

The Women Characters of Carlo Emilio Gadda

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Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973), like his predecessors in Naturalism, has given us women characters of remarkable vitality. By the time of his first recorded writing, during World War I, the earlier (male) view of female beauty had shifted focus; the tradition that had found its poetic symbols in the figures embodying woman's virtues, desirability, vulnerability, and pathos had broadened its typology of women to allow for a representation that included, among other things, qualities verging on the irregular and the bizarre, to which the trio of Fosca, Giacinta Marulli, and Elena Dorello testifies.¹ This characteristic of the bizarre is also a feature of many of Gadda's women 'characters who display an astonishing range of physical defects, which, as the examples below will show, seem themselves almost to justify the character's appearance. By contrast, his male characters exhibit far less extravagance in their individual physical aspects² and, apart from those in whom traces of Gadda himself

1. Igino Ugo Tarchetti, *Fosca*, 1869; Luigi Capuana, *Giacinta*, 1979; Giovanni Verga, *Il marito di Elena*, 1882.

2. The title story in the volume *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi* offers an unusual and uncommon example of caricature in the following description of the powerful but decrepit Beniamino Venarvagli, obsessed with his desire to maintain his substance intact in his heirs: "Codesto ricchissimo prozio Beniamino si ritrovò in vecchiaia, a settant'anni, vedovo senza figli né discendenti diretti, col mento, e dopo il mento l'epigastro, tutto guernito e pavesato d'una interminabile barba color tabacco-ambra a due punte, con il capo calvo e la barba irretiti in una sorta di va e vieni per cui seguitava a parer significare no no anche quando nessuno gli proponeva, o richiedeva, esborsi di sorta: e con una vescica e un intestino in dissesto per cui, usufruendo dell'aiuto della Teresa e di speciali recipienti osculanti, vasi, bacinelle, fistole e cucchiaini a serbatoio, doveva, e poteva, far pipì dal fianco sinistro e pupil dal fianco destro [...]" [This very rich great-uncle Beniamino Venarvagli found himself in his old age, at seventy, a widower without children or direct heirs, with his chin, and after his chin his epigastrium, all covered and decked out with an interminable beard, amber-tobacco colored and forked, with his bald head and his beard caught up in a

are discernible,³ are often not defined in recognizable form. The author directs attention rather to their idiocies of action or attitude, isolating the middle class of property owners (in Lombardy, especially) for his strongest barbs.⁴ In caricaturing the two sexes, he tends to divide their human fallibility into male misuse of the rational faculty and female grotesqueness in physical appearance and psyche. The line between these characterizations is not drawn so clearly as to preclude the middle-class women from equal criticism of their class attitudes, but whatever their station or literary function in his work, women are given the dimension of a physical reality that usually contains elements of distortion. As will be discussed, this more extensive use of physical description with regard to women characters does not always have the effect of individualizing them; their presence, nevertheless, is stated more emphatically and with greater variation than is the case with males, and they have a precise function in Gadda's representation of the world.

The physical deformities that afflict Gadda's women have bizarre parallels in an even earlier literary tradition: in the catalog of their abnormalities, we can find some of the same grotesque images of the body that Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1968) identifies among the characters of Rabelais: the gaping mouth, the enormous nose, swollen bellies, large sweating bodies, and hunched back are present in the work of both writers, and the mention of urination in some unusual context is also common to both. Gadda's descriptions of women further insist on the impairment of the faculties of sight and hearing that inhibits relations with others. These topoi of the grotesque in

kind of coming and going by which he continued to seem to mean no no even when no one was proposing or requesting disbursements of any kind: and with his bladder and his intestine in difficulties so that, using the help of Teresa and of special curved receptacles, jars, basins, pipes and spoons as reservoir he had to, could, urinate from the left side and defecate from the right side...] (Gadda 1963: 369-70). (All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.)

3. This is particularly true of the description of the engineer Baronfo in *La Madonna dei filosofi* (Gadda 1931: 132-33) and of Gonzalo Pirobutirro, the male protagonist in *La cognizione del dolore* (Gadda [1963] 1987: 136-37).

4. A fine example of male idiocy is in the person of the industrialist Eucarpio Vanzaghi, "uomo probo e serio" [an upright and respectable man], who has such a firm conviction about the value of modern prophylactic medicine that he offers an utterly unnecessary appendectomy to each of his three sisters ^{as a} Christmas present ("La cenere delle battaglie," Gadda 1963: 327). The action of the father of Gonzalo Pirobutirro in *La cognizione*, who ruins the family by pouring money into the country villa, is amply castigated in the largely autobiographical pages of the book.

female bodies appear repeatedly in the following examples of Gadda's work, which span twenty or more years of writing.

At least three women are described in terms of a gaping hole of a mouth where front teeth are missing. In the volume *Novella seconda* that appeared in 1971, the segment of an unfinished novel "Notte di luna" (written in 1930) refers to the case of Filomena, whose two front teeth "se ne erano andati l'un dopo l'altro" [had gone one after the other]. We read:

L'uscio si dischiuse a metà: [...1 Filomena si offerse contro la luce del moccolo, mentre un sorriso sfrontato lasciava intravedere quel rettangolo buio, al posto dei due denti. (Gadda 1971: 112-13)

[The doorway opened halfway: [...] Filomena appeared against the light of the candle, with a brazen [literally frontless] smile that showed the dark rectangle in place of the two teeth.]

In the same volume the (unfinished) "Novella seconda" refers to the "mammifero" (mammal) Dirce whose "due zanne porcine, apparendo a destra e a manca di tra la sottile fessura dei labbri e tutta la faccia, le davano un aspetto di cinghialessa in cerca di qualche porcheria dove intrufolare il suo grifo" (70) [two porcine fangs, appearing to the right and left in the thin slit of the lips and all the face gave her the look of a female wild boar searching for some filth or other in which to sink its snout]. This segment, written in 1928, ends with a description of Dirce gossiping with a servant – together they make "due autentici aspidi" [two undeniable asps] – a passage that is repeated almost verbatim in relation to Filomena and Linda in "Notte di luna." In 1949 the same image of toothlessness occurring in "Notte di luna" was used for Marianna in "La sposa in campagna":

L'assenza totale degli incisivi dischiudeva allo sguardo l'oscuro buco del boccaforno dove stanno di casa le bugie: e la lingua per raccontarle. [...] La saliva le andava infiorando le labbra di tante bollicine, come d'un delicato soffritto: e lei la riprendeva dagli angoli delle labbra lungo le fiancate della lingua in un sibilo gentile, o per succhi brevi e redditizi, come sorbisse l'amarena dalla cannuccia, ma di traverso. (Gadda 1963: 292)

[The total absence of the incisors opened to view the dark hole of a mouth, the home of lies and of the tongue to tell them. [...] Saliva kept forming so many little bubbles on her lips, like the foaming of frying butter, and she caught them up from the corners of her mouth along the sides of her tongue with a gentle hiss, or with

short, satisfying sips, as if she were drinking an amarena from a straw, but sideways.]

In a more dramatic way the image belongs to the better-known Zamira, from the hills outside Rome, who is interviewed by police in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (written between 1946 and its final publication in 1957):

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. (Gadda [1957] 1970a: 179)

[La Zamira, yes: known to all, between Marino and Ariccia, by the lack of her eight teeth in front [...], four above and four below: whereby the mouth, viscid and salivary, red as if burning with fever, opened badly, like a hole, to speak: worse, it stretched at the corners into a dark and lascivious smile, not handsome, and, no doubt involuntarily, coarse.] (Gadda 1984: 200)

This last description continues to speak of the woman's face as if it were dark wood, furrowed by deep parallel lines, "come maga antica in sacerdozio d'abominevoli sortilegi" (*Pasticciaccio*, 180) [like an ancient sorceress, priestess of abominable spells] (*That Awful Mess*, 201), in an image of rigidity that fixes the features into a kind of gargoyle.

We find equal insistence on other features, such as noses and eyes, that attract attention by their gracelessness, size, or abnormality. In many cases the descriptions follow the typical Gaddian technique of dilating a point of observation until it encompasses its surroundings and establishes links to quite different realities. In the story "Cinema," for example, the author insists on a particularized account of the consequences of an accident of nature when the tailoress, thinking she is longsighted,

[P]ortava degli occhiali che le annebbiavano un po' quei precisi rapporti cui gli occhi nostri soglion inoltrarci de' corpi contundenti. In realtà non era presbite, ma strabica: sicché se un occhio era al gatto, così morbido e pigro, l'altro le volava di là dai vetri, al di là dai passerai, di là dai tegoli, di là dai comignoli e lo fermava soltanto, tra un garbuglio di fili telefonici, la vetta stellante del Filarete. (Gadda 1931: 62)

[W]ore glasses that clouded those relationships by which our eyes usually separate us from blunt instruments. In fact she wasn't long-

sighted, but cross-eyed, so that if one eye was on the cat, so soft and lazy, the other was out the window, beyond the sparrows, the tiles and rooftops and only the starry spire of Filarete in its haze of telephone lines brought it to a halt.]

The accumulated detail of digression has the effect of lessening the original impact, and the reader's attention shifts from concern for the woman to amazement at the sheer versatility of this divided gaze.

In the same story, the narrator is discomfited by a woman who misunderstands his movements; description is concentrated on her very sharp nose:

Mi guardava anche lei, a sua volta, e piuttosto maluccio: dai dintorni d'un naso aquileso e pallido, affilatissimo, mi lanciava occhiate sature d'una viperina perfidia. (Gadda 1931: 96-97)

[She looked at me in her turn, and rather nastily: from near her pale aquiline and very sharp nose, she threw me glances full of viperish perfidy.]

Two other stories in the volume *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi* give the same attention to gracelessness. In "Socer generque":

[Q]uesta Dupont. [...] Il naso, povera creatura, era tutt'altro che `un nasino francese voltato all'insù', perché era un nasone, e non si capiva di che paese, voltato all'ingìù. (Gadda 1963: 250)

[T]his Dupont. [...] Her nose, poor thing, was not at all `a little turned up French nose' because it was a large nose, it was hard to tell from what country, and turned down.]

And Signora Batraci, in "La domenica," is described with even greater incongruity by comparison with the animal world:

Sorrise mansuefatta, commossa, negli occhi molli e vetrosi, gelatinosi, nelle palpebre piuttosto gravi, rigonfie, stancamente sedute sulle gote, pareva una buona cagna rappacificata col mondo. (Gadda 1963: 242)

[She smiled, meekly, touched, in her pale, glassy and weak eyes, and her swollen rather heavy eyelids, tiredly drooping, she seemed a good dog at peace with the world.]

There are also enough cases of awkward or cumbersome bodies to arouse our interest and curiosity, as these examples show:

`Mi sento delle ruote di bicicletta tra i ginocchi,' [says the narrator], mi sento carezzare affettuosamente le reni e contro la schiena un gran caldo molle, come il thermogène, dedicato proprio alla mia

pleura. E' una signora enorme, che lo scirocco e il vin di Marino hanno resa carezzevole e termogenica, tutta in un felice bagno di sudore.⁵

[I feel the wheels of a bicycle between my knees, I feel my back affectionately caressed by a great soft warmth, like a heating pad devoted to my pleura. She is an enormous lady who, made thermogenic and caressable by the hot wind and the Marino wine, is completely bathed in sweat.]

The unforgettable Donna Giulia de' Marpioni, "nata Pertegati, e cugina dei Borella di Villapizzone" [a Pertegati by birth, a cousin of the Borellas of Villapizzone], uses "la spettacolosa circonferenza e l'enormità della massa" [the spectacular circumference and the enormity of the mass] of her body to get her own imperious way: "donna degna del massimo rispetto: svelta, nonostante la ciccia, risoluta, `energica', ben piantata in terra. [...] Di proporzioni enormi, purtroppo"⁶ [a woman worthy of the greatest respect, quick, despite the fat, resolute, `energetic', sturdy. [...] Of enormous proportions, unfortunately].

In "Prima divisione nella notte" (1950) we find inserted as an accompanying comment to a mother's hysteria the following rather gratuitous reference to characters who make no further appearance in the tale as we have it:

Un cane, fuori, abbaia. Le due domestiche dal ventre a balconcino (non erano incinte, erano fatte così) giungevano le mani su quel ventre, su quel balconcino, si ritiravano spaventate facendo il segno della croce, si riducevano a dire il rosario in cucina. (Gadda 1963: 357)

[A dog barked outside. The two domestic servants with stomachs like balconies (they weren't pregnant, they were made like that) joined their hands on those stomachs, on those balconies, withdrew frightened making the sign of the cross, and went to say the rosary in the kitchen.]

Some further examples regarding the disabilities and deformities of servants are found in *L'Adalgisa* and *La cognizione del dolore*. In the house of the nobleman Gian Maria Cavenaghi, the condition of the domestics Carolina "in prestito" [on loan] and Caterina "a mezzo servizio" [employed half-time] is treated with

5. "La festa dell'uva a Marino" (first published in 1932), in Gadda [1934] (1973: 147).

6. "Quattro figlie ebbe e ciascuna regina" (first published in 1942) in Gadda [1944] (1955: 84, 87).

a pungent conciseness that reflects not so much on the two women as on the beleaguered state of the household once the commercial cleaning service has gone into insolvency:

[S]ebbene la Caterina, strabica del sinistro, avesse poi la cataratta sull'occhio buono: la Carolina, semigobba, era sorda [...].⁷

Caterina, squinting in the left eye, had a cataract on the good eye: Carolina, half hunch-backed, was deaf [...].

In the various points of *La cognizione del dolore* where the village women are brought into the action, their presence is signaled by reference to their deformity or idiosyncrasy, despite the variants of their common name that would distinguish them sufficiently. Through their various services to Gonzalo's mother and the villa, the women incur his anger by their association with the ritual that the villa represents, and the similarity between the points of view of Gonzalo and his creator colors the narration at the point where these women are introduced.

They are first seen as:

[L]a lavandaia Peppa, [...] una donna-uomo più dura e salda che non sia stato mai un facchino [...]. (*La cognizione*, 29)

[Peppa the washerwoman, [...] a man-woman harder and tougher than ever [a] stevedore was [...].] (*Acquainted with Grief*, 21)

[L]a pescivendola a piè scalzi Beppina, notissima in tutto il territorio di Lukones e delle vicine ville, non tanto per il commercio dei lavarelli, quanto per il suo modo sbrigativo e piuttosto amazonico di far la piscia, (il tempo è denaro): che adibiva per lo più, la pipì, a uno scopo nobilmente agronomico [...]. (*La cognizione*, 31)

[T]he barefoot fishwife Beppina, famous in all the territory of Lukones and in the neighbouring villas, not so much for her trade as for her brisk and rather Amazonic way of pissing (time is money): and she directed her pee to a nobly agronomical end [...].] (*Acquainted with Grief*, 21)

[L]a Pina [...] ch'era la moglie nana dell'affossatore principale e vestita sempre di nero [...]. (*La cognizione*, 32)

[Pina [...] who was the dwarf wife of the chief grave-digger and always dressed in black [...].] (*Acquainted with Grief*, 21)

Subsequent mention of them is in these terms: "la viriloide Peppa" (470), "la vecchia senza mutande" (416), and "la moglie

7. "Quando il Girolamo ha smesso" (first published in 1943) in Gadda [1944] (1955: 43).

nana e ingobbita dell'affossamorti, nera come una blatta" (411) [the viriloid Peppa (213), the old woman without drawers (185), the gravedigger's dwarfed and humpbacked wife black as a roach (183)].

Again in *La cognizione* there is a lengthy description of the servant Battistina that concentrates almost exclusively on the woman's goiter: the swelling is of such a size that it is impossible for her to look ahead, but she must keep her face constantly turned to the left – "la faccia si rivolgeva a sinistra, che parve si fossero sbagliati a inchiodargliela sul busto, quasi d'un pupazzo dignitoso verso occidente: in realtà per far luogo al gozzo, tre o quattro ettogrammi" (*La cognizione*, 116-17) [her face was addressed to the left, so it seemed that they had been mistaken when they fastened it to her bust, like a dignified puppet facing west – in reality, to make room for her goiter, three or four hectograms (*Acquainted with Grief* 54-55)]. The description of the deformity consists of an accumulation of extended images that has the same effect of dissolving our empathy with the character as happened regarding the squint-eyed dressmaker of "Cinema." There is digression from the first extended simile to a secondary one:

[E] il gozzo pareva un animale [...] che, dopo averla azzannata nella trachea, le bevesse fuori metà del respiro, nascondendosi però sotto la pelle di lei come il fotografo sotto la tela. (*La cognizione*, 11)

[T]he goiter seemed an animal [...] which, after having clawed at her trachea, was now drinking forth half her breath, hiding however under her skin like the photographer under his cloth.] (*Acquainted with Grief* 55)

This is followed by a further extended image:

Dal gozzo della donna ribolli un `buon giorno signor dottore', così somnesso e bagnato, che parve il cuocere d'una verza e carote in una terrina, a cui per un attimo si sia tolto il coperchio. (*La cognizione*, 117)

[From the woman's goitre bubbled forth a `Good day, doctor', so subdued and damp that it seemed the cooking of a cabbage with carrots in a pot from which for a moment the lid has been removed.] (*Acquainted with Grief*, 55)

Where the objective detail is given Stich prominence, as here, it has a reductive effect on the paragraph's hierarchy of meaning, bringing it all into parallel, undifferentiated components. It is a

technique that elsewhere serves Gadda in breaking up conventional hierarchies of values.

The repetition of negative images of lower-class women, shown with blemish, ugliness, or deformity, is a trait that links Gadda to a certain kind of naturalism: the almost photographic reproduction of the consequences of not supplying appropriate care to women at this level may be coincidental with Gadda's intent, but his work nonetheless documents the presence of toothless, obese, physically decrepit women in service at the center of a country during the years of its proclaimed political and social emphasis on progress, fitness, and probity. Given the implosive, redundant effects of Gadda's language, the intent of social criticism through humor is quite clear. The avalanche of language overwhelms the servants as well as their employers, but the satire seems to discriminate more against the less numerous middle-class women characters, who are observed in greater detail at the level of their social performance. The criticism of them (most sharply felt in *L'Adalgisa* and *La cognizione del dolore* from the mid 1930s) is pointed at the class that had taken upon itself the role of the protector of social values.

These examples of negative female typology seem to contrast with the view of women in the short essay "Il seccatore," written in 1955 (Gadda 1981: 77-81), in which the author finds that, in an epoch that has confirmed the equality of the sexes, there is one positive characteristic still belonging solely to the female sex – they, unlike their male counterparts, are not bores (accepting this statement at face value, without the possibility that it implies criticism of women's loquacity). Far from possessing the male ability to bore others, women, he claims, represent for males a "senso sororale e crocerossistico" [a sisterly, "Red Cross" attitude], a view that, while not negative, is hardly individualistic. The date of the writing of such a stereotype is an indication of the time fix we find in Gadda's imagery, since, in line with his usual distribution of women's roles (within the affective sphere or the private domains of society), it concentrates on the conventional models that refer to the turn-of-the-century Lombard society of his youth. The essay continues with the ideal of "il sorriso e la bontà di una donna, la sua carezza di madre, di sorella, di sposa, di figlia e magari di zia o di cognata" (77) [the smile and goodness of a woman, her caress as mother, sister, spouse, daughter or even aunt or sister-in-law], in which the emphasis rests on the role rather than on the personal char-

acteristics of the women, and typifies them (in an effective denial of the equality mentioned earlier), simply as alleviators of their male relatives' problems.

Though abundantly present in all areas of Gadda's writing except that concerning the war and the technical essays, women characters are limited in their spheres of operation: the middle class is anchored to the routines and rituals associated with family or social interchange, while those without this status, if seen apart from their work function, are shown in their typical group activity. Between these two levels are the young marriageable women from wealthy families, single daughters who display audacity by driving fast cars at dangerous speeds — a phenomenon that is offered as a cliché of modernity from the 1931 *Madonna dei filosofi*, to the *Cognizione* of the late 1930s, to the story "Prima divisione nella notte", dated 1950. One other recurring female figure — that of the strong mother, educator of a young son⁸ — if considered in relation to the personal references throughout Gadda's writing, beginning with his war diary of 1915-1919 (Gadda 1955), leads us to the autobiographical threads in his work that, as often as not, produce lyrical treatment rather than the bizarre and the misogynistic, such as are recorded in this essay.⁹ The early traumas that have been

8. See in particular the Countess Brocchi guiding the education of Gigi in "San Giorgio in casa Brocchi" in *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi*, and the determination of Donna Teresa Velaschi in relation to her son Paolo in *La meccanica*, written between 1924 and 1929 (Gadda 1970b). The theme is continued through allusions that can be read into passages of *La cognizione del dolore* and in the more open statements in "Dalle specchiere dei laghi" of 1941 (Gadda 1964): "Se altri avesse lasciato dondolar la gamba, bimbo irrequieto, o avesse tentato di stropicciarsi le mani diacce da poter sostenere la sua penna, di certo non sarebbe incorso nelle ammonizioni 'illuminate', poi nelle punizioni feroci [...]" [If another, a restless child, had let his leg swing, or had tried to rub his icy hands so as to be able to hold his pen, certainly he would not have incurred "enlightened" admonitions and then ferocious punishment [...]] (22). Gadda draws specific attention to his interest in the theme when, in reviewing a translation of Ramón Pérez de Ayala's *Luna de miei, luna de hiel*, he mentions his own work and the theme of education: "La frase tematica è un accordo a carattere genetico-sessuologico-pediatrico-pedagogistico di notevole (per me) interesse: e mi fa rivivere l'accordo di fondo d'una novella di autore italiano innominabile: *San Giorgio in casa Brocchi* (Solaria, giugno 1931)" (Gadda [1945] 1958: 218). [The theme is a concordance of a genetic-sexological-pediatric-pedagogic nature that is of notable interest (for me): and it brings me back to the basic concordance of a short story by an unmentionable author: *San Giorgio in casa Brocchi* (Solaria, June, 1931).]

9. Since writing this essay I have been able to read Lucilla Sergiacomo's more detailed work on the subject of Gadda's treatment of female characters, in which she identifies a typology of women observed largely with a misogynist's eye (Sergiacomo 1988).

hinted at and discussed by others (particularly Manzotti 1984) and Gadda's possible misogyny are contributing strands no doubt to his general representation of women with such limitations or distortions as we have seen. Any general view of his work, however, shows the writer's consistency in reflecting the deficiencies in all human manifestations, since the world appears to him as a jumble of often discordant phenomena that impinge on each other, with a limiting or distorting effect; as such it excites his criticism. The dialogue entitled "L'Editore chiede venia del recupero chiamando in causa l'Autore" that accompanies *La cognizione del dolore* contains the author's explanation for his representation of the world, and his disclaimer of any unmotivated violence in representing it:

La sceverazione degli accadimenti del mondo e della società in parvenze o simboli spettacolari, [...] e in moventi e sentimenti profondi, veridici, della realtà spirituale, questa cernita è metodo caratterizzante la rappresentazione che l'autore ama dare della società: i simboli spettacolari muovono per lo più il referto a una programmata derisione, che in certe pagine raggiunge tonalità parossistica e aspetto deforme: lo muovono alla polemica, alla beffa, al grottesco, al "barocco": alla insofferenza, all'apparente crudeltà, a un indugio "misanthropico" del pensiero. Ma il barocco e il grottesco albergano già nelle cose [...]: grottesco e barocco non ascrivibili a una premeditata volontà o tendenza espressiva dell'autore, ma legati alla natura e alla storia [...] talché il grido-parola d'ordine "barocco è il G.!" potrebbe commutarsi nel più ragionevole e più pacato asserto "barocco è il mondo, e il G. ne ha percepito e ritratto la barocaggine." (*La cognizione*, 481-82)

[The division of the world's happenings and of society into exterior aspects and symbols [...] and the profound, truthful reasons and feelings of spiritual reality, this selection is the method characterizing the representation that the author likes to give of society: the exterior symbols cause the representation to become a programmed derision that in certain pages reaches a tonality that is paroxysmal and of ugly aspect: (these symbols) induce polemics, jeers, the grotesque, the "baroque": intolerance, apparent cruelty, a lingering in "misanthropic" thought. But the baroque and grotesque already inhabit things [...] grotesque and baroque not ascribable to the author's premeditated wish or expressive tendency, but tied to nature and history: [...] so that the catch-cry "G. is baroque"! could be changed into the more reasonable and placid assertion "the world is baroque, and G. has perceived and portrayed its baroque-ness".]

The cross-referenced allusions within Gadda's work, as well as the illuminations offered by some of the posthumous publications, provide a gloss for most of the repeated minutiae of private experience embedded in this narrative, and reveal how frequently these experiences are projected through the figures of women characters.¹⁰ The centrality of women in the expression of Gadda's themes may correspond to the personal history and condition of the author, but also it seems that the more dominant presence, and enthusiastic participation, of women in all areas of social exchange – more so at a time when their circumstances were otherwise restricted – gave him an ample canvas on which to trace, and then embroider, his design of the endless transmutations inherent in his riotous view of reality. In the most recent edition of *La cognizione*, we find among the author's notes for the preparation of the novel the following plan, in which we can see an intention that does not seem to have been confined to this work alone:

Sviluppare il tema delle donne, delle fidanzate, delle supposte fidanzate. Claqué non ingenua, ma interessata. Svilupperlo tra il mito, la caricatura e la verità. (*La cognizione*, 542)

[Develop the theme of women, fiancées, supposed fiancées. Claqué that is not ingenuous, but self-interested. Develop it somewhere between the ideal, the caricature and truth.]

The ideals and their inversions into caricature are equally truthful aspects of that constant flux that marks his "baroque" world, where known forms dissolve and deform into strange new combinations.¹¹

¹⁰ The two extremes of this experience are manifest in the ideal represented by Donna Elsa in "Al parco in una sera di maggio" ("[P]oiché tutto, di lei, pareva significare senza nostra speranza, dopo bruni alberi: 'sono io, sì! Quella che avete veduta e sognata; ancora per un poco, oggi, sono con voi!'") (Gadda [1944] 1965: 220) [She once seemed everything about her seemed to signify without our hope, after dark trees: "Yes, I'm the one! The one that you have seen and dreamed about: for a little while longer, today, I am with you!"], and in the threat to the protagonist's inner peace that comes from Emma Renzi ("Le spaventose scene con cui Emma Renzi l'aveva accolto poi a ogni nuovo dente che Giletto mettesse [...] avevano avuto per lui ripercussioni un po' dure, ma era il minore de' mali") (Gadda 1931: 130-31) [The frightening scenes with which Emma Renzi had met him every time that Giletto had a new tooth [...]. I had had rather difficult repercussions for him, but that was the least of his troubles].

¹¹ See the essay "Il faut d'abord être coupable" - "quel deflusso di deformazioni multiple che sogliamo chiamare 'la vita'" [that ebb and flow of multiple change that we are wont to call "life"] (Gadda [1950] 1958: 232-33).

Criticism moves from the level of personal vindication, then, to a sociocultural concern that castigates the combination of arrogance and complacency guiding the conduct of a certain society. The women that are targeted are from the author's own background, and in *L'Adalgisa*, where so many of these figures are concentrated, the narrator addresses the reader from the standpoint of a witness who sometimes is relating his own participation in the social rituals described. Such intradiegetic-homodiegetic narration (that is, narration by someone who participated in the action) is set aside on occasions when the narrator moves back to the heterodiegetic distance (that is, the distance of someone who has not participated in the action) of "Sembra, da quanto mi riferirono [...]" [It seems from what they told me [...]]. The presence of his narrator at both the primary and secondary levels of the text, sharing and at the same time acting *as* critical recorder of his society, signals something of the author's conflicting feelings about his *patria* Lombardy and the social phenomena he describes. The focus falls on such women as Donna Carla, who is traversed by "un lampo di cordialità che rischiara per un attimo i vecchi contrafforti della degnazione"¹² [a flash of cordiality that lights up for a moment the old buttresses of condescension]. Their ritual appearance and behavior at concerts is captured in the following:

E sfanalarono su di lei occhialacci [...]. Puntarono su di lei, acuminata, lucide da dietro spesse lenti, le loro pupille inevitabili, i due zii ottimi massimi [...]. Riuscì perfino a poterla avvistare, se pure dentro un mare di nebbie, la cataratta eroica di alcune dame dalla pelle di gecko, coeve di Gaetano Negri: [...] ed ella, Elsa Delmonte maritata Caviggioni, le supponeva integralmente defunte!¹³

[And they beamed onto her their eyeglasses [...]. They, the two most excellent uncles, directed at her, sharpened, bright from behind thick lenses, their unavoidable pupils [...]. The heroic cataract of certain grandames with gecko skin, coeval of Gaetano Negri, also managed to pick her out, even though through a sea of haziness: [...] and she, Elsa Delmonte, Mrs. Caviggioni, had imagined them entirely defunct!]

An aspect of the characterization of this class is the vacuous and narcissistic attitude that is attributed to them, from which

¹² "Claudia disimpara a vivere" (Gadda [1944] 1955: 65).

¹³ "Un 'concerto' di centoventi professori" (Gadda [1944] 1955: 177).

derives their idolization of material possessions and power,¹⁴ as is seen in the following reflection by the Commissario Ingravallo:

Quel dare, quel regalare, quel dividere altrui! [...] [O]perazioni, a suo modo di vedere, tanto disgiunte dalla carnalità e in conseguenza dalla psiche della donna [...] che tende viceversa a introitare: a elicitare il dono [...]. La personalità femminile — brontolò mentalmente Ingravallo quasi predicando a se stesso — che vuol dire di? ... [A] personalità femminile, tipicamente centrogravitata sugli ovarii. (*Pasticciaccio*, 124-25)

[That giving, that donating, that sharing out among others! [...] [O]perations, to his way of looking at things, so removed from carnality and, in consequence, from the psyche of women [...] which tends, on the contrary, to cash in: to elicit the gift [...]. The female personality — Ingravallo grumbled mentally, as if preaching to himself — what did it all mean? [...] The female personality, typically gravity-centered on the ovaries.] (*That Awful Mess*, 138-39)

Ingravallo is here highlighting another feature that we find throughout these texts: the generalization appearing above in "il sorriso e la bontà di una donna" is common to Gadda's writing and can be traced through a surprising array of examples. A further version in *Pasticciaccio* of this limitation to a function or to a single attribute is evident in the succession of young girls who are brought to live with Liliana Balducci and her husband, all beautiful and all helping to fulfill Liliana's lack of children of her own. In *La cognizione*, the confusion that Gonzalo registers over the numbers of similar female names in his vicinity is another regrouping of the individuals into the anonymity of repeated labels:

Il figlio Pirobutirro ebbe l'aria di navigar nel vago: confondeva facilmente le Juane con le Pepite, e anche con le Teresite: ma più che tutto, a terrorizzarlo, era l'insalata delle Marie e Maria proclitiche, cioè le Mary, le May, le Marie Pie, le Anne Marie, le Mariae, le Luise Marie e le Marie Terese, tanto più quando le riscopriva sorelle, a cinque a cinque, da doverle discriminare lì per lì [...]. (*La cognizione*, 149)

[The Pirobutirro son seemed to be navigating in vagueness; he easily confused the Juanas with the Pepitas, and also with the Teresitas;

14. The disastrous consequences of this at a national as well as at a personal level are the subject of the tract *Eros e Priapo* (Gadda 1967), but the theme is there from *La Madonna dei filosofi*, in reference to "analfabetissime donne, sazie d'ogni cibo, sdraiate nelle fanfaronesche automobili de' spaccamonti falliti" (Gadda 1931: 133) [completely illiterate women, every appetite satiated, sprawled in the blustering automobiles of failed braggards].

but more than anything, to terrorize him, there was the mixed salad of Marias, and proclitic Marias, namely the Marys, the Mays, the Maria Pias, the Anne Maries, the Marisas, the Luisa Marias, and the Maria Teresas, especially when he discovered they were sisters, five in a bunch, and he had to distinguish them then and there [...]. (*Acquainted with Grief*, 72)

In his characterization of women of all levels Gadda makes reference to what is common in their experience: this serialization involves not only such as Signora Menegazzi who, "come tutte le donne sole in casa, trascorreva le ore in uno stato di angustia o per lo meno di dubitosa e tormentata aspettativa" (*Pasticciaccio*, 26) [like all women alone in the house, spent her hours in a state of anguish or, rather, of suspicious and tormented expectancy] (*That Awful Mess*, 27), but involves equally Maria Ripamonti, one of the ideal figures, who seems to share some of the author's own thoughts. Yet Maria is undifferentiated from others at the level of her deepest sentiments: "sentiva bene dal più profondo dell'animo, come tutte forse le nobili e gentilissime donne della sua vecchia famiglia, che qualcosa di men che cretino ci doveva essere" (Gadda 1931: 114) [she clearly felt from the depth of her soul, like perhaps all the noble and kind ladies of her old family line, that there had to be something less than cretinous].

Even the forcefulness of such a woman as Adalgisa, the former opera singer, is measured by the fact that she belongs to the class of "quelle meravigliose donne lombarde che il proprio vigor di cervello manifestano [...] col postulare dovunque, davanti a chiunque, la certezza nella propria infallibilità" (Gadda [1944] 1955: 220-21) [those marvelous Lombard women who make manifest the vigor of their thought [...] by postulating wherever they are, in front of anyone, the certainty of their infallibility].

In this respect, the narrative possibilities of beauty seem to offer Gadda less interesting and more stereotyped images than those of some degree of ugliness; a girl of exuberant beauty and spirit, for example, is described as "stupenda" or "meravigliosa," in what reads like a formula akin to that listing color of eyes and hair.¹⁵

15. See "La stupenda Zoraide" (Gadda 1970b: 8): "Dalla lunga Aprilia color granato uscì, pallida, una ragazza stupenda" [From the long garnet-colored Aprilia, there emerged, shaken, a stupendous girl]; "Prima divisione nella notte," in Gadda 1963: 347-48; and "Una meravigliosa fanciulla, unica viaggiatrice [...] la deliziosa viaggiatrice [...] la stupenda Ellen" [a marvelous young girl, the sole traveller [...] the delightful traveller [...] the stupendous Ellen] in Rodondi 1982: 279.

The description of ugliness, however, as we have seen, is only apparently particularized, and, especially in its most startling manifestations, is accompanied by the same deflection of the author's gaze from the specificity of the person to an emphasis on the incidentals or on the margins that lead to other figurations of reality.

Young people, likewise, are represented anonymously, as the following early example from the *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento* shows (written 26 July 1924):

[I] giovanetti si diportano in bicicletta. [...] Alcuni vestono larghi pantaloni di fustagno [...]. I tintori, per l'effetto del cloro e gli allievi salumieri per effetto del sale hanno mani gonfie. (Gadda 1983: 43-45)

[T]he young people pass their time cycling. [...] Some wear wide trousers of fustian [...]. The dyers, because of the effect of chlorine, and the apprentice sausage-makers because of the salt have their hands swollen.]

This frequent diminution of individual expression in the characterization of women is consistent with a more general aspect of style in Gadda: it reflects the particular quality of abstraction that accompanies his use of imagery. Throughout his work nature is represented in reiterated generic images, in particular the stars and the night wind, and the personification of trees as a race of ancient people - the latter in positive contrast with human activity; and as accompaniment to lyrical reflection, beside and within nature, there is the passage of trains, or their smoke, over the distant landscape. All function as group images in which the specific is blurred in response to a predilection for lyricized expression. In such a context, the tendency we have seen to generalize female characters into various typologies lessens their individuality and independence so that, despite the frequently vivid and realistic details attached to them, their function approximates that of carriers of associations.

Given the direction toward which he leaned in his characterization, it is not surprising to find that Gadda deliberately chose to represent others from an external viewpoint. The *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento* documents an interesting discussion in which, as early as September 1924, the author considered the question of whether male writers are capable of representing females "ab interiore." His conclusion was that we are

all able to intuit the sentiments of the opposite sex, since we are a polarization of maleness and femaleness. His reason for rejecting multiple points of view was that the constant movement between the characters' points of view is aesthetically tiring and difficult for the reader to follow. The novel then in gestation was meant to be "un romanzo della pluralità" [a novel about plurality], and his own inclination was for the variety to be achieved through the narrator's perceptions, without the use of interiorized characterization; it is also more realistic, he found, to acknowledge that we continually interpret others from our own point of view. In choosing this path of representing the world from the narrator's point of view, he established a distance from other-than-narrator's-self, so that women characters in particular became a lens through which he took the measure of reality - the frustrations and negations of a personal and a social nature then could be mirrored with a certain detachment. We thus have the contradiction of vibrant women characters that are more often than not passive, rarely initiators of action and still less in command of their situation; they are not allowed to be self-identifying individuals.¹⁶ Women are, instead, the vehicle through which Gadda offers criticism of the distortion of the social and private rights and values that he observed within his own experience: natural deterioration, as seen in the neglected health of the poor, is matched by another kind of impoverishment, which is seen in the obtuse attitudes of the middle-class and the wealthy that contribute, in extreme cases, to social degeneration. In this further example of the process of change and deformation that Gadda identifies as synonymous with life, his women characters provide both a specific historical set of examples of Italian society, seen from a particular early twentieth-century male orientation, and a metaphor through which he represents the world.

16. I am grateful to my colleague Raffaele Lampugnani for his reminder that the figure of Jole in "San Giorgio in casa Brocchi" is a bringer of light. She is certainly, like other "stupende ragazze," the object of the author's delighted gaze, not only for her beauty but for the inadvertent role she plays in the mechanism that others set in motion and seek to control. Jole's most opportune visit as casual messenger to the house of Gigi Brocchi was the source of "nuovi dispiaceri the [...] doveva finir per dare ai Brocchi" [further displeasure [...] that she was to end up giving to the Brocchis], and in the context of the Contessa Brocchi's earlier anxiety about her, we can imagine that the risk of her unemployment was increased greatly by her adventure with Gigi.