Under the Surface
Archaeology of Memory and Renovation of Meanings in Giorgio Vasta's *Il tempo materiale*

Alessandro Cenzi
Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italia

Abstract   This proposal aims to analyse Giorgio Vasta's *Il tempo materiale* through the concept of the mythological machine, showing the short-circuits and the layers of meaning generated by a moment of deep crisis. Set during the Years of Lead, the novel deals with the complex theme of armed struggle that has rarely found proper literary representation. Emphasis will be placed on the processes of estrangement and allegory that make it possible to explore the imagery of the period and the historical facts from an unusual perspective, capable of reconfiguring memory thanks to an explosive reaction between past and present elements.

Keywords   Giorgio Vasta. Estrangement. Allegory. Mythological machine. Years of Lead.

Summary   1 The Armed Struggle: A Literary In-Digestion. – 2 Terrorism and Mythological Machines: Escaping Gazes. – 3 For a Pervasive Estrangement: Gazes from Below and Linguistic Shifts. – 4 The Alfamuto as a Method: Resemantisation Through Linguistic Pressure. – 5 The Temporal Dimension of Allegory: Taking Care of Mourning. – 6 Archaeology of the Past: A Coring.

1   The Armed Struggle: A Literary In-Digestion

Critics pointed out *Il tempo materiale* (2008),[1] Giorgio Vasta's nov-
elistic debut, as one of the most accomplished Italian novels of the
new millennium. The effectiveness of this work originates from the
particular literary processes deployed, making it a complex textual
object, for which many attempts have been expended trying to cat-
egorize it. It is also the only fully and freely novelistic work by the
Sicilian author: *Spaesamento* (2010) is strongly affected by the top-
ographical character of the Contromano collection; *Presente* (2012),
its a four handed collaboration with Andrea Bajani, Michela Murgia
and Paolo Nori, and it is the result of the Diario in Circolo project con-
ceived and curated by Vasta for the Circolo dei Lettori in Turin. The
2017 novel *Absolutely Nothing* is a particular travel report through
the American deserts made in collaboration with the photographer
Ramak Fazel, and the recent *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce*
(2022) is an autofictional short story also made in collaboration with
the American photographer.

   In addition to the literary context of the new millennium animat-
ed by discourses on the 'return to the real',[2] Vasta's novel also fits
into another tradition: the literature on the Years of Lead. Following
the example of Donnarumma (2010), I wish to indicate only the nar-
rative literature which has as main theme the armed fight or that
refers to that imaginary. Indeed, writing operations attributable to
other literary genres such as essays, theatre, and inquiry, or to oth-
er narrative forms such as film and television, do not match with it.

   The most striking feature that has started many studies is the
lack of a novel that can be called canonical about that period. In
other words, it has been observed the inability of a great histor-
ical moment to produce great literature. The reason for this phe-
nomenon can be summarized in three points: first, as a premise, it
should be remembered that an alignment between history and repre-
sentation, between history and literary history, is never guaranteed
and therefore should not be assumed. Second: the narrative elabo-
ration of the armed struggle is strongly affected by the hegemony of
Postmodernism, which promoted the absence of events by rejecting

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[1]   Since the novel *Il tempo materiale* has been largely studied, I will discuss it taking
for granted the readers' knowledge of the plot and the main thematic points.

[2]   There has been much talk about a 'return to the real' and a possible extinction of
postmodernism, internationally, following the tragic events in New York in 2001. To
inflame the debate in the Italian cultural scene, however, was an investigation con-
ducted by Raffaele Donnarumma and Gilda Policastro published in 2008 in the maga-
zine *Allegoria*. For a reconstruction of this scenario, see: Bertoni 2007; Casadei 2009;
Ceserani 1997; Contarini, De Paulis, Tosatti 2016; Donnarumma, Policastro 2008;
Ferraris 2012; Serkowska 2011.

arguments of realistic relevance (Simonetti 2011, 109). Finally, it must be considered that the Years of Lead represent an historical parenthesis with a strong traumatic connotation, and traumas, as Ernesto de Martino has well explained, activate compensatory mechanisms aimed at hiding, distorting, dislocating facts and governing the insurgence of crises (1995, 144-5).

Indeed, it is no coincidence that during the 1970s it was mainly journalists, sociologists and historians who talked about terrorism, while literature, with a few exceptions, maintained a lateral attitude. Authors avoided handling a subject that the mainstream media colonized quickly and, when they decided to write about it, they made use of ostentatiously artificial forms, evasive and ineffective narrative solutions. The most common choices are in fact: processes of fantasmization, which propose dreamy scenarios that are so opaque that they dissolve the real; distancing dislocations, in both chronological or geographical instances; and the recurrence of the family topos, which almost always has the effect of flattening the armed struggle to a family matter (Donnarumma 2010, 340).

From the early 1980s something begins to change and who speaks out and narrates terrorism are the terrorists themselves, encouraged by the cultural industry and the cessation of fighting. New narratives begin to appear and stabilize in the hybrid forms of the book-interview or the four-handed book. These narratives have a primarily cautious and reassuring intent: their goal is the integration through self-justification.[3] The success is guaranteed by the autobiographical authority of the narrator, but themes are banalized and the layers of complexity are reduced. Violence is elided, alluded to or rendered by periphrases. The wide use of armed struggle as a narrative theme clearly does not satisfy the needs of literary research, but is because of the great public interest in this topic. The result is a symbolic subjection of literature to the media (Simonetti 2011, 110).

The 1990s confirmed this subordinate relationship: the narrative about the armed conflict breaks away from the pattern of confession and is now colonized by noir fiction. Even if the end of the aphasic parenthesis of the 1970s is to be considered a step forward, this decade confirms even more the crisis of the novel, which fails to match the complexity of reality hiding the contradictions behind a plot effect. It is precisely the strong codification of the genre noir that shows itself to be the greatest limitation to an effective and authentic portrayal of history. The thinning of the layers of meaning, the constant recourse to stereotypes concerning the figure of the terrorist and the reduction of the victims to simple targets to advance the

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3 In Tabacco (2010, 71) the author defines these narratives as "piloted autobiographies" underlining how the rendering of facts is bent by editorial needs.

plot flatten terrorist action to an easy ingredient capable of bringing mystery and violence.

With the onset of the new millennium, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers, books on terrorism have increased exponentially. The growing demand for storytelling consolidates the success of the noir, which continues to function because of its ability to combine entertainment and inquiry. A comforting effect prevails almost always: the problematic nature of events is flattened into lazy manichaean distinctions capable of satisfying from a spectacular point of view, but cognitively and emotionally sedating[4] (Simonetti 2011, 121).

2 Terrorism and Mythological Machines: Escaping Gazes

What certainly complicates the assimilation of this historical period is the phenomenon of terrorism. As Daniele Giglioli has shown well in *All'ordine del giorno è il terrore* (2007), the category of terrorism generates great embarrassment in anyone who attempts to give it an univocal and universally acceptable definition. The only identifiable characteristic is that 'terrorist' is a label that is only attributed to others, it is never used for self-determination. This term shows itself as a pseudo-concept "a rhetorical weapon without any potential for veracity, not only capable of hiding the truth, but also of generating realities" (Giglioli 2018, 12-13).

What terrorism facilitates is the setting in motion of mythological machines. The theorization of this concept goes back to the 1972 essay *Lettura del "Bateau ivre" di Rimbaud*, but it is in the later *Cultura di destra* (1979) that Furio Jesi really tested this theoretical construct. The mythological machine is described as a linguistic machine that

> proceeds by accumulating a large number of clichés, stereotypes, catchphrases, formulas that seem clear but do not need to be understood, which indeed seem clear precisely because they do not need to be understood. (2011, 8)

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[4] Simonetti (2011, 115-17) specifies that "much of the recent narrative production about the years of the armed struggle insists on the iconography of terrorism, and especially of brigatism, in the forms and ways through which it has become a repertoire in the Italian imagination during recent decades". Indeed, what is returned is an image of the armed conflict completely distorted by the media's incessant work: "while it seems to be talking about a burning past, a lot of contemporary fiction is perhaps talking about the way the mass media act in the present; the way they absorb it into the aesthetic dimension in order to achieve suggestions, emblems and myths". Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the Author.

Jesi speaks about 'ideas without words', pointing out to an inexhaustible and tireless process. In its constant reference to heterogeneous images and materials, the mythological machine merely fills, always provisionally, the void that generates it in a kind of interminable self-justification.

The solution, if there is one, does not consist in the destruction of the mythological machines, which, as Jesi says (2013, 106), "would reform like the hydra's heads" but rather in nullifying the context that makes them real and productive. Therefore, if terrorism moves in an out of sight sacred sphere, it is necessary to respond to this consecration with an Agambenian profanation[5] of that myth, returning it to common use. It is again Daniele Giglioli (2018, 25) who refers to literature as a means capable of respecting this purpose, since it is the carrier of an 'existential posture' aimed at the familiarization with traumatic otherness.

A good example of how the mythological machine works is shown by Chiara Cremonesi, in her article entitled *A Genova tra il Messico e il Cile* (2020). The text investigates the processes that led to the media effectiveness of the two expressions "macelleria messicana" (Mexican butchery) and "notte cilena" (Chilean night) in reference to what happened during the G8 in Genoa at the Diaz school and the torture committed at the Nino Bixio barracks in Bolzaneto. The first refers to the Pinochet regime, taken as a paradigmatic example of a systematic violation of human rights and the use of torture. As for the second, the references are less direct, but no less effective, and seem to evoke an idea of wild Latin America. These enunciations

> do not need to be told in order to be activated [...] [they] are immediately comprehensible formulas precisely because there is no need to understand them: they allude and elude at the same time, evocative even for those who know absolutely nothing about the history of Chile, Mexico, and Argentina. (348)

If, therefore, in the case of Genoa the mythological machine acted by making sure that, although the gaze of Italy was at the chronological and geographical epicenter of the events, the gaze evaded in a process of exoticization by dislocating the violence in an allotopic and allochronic dimension (leaving no space for an Italian night or an Italian butchery), Giorgio Vasta with *Il tempo materiale*, seems to follow an inverse path: from a periphery that is geographic (Palermo), historical (2008), and anagraphic (the protagonist is 11 years old, Nimbo), he turns his gaze toward a particularly dense core of Italian history (1978 and the 1970s). If the

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5   See Agamben 2005.

> language of ideas without words presumes to be able to truly say, therefore to say and at the same time to hide in the secret sphere of the symbol. (Jesi 2011, 27)

Vasta creates a fictional space in which he recalls those elements that, by sedimenting, composed the imagery of those years, and then observes them through Nimbo's eyes. Through estrangement and allegorical processes, Vasta digs a distance between the evoked elements and their meaning; in this way, he lays bare the mythological machine. Giorgio Vasta does not narrate history, but how imagery suffers history (Donnarumma 2009). Within his novel, all those elements that are part of the mainstream imaginary of the 1970s are corroded, showing themselves rather as cultural residues that the present has inherited and onto which seems possible to attribute a new value.

3 For a Pervasive Estrangement: Gazes from Below and Linguistic Shifts

Among the literary processes Giorgio Vasta deploys in this novel, those of estrangement are certainly the most obvious. When speaking about estrangement Šklovskij's essay *L'arte come procedimento* (1917) is essential. In the text the author states that we are in front of an artistic event whenever a process has been intentionally removed from automated perception, so whenever an object is experienced not through recognition, but through vision. Estrangement for Sklovsky (1968, 81-2) is the procedure of the dark form that increases the difficulty and duration of perception. The temporal dimension is therefore a key feature of estrangement as an artistic process: the author intentionally creates a longer way to reach the subject so that perception persists and achieves greater intensity.

A second fundamental contribution comes from Carlo Ginzburg (1998), in particular from his essay "Straniamento. Preistoria di un procedimento letterario". In this text, Ginzburg outlines a tradition of estrangement by traversing different authors who have reflected on this topic: from Marco Aurelio's erasure of misrepresentations, Montaigne's *naïveté originelle*, La Bruyère's and Tolsoj's dislocation of points of view, to the conflict between the freshness of perceptions and the intrusiveness of ideas present in Proust. The result is an empowerment of Šklovskij's concept. Estrangement operates in a dual distance: the one from the referent, which allows the assumption of a new unseen point of view, and the consequent temporal distance, which is the suspension of recognition that intensifies the vision.

Referring to this tradition, the first words with which *Il tempo materiale* starts are enough to introduce the first element of estrangement: "Ho undici anni" (I am eleven years old). The narrator is a

young boy; the protagonist's anagraphic age leads his profile to what Victor Turner (1972, 112) calls 'liminal' subjects, in other words, subjects characterised by an interstitial condition, on the edge between dissimilar social and cultural worlds and who are, for this reason, activators of meaning (Martelli 2015, 96). In the literary sphere, this is nothing new: by proposing a view from below (Zinato 2016, 146) we generally witness a series of shifts that have the effect of formulating an alternative view of reality. We do not need to move far back in time to find literary examples, we only need to think of some Italian novels of the twentieth century, such as *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947) by Italo Calvino. Pin, the protagonist, understands the facts as far as his cognitive maturity develops. For example, the sexual relations engaged by his sister enter Pin's perception and consciousness as "sogni strani" (strange dreams), in which naked bodies are chasing and fighting each other (Calvino 1987, 44). This description duplicates the point of view on the same event, providing the reader a different focus able to activate new connections of meaning. Nimbo, starting from the incipit, is put into dialogue with this tradition, but it is always in this border zone that Giorgio Vasta operates a second shift: that of language.

From the very first line, Vasta decides to blow up all mimesis and all plausibility by attributing an adult language to the eleven-year-old protagonist (and his two other fellows). Nimbo, already in a liminal position because of his age, also goes outside the horizon of expectation that a reader might have for a child protagonist. Nimbo finds no counterpart in the real world, a child like him is not improbable, but impossible, and it is the novel itself that declares it: "un non-ragazzino" (a non-child) (Vasta 2008, 25). This choice by the author, goes beyond the category of the 'supernatural of imposition' (Orlando 2017) because a true normalisation of the facts is never achieved by the reader. The estrangement effect is pervasive because it returns in every sentence pronounced by the protagonist and, by doing this, it exemplifies what Lotman says about the transmission of artistic information.[6]

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[6] "The transmission of artistic information comes from an explosion of meaning: something previously unknown is suddenly illuminated by the encounter with something unexpected, unpredictable, and it immediately becomes clear, obvious" (Lotman 1994, 11).

**4   The Alfamuto as a Method: Resemantisation
        Through Linguistic Pressure**

Palermo was a geographic periphery in regard to the events of the armed struggle, which mainly affected cities such as Milan, Rome and Turin. It is thanks to radio, television and newspapers that the three protagonists learn about the actions of the BR (Brigate Rosse). For the three boys, terrorism is above all a linguistic event. Indeed, their subversion starts precisely from language and is animated by a double refusal: on the one hand for dialect, perceived as something prehistoric in which everything is shouted and the tonal and prosodic level always prevails over the semantic one (Vasta 2008, 59); on the other hand for the ordinary language of television, journalism and cinema, which is functional to indistinction (85).

What the three subversive kids intercept and are bothered by is the continuous work of the mythological machine. In the chapter "Comunicare" they explain this feeling using words very close to those used by Jesi:

> Every week, he says, everything is renewed. New records, each with its own cover, new films, new TV characters. New magazine editions appear on newsstands. The combination of these innovations produces a common imagery that Italy needs to hold together. Because actually everything is falling apart. Every character that appears on the cover or on a screen becomes a centre, something that should provide stability. And so bodies and postures accumulate. But the centre is unstable, it only lasts a week and then moves on, in a cycle of hypocritical revolutions that only function to keep time always identical to itself. (129)

It is this desire for emancipation that leads to the creation of the *alfamuto*: a communicative system that exemplifies and sums up the work of deconstruction of the imagery. The alfamuto is characterised by a process of emptying and re-assigning of meaning applied to the most common images of the film, television and music panorama:

> Let me get this straight, says Bocca. We take a famous form, we leave it as it is outside but we modify its content. Right? That's right, I confirm. We take the most stupid poses that everyone knows and make them into coded messages. (128-9)

The re-reading of the world by the three kids is a "process of selection and rejection of some limited fragments of the culture they belong to" (Martelli 2015, 99). The common imagery is broken down into its constituent icons (the cover of *Yuppi Du*, the dead body of Aldo Moro, the pose of Elvis...) and then recomposed and re-signified.

As it has been shown, the alfamuto exemplifies the work of deconstruction of the collective memory, but even outside this communicative system, the elements summoned fail to activate the mythological machine because they are shifted from the plane of history into another territory in which, through linguistic pressure, they are estranged and distorted. Everything that could have a political relevance is not elided, but moved from the level of the chronicle to a figurative-imaginative level. This choice does not depend on a lack of bravery to face the reality, but rather on a precise stylistic and ethical choice for which the author prefers to render the facts under a different lens. This is not a device aimed to anaesthetise the real like the many used during postmodernism, but a way to amplify it.

In this way *Il tempo materiale* fully embraces Lotman's vision of the function of art.[7] Vasta's novel acts in two directions; on the one hand what is already known is disfigured and rendered foreign to ordinary perception. On the other hand, as the best literature does, it is also able to familiarize us with the most extreme otherness by asking us what we can experience, recognise or disconfirm about our experience by becoming subjects of someone else's predicates. Recognition and judgement on reality are suspended, allowing the reader to activate new cognitive processes and to question the usual view of that chapter of Italian history and of the present day by allegorical resemantization.

5 The Temporal Dimension of Allegory: Taking Care of Mourning

To fully describe the evolution of the concept of allegory over the centuries is a tough challenge. The tradition of this concept is long and closely linked to one of the symbols with which it experiences periods of co-presence, alternation or mutual exclusion (Luperini 1990, 7). Here, I will only report the main passages that led to the rediscovery of this practice in the modern era, and in particular on Walter Benjamin's reflections.

The nineteenth century was certainly the century of least artistic success for allegory. The reasons are to be found in the influence of

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[7] According to the Russian theorist, the relationship between extra-artistic reality and that of art moves along two axes: "On the one hand there is the dismembering of extrartistic reality, and the recomposition of its elements into new combinations: translation into the language of art gives these fragments of reality a surplus of freedom, and fills them with new meanings. [...] However, the reverse is also possible. Art can not only create an analytical image, in which what is usual and similar becomes unusual and dissimilar: art can follow the path of synthesis, transform the dissimilar into the similar" (Lotman 1994, 82).

Romanticism, which promoted values such as organicity and the reconstruction of meaning. The lack of success of allegory depends therefore on an aesthetic assumption that is not respected: that of unity and synthesis. By referring to something external, allegory is pointed out as an imperfect practice, a "conceptual effort" (Rustioni 2016, 63).

For a rehabilitation of allegory in the artistic sphere, we have to wait until 1926, the date of publication of Walter Benjamin's essay *Il dramma barocco tedesco*. This text completely overturns the Romantic view of allegory and restores its strength. The steps taken by Benjamin that led to the redemption of this practice are mainly two: the first is to consider the imaginative value of allegory. The image that this proposes on each occasion is not to be considered as an enigma to be solved in order to reach the true meaning of the work (this position comes from Benedetto Croce), but is to be understood as an instant and synthetic expression of the ego, in other words an image without which an idea could not have been expressed.[8] By this Benjamin affirms "the scriptural character of allegory and the allegorical character of writing" (Luperini 1990, 46), guiding us to the second step, which is to recognise the conventional character of allegory, as well as that of writing.

The relationship between words and things is the result of an arbitrary assignment and exists only because of a social pact to make communication possible. Likewise, allegory makes use of these arbitrary signs to create new meanings. Allegory consequently takes on the status of metalanguage and is not "convention of expression, but an expression of convention" (Benjamin 1999, 149). Allegory for Benjamin is not limited to the rhetorical figure, but is understood as authentic expression that uses a conventional sign system to create other meanings. This non-dogmatic and non-univocal relationship between sign and meaning opens up the dimension of temporality: allegory establishes a distance between sign and meaning and "renouncing any nostalgia or desire to coincide, it establishes its own language in the void of this temporal difference" (DeMan 1975, 263-4).

Allegory does not require an immediate relationship, but a kind of suspension that digs a distance between sign and meaning (Muzzioli 2010, 183). This distance, as Walter Benjamin well explained, is traversed by brooding, that is, the act of one who, confused, meditates, creating new dialectical connections between fragments (Benjamin 2000, 214).

Regarding the ways in which it takes root in a story, it is possible to say that allegory takes place where fiction does not hold up, where

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8   See Benjamin (1999, 137), in which he affirms: "allegory is not a simple rhetorical device, but full expression, as language is, or even as writing is. And this is the *experimentum crucis*. It was precisely the writing that appeared as the conventional sign system par excellence" (Author's transl.).

the mimetic naturality of the tale is lacking, where the perception of the 'as-if' remains unsatisfied and therefore opens up space for an intervention by the reader (Todorov 1986).

As a result of these considerations, the points of contact between allegory and estrangement should be obvious: both base their effectiveness on a temporal and conceptual separation between sign and meaning; both ask the reader to be an active participant in the reconstruction or completion of meaning; both propose to redefine the edges of certain elements by betting that an alternative pathway will reinforce the resulting effect. It should come as no surprise, therefore, if various textual passages that can be identified as the site of estranging processes are also valid for allegorical evaluations; the places in the text where mimesis fails are fertile gaps in which processes of re-attribution of meaning can flourish.

Particularly illustrative of this functioning in the novel is the role of Aldo Moro. In the novel, the ex-president of the DC appears sporadically, always in different contexts. The first occurrence is in the fourth chapter *Al centro della terra* (At the Centre of the Earth): it is 18 April 1978 and following what is believed to be the seventh announcement from the BR, the search for the president's body is concentrated on Lake Duchessa. Nimbo learns this news from the TV which immediately triggers his mythopoetic fantasy:

> I get back to my seat. On the television there is still the lake and the helicopters. I drop my gaze to the soup, my lake of clear ash: the whole of Italy is looking for Aldo Moro and Aldo Moro lies at the bottom of my plate […], I take the spoon and slide it over the edge of the plate towards the bottom […], Aldo Moro is frozen, his arms are folded tightly against his sides, his head is closed between his shoulders, his knees are against his chest, the honourable man is exhibited, displayed, elevated in his inox steel cradle and is offered as sacrificial nourishment, as a host to be taken in the mouth and swallowed without thought, all of Italy and all Italians, eating the president of the Christian Democrats, taking communion, not chewing, swallowing, feeling inside the taste of Lent and of wheat, of medicine and then looking into each other's eyes and finding them bright and without anguish, the full and proud Italian gazes. (Vasta 2008, 69)

Later we meet him during the construction of the alfamuto, of which he becomes one of the twenty-one poses chosen by the three protagonists:

> We get to "die". Scarmiglia crouches in the sand, on his side, one arm bent, his hand resting on his hip, his head slightly reclined to the left: Aldo Moro dying and emerging from the metal womb of the Renault 4. In the space of two months we saw that photo so many times that for us it became the photo of all deaths. (Vasta 2008, 139)

Lastly, it is implied in the character of Morana who shares a similar name and destiny with the president. The element that all these passages have in common is that, through processes of association and estrangement, Aldo Moro is never considered as a real referent, opening up predictable considerations on the political situation, but is shifted. In the first case, the chronicle of events immediately leaves space for a reflection that associates the Moro kidnapping to metabolic-digestive processes, with references to the practice of Christian communion as a moment of expiation of guilt. In the second, it is only the figural value of an image that is emptied of all its contingent implications and re-signified. As regards Morana's character, on the other hand, the evident parallels must be related to the differences that do exist, contributing to an effect of suspension of judgement and inviting a revaluation of both Morana's character and Aldo Moro's role. The ex-president of the DC is therefore alienated from Nimbo; in this way he is free to establish relationships and cross-references with other points in the text, inviting the reader to a reconfiguration of his view of the events. In this sense, the scene of Aldo Moro's swallowing is in clear dialogue with an episode contained in the chapter "Eclissi", in which, after a family loss (a miscarriage by his mother), Nimbo observes his brother Cotone taking care of a rotting sandwich:

> Indeed, since the day of the miscarriage, something in Cotone had changed. He was always carrying a sandwich. So far so normal, he could be hungry. But the sandwich was always the same. Sometimes he picked it up, contemplated it and put it back. Never a bite, nothing, the sandwich was untouched. [...] Sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning slightly forward, Cotton removed small pieces of the sandwich he was holding with his left hand using the middle finger and thumb of his right hand. He peeled them off and ate them. Hearing me come in, he paused for a moment and looked at me, then resumed peeling off small pieces and eating them. They were green and blackish, crumbling between his fingers. Without saying anything to him I sat down next to him. I stayed like that, with Cotton, unable to speak to him. Then, considering that every connection is silence, I had stretched out a hand towards the sandwich, peeled off a piece of it and started to eat the mourning too. (Vasta 2008, 164-7)

This comparison on a metabolic level highlights profound differences between the two episodes: Moro's swallowing is associated with Christian communion: a swallowing without chewing with an immediate saving effect that allows people to return to normality guilt-free. On the other hand, the phase of slow chewing and digestion of the sandwich is preceded by a period of waiting, a period of care, of

grief. If, as Leonardo Sciascia also suggested in his *L'Affaire Moro* (1978), the death of the DC president had the effect of strengthening and uniting the State, Vasta seems to prolong that suggestion by adding that his killing also absolved the whole of Italy of guilt, by preventing the nation from understanding the depth of events and stopping history, and it is precisely this stasis that the three young boys try to unblock through subversion.

6 Archaeology of the Past: A Coring

Throughout the novel, Vasta prevents the mythological machine from functioning by translating its elements into a different plane. The figure of Aldo Moro in particular constitutes one of the most complex aspects to probe: dealing with his history and therefore to Italian history as a whole requires anyone to relate to a dense common encyclopaedia full of contradictions, approximations, removals and stratifications of events. However, these doubts did not prevent his figure from being taken as a paradigm of the victim during the season of political violence in the 1970s. The fact that the Day of remembrance of the victims of terrorism was fixed on 9 May (the day Aldo Moro's body was found) and not, for example the 12 December, the anniversary of the Piazza Fontana massacre, as many associations of victims' families had proposed (Ghidotti 2016, 182) demonstrates the importance of Aldo Moro's memory compared to all the other victims and testifies, at the same time, the desire that his death should sum up all the others. In this regard, David Moss speaks of 'memorisation without memory' in reference to the fact that a pervasive representation of the figure of Moro throughout Italy is not followed by a shared memory on the meaning of his life and death (Ghidotti 2016, 182).

If, with good reason then, Daniele Giglioli speaks of Moro as an "unburied corpse" (2014, 23), Giorgio Vasta with *Il tempo materiale* goes exploring what has been buried in his place by making his way through the cultural residues that make up our imagination. The operation that Vasta conducts with this novel is archaeological: it is not aimed at rereading the past, but at investigating it ex novo, perforating the surface of things and sinking into it until it shakes the layers of meaning and symbolic concretions (Raccis 2013). The logic of coring, an explicit method of investigation also underlying the short story *Spaesamento* above mentioned, drives this novel and is traceable in the chapter "Lander". Nimbo is the literary probe with which Vasta investigates 1978; his exasperated perceptiveness is functional to an operation of excavation and discovery of what Benjamin would call the 'rags' of history (Agamben 2008, 74). Vasta as an author is therefore comparable to the figure of the chiffonnier so much appreciated first by Baudelaire and then by Benjamin. In this, the residue

(as a concept) shows its relationship to the scrap and the fragment and "appears as the testimony of a subversive marginality" (Valdinoci 2019, 5), and the bearer of new possibilities. The power of this novel lies precisely in the construction of a constellation of known elements that are rendered unusual. A past historical moment is made to react violently with elements of the present, realising that revolutionary dialectical process that Benjamin attributes to the monad.

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