature, mythology and biblical reference, Gadda loads the figure of Gonzalo with such a heavy weight of literary allusion as to deprive him of any one unified identity. And just as the line between the 'imaginary' and the 'real' quickly becomes blurred for Leiris, Gonzalo proves incapable of sustaining the weight of significance ascribed to him. Literary references abound throughout the narrative: from Cervante's *Don Quixote* to Joyce's *Stephan Dedalus*, and from Molière's *Misanthrope*, to Shakespeare's *Brutus* and, of course, the central figure of *Hamlet*, Gonzalo becomes a seemingly endless source of literary allusion within the text. One might cite, for instance, the doctor's description of him early on in the narrative as "un misantropo", his mother's comparison of her reclusive, cynical son to Molière's *Misanthrope*, as quoted above, or the

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<sup>272</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 75.

doctor's allusion to the figure of Beethoven when trying to get to the root of his famed celibacy. Equally, one might note the narrator's declaration that, "si sarebbe pensato ad una maschera, da dover consegnare alle gipsoteche della posterità. Era invece la faccia dell'unico Pirobutirro maschio vivente che guardava alle travi del soffitto" (CD, RR I, 620). The extensive web of literary references is further complicated through an on-going Caesarian intertext within the narrative. Gonzalo is described at one point, for instance, as "un tal fanatico della libertà" (CD, RR I, 650). For Sbragia, the narrator would appear here "to be encouraging the reader to see in his transposed act of political resistance yet another of the many ironic masks that Gonzalo is forced to don, this time that of Caesar's youthful assassin, Marcus Brutus Junios."<sup>273</sup>

Just as the process of self-fictionalisation at work within Leiris's autobiographical writings might be seen to stem from a deep-seated sense of subjective fragility on the author's part, Gadda's excessive loading of literary allusion onto the figure of Gonzalo might be seen to derive from the author's desire to illustrate the impossibility of any unified, authentic subjective experience within the "farsa da commedianti nati cretini" that makes up social reality. For, far from a process of enrichment, this is in fact one of diminishment. By constructing the figure of Gonzalo around such a complex web of literary signification, Gadda succeeds in reducing him to the status of an empty mask or hollow receptacle devoid of any real substance, onto which any number of different, even conflicting, personae might be ascribed. It is only after "every illusion of subjectivity has been destroyed", Dombroski thus posits, that Gadda can complete his "absurd reinvention of myth".<sup>274</sup> Roscioni suggests that the primary effect of this process is to afflict Gonzalo with such an incapacitating degree of self-contradiction as to rid him of any sustainable sense of self:

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<sup>273</sup> Sbragia, "Toga Caput Obvolvitur".

<sup>274</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 88.

Gonzalo è un argentino e un Lombardo, un celto e un tedesco, un ingegnere e uno scrittore, un lettore di Platone e un venditore ambulante di fazzoletti, è l'Avaro, il Misanthropo, il Malato immaginario, il Nemico del popolo, è Enea, è Rodrigo Borgia [...] D'altra parte, questa disponibilità e questa ricchezza saranno pagate al prezzo di laceranti contraddizioni. Esso non potrà infatti identificarsi a lungo con nessuna delle sue immagini: sarà d'animo 'ora saturnino ora dionisiaco ora eleusino, ora coribantico'; vorrà negare la realtà che lo circonda, e riuscirà solo a negare sé medesimo.<sup>275</sup>

Sbragia has pointed out, moreover, that the process leaves Gonzalo struggling with an unbearable compulsion to cast off this heavy cloak of contradictory identities: "The swings in personality border on the schizophrenic", he explains, "the masks bear the marks of estrangement. In Pirandellian fashion, Gonzalo seeks liberation from the assigned identities."<sup>276</sup> Like the typical Pirandellian subject, then, who represents the object of ever-changing, mutable identities, Gonzalo struggles to free himself from the tensions and unsustainable weight of an experience of selfhood that is at once endlessly rich in signification and tragically devoid of unified meaning.

Through the semi-autobiographical figure of Gonzalo, Gadda might therefore be seen to be giving voice to the philosophical denunciation of monadic, unified identity, or "idolo io", put forward in *Meditazione milanese*. This philosophical crusade against the unified self in fact represents the source of numerous tirades within *La cognizione* by Gonzalo himself. One might recall, for instance, his vicious critique of the first person pronoun in the following outburst: "Bel modo di curarsi! ... a dire: io non ho nulla. Io non ho mai avuto bisogno di nessuno!... io, più i dottori stanno alla larga, e meglio mi sento... Io mi

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<sup>275</sup> Roscioni, *La Verità sospetta*, p. 167

<sup>276</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 123.

riguardo da me, che son sicura di non sbagliare... Io, io, io!”. For, he continues, “Ah! Il mondo delle idee! che bel mondo!... ah! L’io, io... tra i mandorli in fiore... poi tra le pere, e le Battistine, e il Giuseppe!... l’io, l’io!... Il più lurido di tutti i pronomi...!” (CD, RR I, 635). Representative of society’s erroneous belief in the possibility of a unified, stable subject, the personal pronoun becomes the object of an ongoing battle for the theorising Gonzalo:

...il solo fatto che noi seguitiamo a proclamare... io, tu... con le nostre bocche screanzate... [...] io, tu... questo solo fatto... io, tu... denuncia la bassezza della comune dialettica... e ne certifica della nostra impotenza a predicare nulla di nulla,... dacché ignoriamo... il soggetto di ogni proposizione possibile. [...] ‘...: io, io, io!... Ma lo cacerò di casa! Col pacco de’ suoi diritti legato alla coda... fuori, fuori!...’ (CD, RR I, 636-638)

It is not only in the figure of Gonzalo that one can witness this process of literary identification at work in *La Cognizione*, however. The strategy also determines Gadda’s characterisation of the mother figure. Depicted, like Gonzalo, in relation to an array of literary figures, the *Signora* is described by Pedriali as embodying, simultaneously, all of the pathos of “a tragically great Shakespearian figure” and all of the “petty meanness of a Molière character”.<sup>277</sup> Throughout the course of the narrative, she is associated with a wide array of literary reference points: from Shakespeare’s Veturia (“Sotto il cielo di tenebra... Veturia, forse la madre immobile di Coriolano, velata”), to King Lear (“Con una mano, allora, stanca, si ravviava i capelli degli anni, effuse dalla fronte senza carezze come quelli di Re Lear”), Suetonius’s Caesar (“non fosse stata la dignità delle palpebre, che cadono, cadono, come la toga di Cesare, sullo stupore della morte”), and, finally, Sophocles’ Jocasta, whom Manuela Bertone lists as a particularly rich literary precedent: “a mother who is far from

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<sup>277</sup> Pedriali, ‘The Mark of Cain: Mourning and Dissimulation in the Works of Carlo Emilio Gadda’, in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, 132-158 (p. 156).

being excluded from the narrative project [...] a mother who is actually all too present, who drives her son to his tragic deeds.”<sup>278</sup> However, not only does the mother figure bear the weight of a myriad of literary precedents and thus offer up a score of potential interpretations. Rather, she is also presented by Gadda as a wider symbol for society itself, inasmuch as she comes to stand for the very same bourgeois social institutions, or “[le] baggianate della ritualistica borghese” (CD, RR I, 764), so fiercely scorned by Gonzalo throughout the narrative. One such example can be identified, for instance, in the bourgeois fixation with the institution of the family, which finds expression in what Sbragia describes as a “given ideology of ‘motherhood’.”<sup>279</sup> Contrary to Gonzalo, who, Gadda explains, “è insofferente della imbecillagine generale del mondo, delle baggianate della ritualistica borghese; e aborre dai crimini del mondo” (CD, RR I, 764), the mother is fully integrated into the wider community. As such, Luperini describes her as being guilty of a form of transgression equivalent to that of Mussolini himself: “L’errore della madre”, he explains, “è della stessa natura di quello di Mussolini (perché riguarda la reintegrazione dell’io nelle forme stolte che sole sono possibili nella società e nell’ideologia borghese), e il segno d’una stortura oggettiva la quale a sua volta è alla base del ‘male oscuro’ del figlio.”<sup>280</sup> One of the most obvious means by which this is demonstrated in the novel is through the mother’s obsessive fixation with the bourgeois ideal of the “Villa Madre”, which for Gonzalo comes to represent the errors of bourgeois society as a whole: “L’Idea Matrice della villa se l’era appropriata quale organo rubente od entelechia prima consustanziale ai visceri, è però inalienabile dalla sacra interezza della persona” (CD, RR I, 687). More than just a symbol of a typical bourgeois attachment to the idealised notion of the home, the Villa comes to stand as a symbol within the novel of the isolated concept of monadic identity itself: “tutto ciò che nasceva dalla Villa,

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<sup>278</sup> Bertone, ‘Murderous Desires’, p. 130.

<sup>279</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 130.

<sup>280</sup> Romano Luperini, *Il Novecento: apparati ideologici, ceto intellettuale, sistemi formali nella letteratura italiana contemporanea (Vol. II)* (Turin: Loescher editore, 1981), p.109.

o dalla Idea-Villa, era manifestazione e modo dell'Essere sacro foruncolo sul collo della Bestia-Essere. Anche il sentore" (CD, RR I, 706). In her article on the question of defilement and abjection in the writings of Gadda and Céline, Wehling-Giorgi suggests that, "the confines of the villa, which primarily embody the monadic sphere of the self in *La cognizione*, also symbolise the penetrability of the subject which is constantly assaulted by the outer invasion of abjection."<sup>281</sup> Drawing a symbolic link between the 'womb-like' nature of the Villa and the bond between the mother and son, she goes on to propose that "The protagonist's longing for protection and intimacy within the domestic walls [...] suggests his desire to return to the pre-narcissistic maternal space, reconstituting the bliss of the originary union with the progenitor."<sup>282</sup>

Within the narrative framework of *La Cognizione*, the mother (and, by extension, the Villa-Matrice) therefore figures as a symbol both of the erroneous notion of monadic selfhood denounced by Gadda throughout his writings and of what Dombroski has described as the "Oedipal territory of repression [...] fixity, truth and sanity, everything on which the well-constructed ego rests."<sup>283</sup> Any attempt on Gonzalo's part to break away from the mother, it follows, would involve not only a violent dissolution of the bond between mother and son, but also a self-destructive refutation of social integration itself. And it is herein that the tragic significance of Gonzalo's experience lies. For, unlike the mother, who is fully integrated into society's fraudulent "forme stabili", Gonzalo is from the outset engaged in a losing battle to pierce through society's superficial façade in order to reach a more authentic

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<sup>281</sup> Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 'Defilement, War and the Corpse. On Abjection in Gadda and Céline', *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, 7 (2011), <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue7/articles/wehlingdefile07.php>>.

<sup>282</sup> Wehling-Giorgi, 'Defilement, War and the Corpse'.

<sup>283</sup> Dombroski, 'Overcoming Oedipus', p. 128.

realm of experience. Benedetti suggests that he might thus be seen to represent the classical figure of the tragic anti-hero:

In Gadda, grief is necessity, it is inevitable. Gonzalo's illness is not the result of an accumulation of knowledge about all things and their vanity, but rather a destiny provoked by an original catastrophe: the consequence of a misdeed or an offence which tore apart the good reality of the ethical organism. [...] Like pale melancholic Hamlet, Gonzalo too is summoned to avenge a wrong he has not committed – a task which is necessary but unjustified. In Gadda's language that is called a 'negazione delle parvenze non valide'.<sup>284</sup>

More than just his crippling awareness of the fraudulent nature of social reality and the mendacious theory of monadic identity upon which it is based, the true tragedy of Gonzalo's experience would thus lie in his ultimately self-destructive endeavour to make amends for an offense he has not committed. The 'offense' to which Benedetti is referring here consists in the protagonist's (self-)destructive attempt to pierce through society's "parvenze non valide", in what might be described as the battle of reason of a thinking individual confronted with an unthinking society: "In certo rovello interno a voler risalire il deflusso delle significazioni e delle cause, in certo disdegno della superficie-vernice" (CD, RR I, 607).

A parallel might be drawn, in this light, between the experience of Gonzalo and that of Pirandello's *umorista*, whose struggle lies in his debilitating awareness of the unbridgeable divide that stands between 'reality' and the series of 'illusions' with which it is presented: "Questa riflessione s'insinua acuta e sottile da per tutto e tutto scompone: ogni immagine del sentimento, ogni finzione ideale, ogni apparenza della realtà, ogni illusione."<sup>285</sup> In his

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<sup>284</sup> Carla Benedetti, 'The Enigma of Grief: An Expressionism against the Self', in *Carlo Emilio Gadda: Contemporary Perspectives*, 159-176 (pp. 166-167).

<sup>285</sup> Pirandello, p. 148.

seminal study of the demise of tragedy in the modern era, *The Death of Tragedy*,<sup>286</sup> George Steiner describes this construction of an illusory “superficie-vernice” in terms of a hypocritical, self-defensive process enacted by all members of society, which he terms “the mask of hypocrisy and self-deception with which men seek to guard against the realities of social and personal life.”<sup>287</sup> For Pirandello, this constitutes a process of fatal deception resulting in the threat of “quell’ombra [...] paurosa e tiranna per tutti gli uomini che non riescono a rendersi conto del fatale inganno.”<sup>288</sup> Tragically aware of his condition, however, the Pirandellian humorist finds himself pitted against a society which he both depends upon and rejects. Calling upon the case of Copernicus to illustrate his theory, Pirandello proposes that it is thus only through the piercing judgement of the humourist that this illusory veneer of “apparenza” can be destroyed: “Uno dei più grandi umoristi, senza saperlo, fu Copernico, che smontò non propriamente la macchina dell’universo, ma l’orgogliosa immagine che ce n’eravamo fatta.”<sup>289</sup> Like Pirandello’s humourist, Gonzalo comes to figure as what Sbragia describes as “the raging madman and the melancholic clown who exposes the absurd underbelly of society”.<sup>290</sup> One might recall, for instance, his biting critique of the absurd behaviour displayed by a group of restaurant goers that he observes one evening, whose ridiculous conduct, he suggests, derives from an absurd, fallacious belief in their own significance: “Tutti, tutti”, he laments, “avevano la loro vita, la loro donna: e si erano lasciati varare: ed erano in condizione di essere presi sul serio. [...] Ognuno credeva, realmente, di essere una cosa seria” (CD, RR I, 696). For, he continues, “Nemmeno essi stessi, che pure conoscevano a fondo tutto quanto li riguardava, le proprie unghie incarnite, e le verruche, i

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<sup>286</sup> George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961).

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, pp. 293-4.

<sup>288</sup> Pirandello, p. 159.

<sup>289</sup> Pirandello, p. 159.

<sup>290</sup> Sbragia, *Modern Macaronic*, p. 117.

nèi, i calli, un per uno, le varici, i foruncoli, i baffi solitari: neppure essi, no, no, avrebbero fatto di se medesimi un simile giudizio. E quella era la vita” (CD, RR I, 700).

What Gadda illustrates, through the case of Gonzalo, is thus the tragic recognition, in George Steiner’s words, that “Once the mask has grown close to the skin, it can be removed only at suicidal cost”.<sup>291</sup> As the narrator asserts, any attempt to destroy society’s “superficie-vernice”, will inevitably bring about a destruction of the self:

Lo hidalgo, forse, era a negare se stesso: rivendicando a sé le ragioni del dolore, la conoscenza e la verità del dolore, nulla rimaneva alla possibilità. Tutto andava esaurito dalla rapina del dolore. Lo scherno solo dei disegni e delle parvenze era salvo, quasi maschera tragica sulla metope del teatro. (CD, RR I, 704)

The real tragedy embodied by Gonzalo’s process of “cognizione” might therefore be seen to lie in the recognition, to quote Dombroski, that “there is [...] no transcendental ideal with which to contrast the illusions of life.”<sup>292</sup> As Luperini explains, “L’ideale è vuoto, il sublime ha lasciato deserte le scene, e ne resta solo la maschera paradossale.”<sup>293</sup> All that remains, once society’s fallacious “parvenze” have been exposed for the empty illusions that they are, is an empty vacuum that leaves nothing, not even the self, intact. Gonzalo is thus left with nothing, to quote Giuseppe Stellardi, but “la certezza del nulla che soggiace tanto alla vita vera quanto alla creazione letteraria, e che rende vano ogni tentativo di comunicare.”<sup>294</sup> As a result, Gonzalo can be seen to occupy what Dombroski has described in terms of an “untenable position of entrapment”,<sup>295</sup> between a form of abnormal, narcissistic isolation

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<sup>291</sup> Steiner, p. 294.

<sup>292</sup> Robert S. Dombroski, ‘The Meaning of Gadda’s War Diary’, *Italica*, No. 4, Vol. 47 (Winter 1970), 373-386 (p. 374).

<sup>293</sup> Romano Luperini, *L’allegoria del moderno: saggi sull’allegorismo come forma artistica del moderno e come metodo di conoscenza* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990), p. 276.

<sup>294</sup> Giuseppe Stellardi, *Gadda: Miseria e Grandezza della Letteratura* (Florence: Franco Cesati editore, 2006), p. 113.

<sup>295</sup> Dombroski, ‘Overcoming Oedipus’, p. 125.

from society and a hypocritical integration with it. For while he has exposed social reality for the delusionary façade that it is – “il berciare d’una muta di diavoli pazzi, sozzi, in una inutile, bestiale diavoleria” (CD, RR I, 735) – and arrived at the tragic recognition that the only way to survive is to exist in isolation from that reality, he is nonetheless tragically aware that any such an act would result not only in the destruction of society but also of the self: “negare vane immagini, le più volte, significa negare se medesimo” (CD, RR I, 703). Faced with this impasse, Dombroski suggests that Gonzalo responds by retreating into a state of “narcissistic eccentricity” serving as a defensive barrier between himself and the threat of the other. By fashioning his own “grandiose self”, Gonzalo “rebels against deformation through narcissistic eccentricity”. The result, he suggests, is that “[Gonzalo’s] narcissism (and with it Gadda’s entire literary enterprise) becomes, in a Marcusian sense, an emancipatory force. Narcissistic isolation is Gonzalo’s refusal to accept repressive society.”<sup>296</sup>

More than just a denunciation of authentic *subjective* reality, this narrative reduction of the figures of Gonzalo and the Signora to the level of empty literary masks or character typologies can also be seen to relate to a critical loss of faith on the author’s part in literature itself. For Dombroski, the literary reference points around which the two figures are constructed are thus “not deployed as markers signalling the transcendent, imaginary world of literature”. Instead, “the literary is exhibited ironically as artifice.”<sup>297</sup> This ironic denunciation of the literary act also goes hand in hand, for Gadda, with an attack on the potentialities of language. Gadda points, at numerous instances in his writings, to a deep-seated nostalgia for an idealised classical past in which language still possessed a quasi-magical capacity to impart order and meaning upon external reality, as a vector of truth rather than artifice. Hence he explains, in ‘Meditazione breve circa il dire e il fare’, “Come la magia

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<sup>296</sup> Dombroski, ‘Overcoming Oedipus’, p. 142.

<sup>297</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 87.

e la negromanzia conobbero il valore ossessivo o ricreativo della parola, così questa, anche nella società illuminata, serba il suo contenuto magico. Sta a noi di riscattarla dall'ossessione della frode e di ricreare la magia della verità" (VM, SGF I, 453). Leiris, too, frequently laments his progressive loss of the reverent attitude with which he looked upon language as a child:

Trop fugace, à mon gré, serait bientôt passé ce temps où tout ce que je lisais était Parole, effective 'parole d'évangile' dont l'absolue véracité ne pouvait être mise en question [...] En ce temps-là, il est certain que Dieu était le Verbe, que ce verbe était dieu et que ce dieu, dans les choses, s'était incarné. Mais tout se passe, aujourd'hui, comme si 'Dieu' se vengeait de n'être plus qu'une affaire de langage, un mot entre les autres mots, et comme si moi, les idées, les mots, les choses, nous allions chacun de notre côté. (B, RJ, 50)

Too soon, he bemoans, is language reduced to nothing more than a series of "'lettres mortes' après avoir été ressorts kabbalistiques d'illumination" (B, RJ, 68).

Through the overtly autobiographical figure of Gonzalo, Gadda thus gives voice in *La cognizione* to the unresolved, tragic quandary faced by the knowing individual who seeks to break through society's illusory veneer in an attempt to access a more authentic subjective reality. For what results from any such an attempt, it is suggested, is not only the destruction of society itself but, crucially, the tragic negation of the self. For Gadda, there can be no knowledge within an external reality defined by its own senselessness, just as there can be no authentic experience of subjectivity for a self inextricably caught up with an inauthentic social reality: "Non si può conoscere l'io – non si può dire: Io – ; non si può conoscere il mondo. Si può solo avere la cognizione che tutto è un groviglio le cui relazioni non potranno

mai essere sciolte.”<sup>298</sup> The only solution for the thinking individual is thus the knowing construction and acceptance of an inauthentic yet socially acceptable persona: “Ho dovuto costruire la mia personalità”, the author explains in ‘Come lavoro’, “se personalità è” (VM, SGF I, 19). The ultimately unresolved tension within the text between the conflicting voices of the ‘tragic’ individual, Gonzalo, and the ‘comic’ collective chorus thus point to an inextricable interrelation of the individual and the collective, “cognizione” and illusion, leaving the thinking individual caught in the inescapable double bind described by Dombroski. For while social reality is shown to be intrinsically flawed, based as it is upon a series of superficial “parvenze non valide” and “menzogne salvatrici”, it is only at the price of self-negation that the individual can destroy it, forcing him into an impossible choice between a fallacious, illusory union with the other and a neurotic, impossible form of narcissistic retreat. The only difference between the normal and abnormal individual, Gadda thus explains, is that the latter is aware of the illusions upon which social existence is grounded:

In realtà, la differenza tra il normale e lo anormale è questa qui: questa sola: che il normale non ha coscienza, non ha nemmeno il sospetto metafisico, de’ suoi stati nevrotici o paranevrotici [...]: non ha dunque, né può avere, coscienza veruna del contenuto (fessissimo) delle sue nevrosi: le sue bambinesche certezze lo immunizzano dal mortifero pericolo d’ogni incertezza: da ogni conato d’evasione, da ogni tentazione d’apertura di rapporti con la tenebra, con l’ignoto infinito: mentrèché lo anormale raggiunge, qualche volta, una discretamente chiara intelligenza degli atti...(VM, 21-2)

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<sup>298</sup> De Benedictus, p. 119.

Having arrived at the tragic recognition that social reality itself *n'est que vanité*, to use Leiris's words, Gonzalo, embodying the experiences of the author himself, is thus forced to choose between either self-consciously donning the caricatured persona accorded to him by the wider community and thereby entering into a hypocritical acceptance of an artificial social reality, or else engaging in a self-destructive refutation of that reality. In line with this refutation of any authentic experience of subjectivity within a fraudulent external and social reality, Leiris, too, ultimately fails in his attempt to forego the realm of the 'imaginary' and thereby transform literature into the valid, courageous engagement with the 'real' described in 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie'. Unable to reconcile himself to an autobiographical project based on nothing more than 'jeu' while at the same time recognising the impossibility of separating the inextricably interconnected poles of 'réalité' and 'fiction', 'jeu' and 'règle', he remains riven throughout his writings between two equally untenable solutions: "Ce que je veux, somme tout", he explains in *Frêle bruit*, as quoted earlier on in this study, that "c'est jouer, pour moi et, aussi bien, pour les autres, à qui je donne mes performances en spectacle tel l'artiste, le sportsman ou le joueur d'échecs qu'on admire; mais ce que je ne puis admettre, c'est que ce jeu ne soit qu'un jeu" (FB, RJ, 986).

For both authors, disenchanted with the possibility of entering into any authentic experience of unity with the other, be it at the level of individual or communal relations, writing thus becomes the arena in which a fragmented and inauthentic experience of subjectivity is both played out and exposed. While Leiris's autobiographical project can be seen to stage an *on-going* alternation between promise and failure, though, rooted in the author's persistent yet ultimately thwarted quest to reconcile the critical tension that afflicts him throughout his life, between the conflicting poles of 'reality' and 'fiction', 'jeu' and 'règle', Gadda's narrative fiction can be seen to take its starting point, I have argued, in a definitive loss of faith in literature's capacity to impart order and unity and out-and-out

denunciation of the possibility of entering into any authentic experience of subjectivity within an inherently inauthentic social reality.

## Conclusion

In her analysis of Leiris's autobiographical enterprise, Nathalie Barberger describes the author's work in terms of an "œuvre inaboutie, règle introuvable, quête échouée dans le vertige du vide".<sup>299</sup> Grounded on an ineradicable sense of lack, or 'vide', for Barberger Leiris's writing project would thus constitute, in essence, a tragic lament for a long-lost "forme achevée", or "unité perdue". "L'écriture de Leiris", she posits, "est une écriture du deuil: deuil du mot, deuil de la forme et de la totalité, deuil de l'unité, deuil du sens et du sujet."<sup>300</sup>

And it is in precisely such a lament for an irretrievable experience of 'plenitude' or 'unity' that, I have argued, the central affinity between the works of Gadda and Leiris might be seen to lie. For while these two central figures of twentieth-century literature are clearly distinguished by a number of explicit differences – from their respective intellectual and professional backgrounds, to the differing intellectual and literary scenes of which they were part and their contrasting experiences of the First World War - their works find a common basis in a shared nostalgia for an experience of unity and order absent from a fragmented modernity. Riven by an on-going conflict between the real and the ideal, the individual and the communal, their works can be seen to express a negative vision of modern reality which, I have argued, is firmly rooted in a tragic breakdown of communal integration, the rejection of established conceptions of a unified self, and a resultant increasing sense of alienation and isolation at the level of individual experience.

In her study of the rise of modernist literature, Anne Wright defines the early years of the twentieth century as a period characterised by "the fracturing or dismantling of personal

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<sup>299</sup> Barberger, p. 56.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, p. 56

relations, of social institutions, of civilisations.”<sup>301</sup> Be it at the individual, cultural or national levels, she explains, this historical period saw the onset of a “total devastation” of the order and unity of the classical past, giving rise to a disorienting experience of fragmentation at the level of individual experience. Through a comparative examination structured around three broad areas of concern - the place of the individual in relation to the communal, the relationship between male self and female other, and, lastly, writing as a means of either defending against or exposing an inherently fragmented experience of subjective reality - this comparative study has sought to uncover a shared sensitivity on the part of both Gadda and Leiris to a number of the key issues of twentieth-century thought, namely: the conception of the subject as a fractured entity deprived of any unified, authentic identity; the breakdown of communication between individuals and subsequent impossibility of entering into any real relationship of unity with the other; the absence of community within a fragmented modernity; and the loss of faith in the conception of literature as an act capable of imparting totalising meaning or order upon subjective or external reality.

While Leiris concerned himself principally with the theories of the communifying sacred put forward by the Bataille communities of the 1930s as well as partaking in the Surrealist endeavour to locate that critical point of non-contradiction within a society dictated by binary oppositions, Gadda looked to the unique potentialities of collective integration offered by Fascist group psychology and the experience of war as a means of overcoming the ills of modern egoism and individual isolation. Albeit in differing modes, though, both authors can be seen to grapple with an on-going sense of nostalgia for the unity and order of an irretrievable past. “A l’ancien temps”, Leiris asserts in *Biffures*, “si divers, si contrasté

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<sup>301</sup> Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910-1922: Howard’s End, Heartbreak House, Women in Love, and the Waste Land*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), p. 3.

qu'il eût pu être – s'attachaient des idées dominantes d'ordre, de calme, de bonheur, de bonté" (B, RJ, 155).

While it has been my primary aim to examine the affinities between these authors' works, this comparative reading has also cast light on the no less interesting differences that set their approaches apart. For while the Milanese author elects to represent his experiences through the (albeit thinly disguised) veneer of narrative fiction, his French contemporary chooses to engage in a direct account of his experiences through an autobiographical project spanning almost four decades of his life. Equally, while Leiris's thought was largely shaped by his close personal involvement with a number of key literary figures of contemporary France – from Breton to Bataille, and from Sartre to Mauss - Gadda himself entertained a comparatively isolated position in relation to the key figures of his own national literary landscape. Moreover, while Gadda's post-war fictional narratives can be seen to take their starting point from the fundamental experience of disillusionment triggered by the author's military experiences during the First World War, Leiris's autobiographical project arguably stages an *on-going* alternation between promise and failure, between a belief in the potential validity of the literary act as an authentic, courageous engagement with the 'real', and a denunciation of it as nothing more than a cowardly, narcissistic retreat.

Despite these broad differences, I have argued that a clear correlation can be identified both in Leiris's autobiographical writings and in Gadda's overtly autobiographical fictional narratives between the lament for a lost experience of unity described above, and a loss of authorial control. In Gadda's narratives, this gives rise to a striking degree of narrative fragmentation and open-endedness that has been the subject of extensive critical discussion, and upon which there is neither the space nor the need to reflect here. Suffice it to note that a direct nexus can be identified between the author's philosophical theory of open-endedness – as presented in the anti-Leibnizian treatise *Meditazione milanese* – and the fragmentation

characteristic of his writings at the textual level. Stellardi has gone so far as to suggest that Gadda's oeuvre might thus be seen to be dominated almost in its entirety by an essential "fragmentariness".<sup>302</sup> Equally, while Leiris makes it his declared goal to submit his autobiographical project to a strictly regulated tauromachic code, wherein the text would be divested of all trace of the imaginary in an effort to turn writing into an act of genuine heroism akin to the sacred undertaking of the *toreador*, what he in fact proceeds to engage in is a sprawling act of literary *creation* dictated by its own set of rules; "Mesure des hauts et des bas, machine tournant à vide, cet ouvrage qui ne m'apporte aucune maîtrise et dont je ne suis même pas le maître" (FB, RJ, 970). Deprived of a controlling, authoritative enunciating subject, the literary act might be seen to reflect the authors shared experience of subjective fragmentation and dissolution.

Rather than a submission to defeat, however, the narrative proliferation and inconclusiveness that results from this loss of authorial control might in fact be described as what Hewitt has termed an act of "successful failure".<sup>303</sup> Within the context of Leiris's autobiographical oeuvre, Barberger interprets this process in terms of a 'necessary' failure, noting that "si Leiris dresse finalement le constat d'une impossible règle du jeu, il serait absurde de parler d'échec. Tout au mieux pourrait-on dire, en paraphrasant Jacques Schérer, qu'il s'agit d'un échec nécessaire."<sup>304</sup> As against a mimetic representative model, which depends both on the stability of the object of representation and on that of the enunciating subject in charge of the act of representation itself, both Leiris and Gadda can be seen to undertake an act of literary representation that is itself necessarily grounded on the

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<sup>302</sup> Giuseppe Stellardi, 'Fragments of (urban) space and (human) time: Gadda, Baudelaire and Benjamin', <<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/lcahm/leopardi/fragments/leopardi/paper-stellardi.pdf>>.

<sup>303</sup> Leah D. Hewitt, 'Getting into the (Speech) Act: Autobiography as Theory and Performance', *SubStance*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Issue 52 (1984), 32-44 (p. 32).

<sup>304</sup> Barberger, p. 56.

impossibility of separating (writing) subject from (written) object, ‘règle’ from ‘jeu’. In relation to Gadda, Dombroski speaks of the author’s ironic deployment of the ‘artifice’ of literature as a means of exposing the artificial nature of subjectivity itself: “Since the object is, on account of its own alienation from itself, an illusionary entity, a being whose essence has been stolen”, he explains, “the author, not to fall victim to the illusion, uses the degraded image against itself for the purpose of reinventing it.” The purpose of art within Gadda’s works, he thus suggests, “is to deliver the alienated object from its own obsessions of unity and identity by focusing on its own radical otherness”.<sup>305</sup>

In line with Dombroski’s description of the tragic “double bind” into which Gadda’s most overtly autobiographical double, Gonzalo, is forced, Leiris’s and Gadda’s autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts can therefore be seen to give expression to a crucial conundrum at the base of their conception of subjectivity itself. Divided between a denunciation of the inauthenticity of social reality and a refutation of the alternative, namely, an unsustainable and unethical form of monadic selfhood, both authors find themselves riven by an irreconcilable conflict between a direct, hypocritical engagement with the sphere of the ‘social’ and a narcissistic retreat into the isolated realm of the ‘individual’. While for Gadda this takes the form of an on-going conflict between a tragic “cognizione” and a hypocritical acceptance of society’s illusory “parvenze non valide”, for Leiris this central tension is articulated around an ongoing, unresolved conflict between ‘fiction’ and ‘réalité’, ‘règle’ and ‘jeu’. Hence while Leiris initially conceives of the act of writing the self in terms of a “réponse à un manque”, his on-going quest to “trouver un plein” through writing is inevitably forestalled: “le fait d’écrire”, he proclaims in *Biffures*, “loin d’infuser une vie factice à qui, autrement, n’arrive pas à se sentir tout à fait vivant – ne nous donne même plus l’illusion de boucher le moins du monde le trou de ce qui nous manque” (B, RJ, 278). Intrinsically

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<sup>305</sup> Dombroski, *Creative Entanglements*, p. 53.

unattainable, any such an experience of unity cannot but remain an impossible ideal: “toute l’émotion esthétique”, he explains in ‘Miroir de la tauromachie’, “se greffe finalement sur cette lacune qui représente l’élément sinistre sous sa forme la plus haute: inachèvement obligatoire, gouffre que nous cherchons vainement à combler, brèche ouverte à notre condition” (MT, 31).

While considerable critical attention has been accorded to the authors’ positions within their respective national literary contexts, little has been done to highlight such affinities between their thought and the wider panorama of twentieth-century European discourse. What I hope to have illustrated through this comparative study, therefore, is that, far from being restricted to the specific discourses of their respective national frameworks, as criticism has most often tended to suggest, Gadda and Leiris in fact display a shared sensitivity to a key tenet of twentieth-century discourse: namely, a central tension at the base of modern experience between a nostalgia for a lost unity and order of the distant past, and a recognition of the tragic unattainability of any such an experience within a modern reality grounded on its own fragmentation and dissolution.

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