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Gothic Negotiations of History and Power in Landolfi's *Racconto d'autunno*

Keala Jewell

Uses of the Gothic

In recent decades, literary scholars have intensified their inquiry into Gothic prose of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries while applying new critical insights to later Gothic forms. Analytical models that have contributed to the trend are, according to Jerrold Hogle, “reactivated” psychoanalysis, Derrida’s theorization of haunting, gender studies, cultural studies, and “New Historicism.”¹ Genre criticism has figured large, studying how classic Gothic novels engage history by using romance conventions. The Gothic does not limit itself to adventure and capers, of course, since it so often focuses on perversion and transgression on the part of incestuous aristocrats, debauched monks, or sadistic Inquisitors who persecute innocents. An achievement of recent theorizing is a better understanding that horror in the Gothic is never self-contained from a historical standpoint. As it turns its gaze to a medieval past, Gothic horror mobilizes anxieties about the present, especially its politics. This characteristic was evident from the birth of the genre in the late 1700s, in the years that witnessed the French revolution and the Reign of Terror. Advances in the critical scholarship have aimed at deepening our understanding of the politics of horror and at uncovering technologies of identity.

Robert Miles, a critic at the forefront of this critical renaissance, has developed models of analysis that examine an “unpredictable flow of power.”² In his view, Gothic novels both demonize medieval, barbarous, degenerate nobles whose powers stand in opposition to modern democracy and, at the same time, negotiate contemporary anxieties that have little to do with a fear of resurgent aristocracy. They feature an intermingling of a culture’s sense of security in a superior present and a sense of anxiety about that same present projected into the past or onto other cultures. Fred Botting has called this a “play of antitheses.”³ With this critical lead, we may apply new models of analysis to Italian Gothic literature and explore its relations to historical contexts.

Analytical models derived from New Historicism are particularly suited to the study of Tommaso Landolfi’s novel *Racconto d'autunno* (1947) because of its blend of historicizing and gothicizing elements. *Racconto* is set during the resistance to Fascism and is articulated into a

¹ Jerrold Hogle, “Theorizing the Gothic,” in *Teaching the Gothic*, edited by Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 31.

² Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1996), x-xi.

³ Fred Botting, ed., *The Gothic* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 9.

frame story and an inner narration. The outer frame tells of a partisan fighting the Axis powers who is separated from his cohort and comes upon a decrepit country manor inhabited by an aged count, who harbors him, in the inner story, out of his ancient obligation to guests.⁴ In the tale, the young soldier negotiates the Aurunci Mountains after a disorderly retreat during what seems to be the autumn of 1943. In the novel's historical scenario, the protagonist is no longer part of an Italian army corps and is dogged by difficult-to-define military and political affiliations.⁵ He would be fighting both Fascist Italians and German Nazis, or "Goths" if you will (Hitler had named another famous defensive line in Italy precisely the "Gothic Line" in remembrance of how Goths in the sixth century had held out against imperial Roman armies.) In unfamiliar environs, the unnamed hero cannot know exactly who his allies or enemies are.⁶ In geographical terms, he may or may not be in enemy territory, somewhere along the Gustav Line near Montecassino. Any Italian he comes upon could be a Fascist in hiding from the Allies, guilty of "compromissione politica," or an anti-fascist in danger of attacks from German patrols (11). In other words, Landolfi has chosen to represent a moment of struggle, uncertainty, and unrelenting battle. The novel's historical framework goes against the grain of so many accounts of wartime Italy that tell a story exclusively of the anti-fascist triumph over Fascism. Landolfi casts doubt on that familiar narration in the very opening pages of the novel, which apply the telling epithet "detto liberatore" (11) to the Allied army.⁷

Racconto's double narrative structure, so prevalent in the Gothic genre, mobilizes both national stories and familial stories. Intensely focused on identifications, both kinds of narration invoke horrifying power struggles. Generic markers suggest a familiar Gothic plot that depicts social groupings in violent conflict. In the classic British Gothic tale, the binary opposition medieval/modern helps forge the ideology of an emergent middle class that considers itself enlightened, democratic, and peaceful and opposes an older, backward, top-down social order untouched by reason, democracy, and freedom. An anxious middle class could envision

⁴ Idolina Landolfi prepared an authoritative edition of *Racconto d'autunno* (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1995) from which I cite: "il vecchio dov  concedermi l'uso dei suoi libri," 50.

⁵ See Leonardo Paggi, "Legacies of Anti-fascism," *New German Critique*, 67 (1996): 101-10

⁶ *Racconto*: "di malintenzionati, di spie e di traditori pullulava la regione" (15). Battles in the region of Montecassino began in the autumn of 1943 and continued into the winter and spring of 1944.

⁷ Morgan writes succinctly: "It was certainly the case that the Germans, as opposed to the Allies, were never seen as liberators. But it cannot be assumed that, initially anyway, Allied occupation was more benign than German, or that conditions for the population improved significantly from one occupation to another. This was partly because the conduct of both German and Allied occupying armies was driven by the same logic of invasion and occupation, to control the territory in pursuit of the priority for them of waging the war." Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 133. Davies confirms that "in Allied literature, operations conducted by the western Allies or by the USSR are generally described as 'liberations,' whilst similar operations conducted by the Axis forces are described as 'occupation' or 'invasion.' In contemporary Axis literature, the roles of 'liberator' and 'occupier' were exactly reversed." Norman Davies, "Occupation," *The Oxford Companion to World War II*. Ed. I. C. B. Dear and M. R. D. Foot (Oxford University Press, 2009).

distinctly un-modern times and places where authority is over-centralized, for example in the fiefdoms of Italy or Spain. If some national cultures presumed that enlightened thinking would provide them with stability, rights, self-determination, and freedom from the abuses of power, historically those same nations would, in other words, define their own states in relation to people and places presumed to lack their own progress. In a familiar formulation of the idea, the Marquis de Sade observed that European Gothic novels set during Spain's old Inquisition were as much about France's Reign of Terror, with its unruly mobs, as they were about a resurgent aristocracy of evil princes. The Enlightenment⁸ and the nineteenth century were not exempt from fears that modern democracies might not hold on to their (presumed) collective and individual gains.

The opposition that sets modern democracy against undemocratic and backward populations has been, of course, continually challenged in postcolonial studies. We know that during its rise European culture constructed a narrative of modernity crucial to its sense of identity and its drive for hegemony. The European continent, in this view, broke out into sustained economic growth and eventually emerged as a historic grouping of nation-states that considered themselves destined to perpetual development and power.⁹ This master narrative exerted an immense influence on modern cultural geography.¹⁰ That narrative of democracy's struggle against backwardness appears in Italian Gothic narratives as well, with some twists. How would Italian authors, themselves part of a geography other nations considered "Gothic," work with the genre? If an internal other, a place of European backwardness, how would Italy re-fashion the genre?

Landolfi, writing in the mid-twentieth century, seems to do what early Gothic novels did in terms of conjuring up an "enlightened" positionality and demonizing an anachronistic class that holds onto its power and threatens historical progress. The partisan soldier resembles the hero of a Gothic romance as he battles a decrepit, conservative, and perverse count. A chevalier of sorts, the soldier hopes to wrestle from the old man's grasp a young woman closely related to the heroines of novels like Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian*.¹¹ Associated with an outdated political system divested of political and economic power, the Count and his castle furnish the equivalent of the classic Gothic medieval setting. Gothic conventions would lead us to expect a hero with progressive ideals who can punish the aristocratic despot. We would expect this hero to defend the modern, democratic nation state against any twentieth-century avatar of the feudal ruler — the totalitarian dictator, for instance.

⁸ For the importance of placing Gothic into a dialectic with the Enlightenment, the bibliography is extensive, with contributions especially from Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁹ Stuart Hall, "Introduction," *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, Kenneth Thompson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 7.

¹⁰ I draw from Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, 186.

¹¹ For this theme and for Landolfi's "romanticism" see Romana Capek-Habekovic, *Tommaso Landolfi's Grotesque Images*. Studies in Humanities: Lit.-Politics-Soc. (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), Chapter 3.

We should not forget, however, a distinctive trait of Gothic novels: their “play of antitheses.” Fears of a tainted past coexist with fears of contemporary configurations of power. Gothic novels hold up a mirror, in other words, to middle-class anxieties over historical forces that are not regressive but progressive. The extension of rights and powers to disenfranchised subjects generated anxieties specific to the post-Enlightenment period. A variety of historical eventualities related to “democratization” — the changing status of women, to give one example — contributed to social conflicts, social struggles, and hence to politicized “horror.” If this model holds true, it should be possible to uncover in *Racconto* the author’s way of engaging both the risk of centralized power and the risk of distributing power democratically. The historical war story is, in this view, no pretext for a purely fantastic Gothic tale, as has often been held to be the case.¹² Both the outer and inner stories, “historical” and “Gothic,” engage discourses of subjugation and disempowerment equally.

Spatial dominion and the flows of power

The word “discourse” indicates a critical model that approaches history in terms of technologies of selfhood whereby subjects constitute themselves within historical power practices. The latter

¹²An exception is Enrico Cesaretti: “in misura ancora più drammaticamente efficace di qualunque narrazione realistica, l’impatto sull’autore dei terribili eventi legati al conflitto bellico, di cui egli ci fornisce una personale, immaginosa interpretazione” Enrico Cesaretti, *Castelli di carta. Retorica della dimora tra Scapigliatura e Surrealismo* (Ravenna, Italy: Longo, 2001), 132. See Alvaro Biondi, “‘L’Italie magique,’ il surrealismo italiano e Tommaso Landolfi” (86), for the view that the frame is a pretext. Biondi cites C. Varese’s 1951 assertion that the book opens and closes with precise historical references but “nel suo nucleo, evade dalla realtà storica, non solo della Guerra, ma della comune umanità con l’attrattiva del mistero e della magia, verso il segreto di una vita chiusa e bizzarra, di una preziosa e dissimulata presenza femminile.” In *Una giornata per Landolfi: Atti del Convegno, Firenze, 26 marzo 1979*, edited by Sergio Romagnoli (Florence: Vallecchi, 1981). Biondi believes that Landolfi uses the Gothic to express his “polemica perpetua con la modernità” (p. 87). Cecchini uses the idea of “pretext” for the Resistance narrative but finds that the destruction of manor is a figure for the destruction brought by the war; he is also the most careful student of the novel’s structure and themes related to the ruined house as a contradictory birthplace and prison. Leonardo Cecchini, *‘Parlare per le notti’. Il fantastico nell’opera di Tommaso Landolfi*. Etudes Romanes. (Aarhus, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press et l’auteur, 2001), 96. Billiani and Sulis provide a general framework for examining how history, politics, and the fantastic are present together in Italian Gothic, which evinces its own politics of form. Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis, ed. *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic: Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007). It is important to note that in general the figure of the manor house takes various forms in Landolfi’s prose cannot be accorded one meaning. For example in *La pietra lunare* the “maniero” is represented as part of a hill town and seen predominantly from the exterior perspective; it contrasts both a ruined castle at the summit of the town and the realm of magical nature. The gruesome stories “Maria Giuseppa” and “Settimana di sole (ovvero Maria Giuseppa II)” also unfold in a manor house within a village: the structure is both a trap set by a sadistic, insane protagonist and a treasure trove that he explores madly in “Settimana.” Tommaso Landolfi, *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi*, Ed. Idolina Landolfi. (Milan: Adelphi, 1996 [1937]). The latter story is the closest cousin perhaps to *Racconto* in terms of its setting and themes.

cannot be limited to the strictly political domain, such as who may vote. Spatialities, sexualities, genderings, and knowledge practices, to name some influential categorizations, develop in tandem with a dialectics of power and disempowerment in historical societies. Spatiality, in particular, has long been of importance to theorists of the Gothic, with its mountains, deep forests, and, especially, its terrifying haunted castles.¹³

Racconto confirms the importance of represented space to Gothic textualities.¹⁴ Let us assume that Landolfi recognizes that writers think through and present power relations among various characters by means of spatial representations, here of the Gothic manor with “i suoi terrori” (113). Landolfi’s novel registers shifts and reversals in power by creating spatial dispositions and diverse ways of dwelling.¹⁵ His unnamed protagonist begins the story bereft of power and on the outside. Cut off from his cohort and besieged by hunger, the partisan has no choice but to enter into what will be a frightening adventure. When the soldier comes upon an enclave of buildings in a remote rural area, he aggressively attempts to enter it and manages to break in by force. The soldier is convinced, wrongly, that in wartime only old folks, women, and children — called “deboli abitatori” (15) — could dwell in this “house,” as Landolfi first refers it, adopting the soldier’s unknowing point of view. Landolfi subsequently narrates the undoing of the soldier’s simplistic convictions. Within the manor house, Landolfi’s characters challenge each other and enter into power relations through their ways of inhabiting those spaces and in constant struggles over their dwelling rights. The characters’ spatial movements not only create a narrative, they supply action and drama. Actions as simple as stepping aside, shutting or opening a door, or taking a shortcut, can be acts of homage, deference, or defiance.

¹³ Theorists of Gothic spatiality, as Hogle notes (“Theorizing the Gothic,” 30), have pointed out that two or more processes — often at odds with one another — are at work in representations of castles in particular. First, in representing castles, the ruined symbols of a past era of European culture are foregrounded *in order that* the Enlightenment can appear to have supplanted ideologically the earlier epoch. Second, and opposite, the castle’s supernatural quality keeps a wondrous sense of the numinous vibrant. Maurice Levy believed that the deep space of the castle in Gothic fiction had an expansiveness that could replace the grandeur of the Gothic cathedral. Theories of a multivalent spatiality further the view that Gothic texts negotiate contradictions and give definition and value to several ideas and ideologies at once.

¹⁴ Cesaretti examines the periodization of Landolfi’s work in terms of the evolution of his evolving fantastic novels, noting how the Gothic castle is a kind of figure of Landolfi’s early prose style. Cesaretti demonstrates the multiplicity of fantastic directions and elucidates the pertinent literary genealogies, including Romanticism. Cesaretti, *Castelli di carta*, 206-07 and 215-17. He also gives an analysis of the manor house in the short story “La spada” in the context of the author’s tendency to pastiche and ironic distance. Importantly, Cesaretti counters Oreste Macrí’s conviction that Landolfi turns Gothic “lead” into “gold” through his elevated, elegant prose style. A different view is expressed by Lazzarin, who documents some of Landolfi’s comments on fantastic literature and on the Gothic specifically, 23-24 and 209.

¹⁵ I draw on Foucault’s studies of spatiality in terms of its history and “emplacement”: “Emplacement is defined by the relations of proximity between points or elements.” Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Trans. Robert Hurley and others. *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Vol. 2. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 176) I also draw on his reflections on circulation in space (177).

Landolfi's novel furnishes a detailed narration of mobile, ambiguous power relations with the device of the Gothic manor.¹⁶ The author advances his plot by masterfully presenting strong social and historical contrasts in the physical manor house itself. The manor's architecture, as Landolfi represents it, signals the wealth and the despotic power of an ancient, blue-blooded aristocracy. The abode is a distinctive emblem of a cultural geography.¹⁷ Neo-gothic rooftop crenellations crown a manor so vast and complex that even the owners could not hope to "possess" it (39). The immense main façade, the monumental staircase, decorative stonework with pyramids and balls, vast double terraces on front and back, the outbuildings and granaries all suggest a quasi-abandoned mid-sixteenth-century country dwelling place of an important aristocratic family. Within, the soldier will uncover dark furniture in a vast formal atrium (38), the portrait of a beautiful woman, admirable frescoes, an extensive library, and damask chairs with heraldic decorations. Mounted deer heads suggest hunting and the aristocratic pleasures of "un'antica casa di caccia posta su una tenuta familiare" (46). Internal window details are distinctly Settecento so that the overall effect is "promiscuità e incurie unite al senso di un passato splendido" (38).

The modern national state had long since abrogated the rights of an ancient aristocracy, yet an anachronistic order persists here. Landolfi creates a narrative in which a "dead" order maintains a powerful, ghostly presence and traps the protagonist. If provincial villas once were an emblem of city wealth transferred to the country, the manor in its current form no longer stages country delights. The brocade is in tatters. The crockery is mismatched and chipped, and the furnishings are dilapidated. Determined by an embedded history of habitation that is not simple for the partisan to grasp, the manor turns out to be no refuge. Once he has broken in, the soldier quickly senses that he must master the rules of the material architectural system in order to ensure access and his survival. Destructive, deadly powers threaten to disorient the young man and to force him into bonds whose nature he, like Jonathan Harker in Count Dracula's castle, cannot fathom. Spatial knowledge becomes a weapon that will immediately become a necessity because of challenges to his power and agency. In an early scene, the Count escorts his guest to a room where the guest may retire. A conventionally Gothic episode follows in which the house seems to govern the actions of its inhabitants. In a literalization of their general situation, the hero or heroine opens a door, it closes behind them, and he or she turns back only to find that the door has mysteriously locked itself and blocked a retreat. In *Racconto* as well, the soldier tries the door to his room only to find it bolted from the outside.¹⁸

¹⁶ For the "foreign" in terms of spatial contexts in *Racconto*, see Anne Deshoulières, "La jeune fille et le fugitif de Tommaso Landolfi, *Réveillon à Tanger* de Paul Bowles: Deux exemples d'une hospitalité pervertie," In *L'Étranger dans la maison: Figures romanesques de l'hôte*. Ed. Bernadette Bertrandias (Chamalières: Centre de Recherches sur les Littératures Modernes et Contemporaines, 2003).

¹⁷ On obsolescence, see Michele Mari on "case-tempo" in conjunction with a stylistic "inattualità" (Mari 1999).

¹⁸ *Racconto*, "non ebbi il tempo di concludere. Ebbi bensì quello d'udire che l'uscio veniva inchiodato dal di fuori," 35.

From this point forward, multiple questions drive the suspenseful narration: who might impose their presence in the historical manor and rule over its inhabitants, and how would they assert their power? Both a discrepancy in power and uncertainty as to who is indeed in power are fundamental to Landolfi's anxiety-producing plot. Landolfi deploys a familiar Gothic device whereby a hero navigates uncertain spaces in which he is partly a prisoner, partly an agent of discovery, and partly an intruder. In the same way, the castle's owner is part noble guardian and part horrid persecutor of guileless trespassers. The struggle between the elderly "host," the stronger inhabitant, and his young "guest," ostensibly the weaker one, takes up many long chapters precisely because Landolfi has constructed a series of significant juxtapositions and contradictions. One man has the advantage of the home ground and the chivalric determination to defend his domain at all costs, but he is an anachronism weakened by age; the other is a youthful outsider who belongs to a modern order but who exhibits overconfidence.

Landolfi folds these disparate attributes of the two opponents carefully into his narrative, as part of his reflection on the complexities of empowerment. The prose expertly follows the soldier's incessant, risky transgressions and his repeated submissions within the "Gothic" series of encounters between two men.¹⁹ Landolfi develops a narration in which the protagonist insists on engaging the villainous Count in endless micro-encounters. In this way, the author modifies the classic Gothic plot, removing adventure and highlighting a stretched out, slowed, narrative timing. For example, for several days the soldier tries to convince the old man to speak to him even though the old man's silence remains obdurate.²⁰ When chance encounters occur in locales in the manor where the protagonist is not supposed to be, a strained conversation typically ensues in which the protagonist tries with excruciating awkwardness to explain his illicit presence or to cover his intrusive actions.²¹ Solitary rage typically follows upon the heels of the soldier's submissive retreats ("profonda rabbia," 25). Epistemic uncertainty is intolerable to him and a sense of urgency accompanies the soldier's desire to outsmart and tame the old man: "come tollerare una sia pur occasionale convivenza con creatura tanto enigmatica, estranea, secondo pareva, al mondo degli uomini? Epperò mi premeva scioglierla, ammansarla, rendermela in qualche misura familiare" (34).

The author's creation of such an insistent protagonist is an important sign that Landolfi wants to explore questions of subjectivation and "emplacement," to use Foucault's term.²² Self-agency, the power to be the subject of one's actions rather than the plaything of an exterior power, depends on how the protagonist will establish his own way of dwelling or placing himself

¹⁹ Eve Sedgwick has studied the Gothic novel in terms of the bonds between men, for example in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, (ix). They define themselves in terms of the relation. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

²⁰ *Racconto*, "mi riuscì di imporre la mia presenza nella casa," 49.

²¹ *Racconto*, "L'intensità di quello sguardo era in tali istanti letteralmente intollerabile; abbassai il capo," 52.

²² Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 176.

within the governing “dispositivo,” the Count’s manor house.²³ In the earliest chapters, the young man refuses to relent in the face of the Count’s threats,²⁴ and he continues to insist both on speaking to the man and on exploring the mansion. As the soldier whipsaws first in one direction and then the other, the reader wonders if the visitor is in command of his dangerously insistent behavior. Why does he not take in the information that the Count can surely punish him horribly for having profaned the manor with his presence?²⁵ This misguided strong sense of agency is risky because it blinds the protagonist, whereas a consciousness of weakness might effectively instill a sense of caution. Landolfi structures his tale to show that the protagonist does not quickly grasp the fact that this space is a language he does not speak fluently.²⁶ As the story progresses, the young man’s spatial knowledge does increase. False starts and errors (or experience) eventually teach the young man how to effectively engage the old man in his territory. Problems arise when the “disposition” of the house escapes him (39), but the intruder accedes eventually to certain quarters that he believes will unravel the mysteries he seeks to grasp.²⁷

In trying to determine the nature of his enemy, the protagonist is, however, being drawn closer to danger, despite his growing knowledge. Landolfi thickens the epistemological plot based on spatialities. He does this by having his protagonist become more methodical in his knowledge-seeking. In this section of the narrative, the young man searches insistently for a secret room, and Landolfi strongly connotes the attempt. The soldier’s bedroom contains a wardrobe with a sliding panel that appears to allow entry from the adjacent room, the source of uncanny scratching and breathing sounds. He finds no mechanism for passing through the piece of furniture against the wall to the room that may be the lair of his host (or hostess). He must find entry by means of what the author refers to as “rilievi” — a topographical term that accentuates the mapping the man undertakes:

Dunque alla stanza cercata non s’accedeva di là, e occorreva perlomeno rilevare la pianta di quella parte della casa per trovarne l’ingresso. Impresa che appariva difficile, considerato come neppure la parete che faceva angolo con questa in parola presentasse apertura, sicché questa medesima fosse possibile seguire in qualche modo; considerate altresì, in generale, la speciale disposizione dei vani

²³ In *Rien va* Landolfi discusses “dispositivi,” calling them laws that are not divine (53). Foucault reminds us that “subjects are located both in the movement of various discourses.” Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 77.

²⁴ See Cesaretti, *Castelli di carta*.

²⁵ The Count describes previous Allied soldiers’ presence as having “profaned” (35) his house, but the visitor does not ask himself what the Count might do to defend his sacred spaces.

²⁶ Cesaretti, and others such as Enrico Falqui, have uncovered psychoanalytic symbolism in Landolfi’s spatialities. Cesaretti has explored the female connotations of the space of the manor house in terms of an “archetipo materno,” Cesaretti, *Castelli di carta*, 135.

²⁷ *Racconto*, “penetrare in qualunque maniera,” 21.

nella casa, l'uno dentro l'altro, e dunque i continui e già accennati mutamenti di direzione e orientazione ci si era costretti nell'attraversarla. Non disperavo tuttavia di venire a capo della difficoltà, ma bisognava procedere con un certo metodo ... (59)

The operative word is “metodo.” This explorer thinks in terms of axes and geometry, since they are the basis of this architecture. Roughly speaking, the protagonist tries to get to the secret room first in the left direction from his own bedroom door. He comes up against walls with no doors in the direction of the secret room — none in the entryway of his room, three “teorie” [enfilades] of rooms, or along a long hall. When the whole zone to the left of the bedroom entry fails to give access, he tries a mirror approach and moves to his right. The rooms on this side are not enfilades, but their structure still mirrors the first section he explored. The space is a grid, with “muri di traverso.” (See Appendix 1 for a hypothetical mapping). To negotiate the house, the protagonist mobilizes all of his knowledge of the culture’s disposition to mathematical spaces.²⁸ Geometry delivers, he thinks, the key to the spatial secret. Keeping the dispositions of the various rectangles in mind, the partisan finally gets to the hidden room.

As the partisan begins to understand the manor’s floor plan, an unexpected outcome emerges. His mastery of his situation actually diminishes, and his vulnerability grows. The reader and the protagonist alike reach a turning point when they realize that the subject of the narration is not the agent of his own actions.²⁹ The protagonist has found certain doors unlocked so that he goes exactly the direction the Count, “battendomi la strada” (38), wants him to. As Hogle has observed, the Gothic hero is often subject to an inconsistency of being that stems from an inability to achieve self-agency. In the Count’s domain, the soldier lives and acts inside a power relation that actively blocks his self-agency.³⁰ Once the partisan has gained the secret room, he is “discovered” immediately by the Count. The Count has allowed the protagonist just enough rope to hang himself: “Non avrei mai potuto imporre la mia presenza se lui non l’avesse voluto” (66).

²⁸ Critics may have been too quick to call this building a sheer “labyrinth.” For two examples see Rocco Carbone, “La dimora violata: Tommaso Landolfi e *Racconto d'autunno*,” *Chroniques italiennes* 47-48:3-4 (1996), 74 and Lazzarin 224. Because of its epistemological frame, the classical notion of a maze may not allow us to understand the functions of the social spatiality Landolfi is creating.

²⁹ Critics have applied a good deal of insight to the study of Landolfi’s unique first-person narrations. For Carbone, the frame story, the war, gives a recognizable context that functions as a foil: it only highlights the subjective viewpoints. After the frame story, “si deve cedere il passo ad altro, ad un racconto il cui senso più riposto e attivo è animato dalla segretezza e dal mistero dove l’intimità delle emozioni individuali prende il sopravvento sulla tragedia pubblica e storica.” Carbone, “La dimora violata,” 77. See also Anna Dolfi, “La camicia di nesso della letteratura: Nota sul diarismo di Landolfi,” *Gradiva: International Journal of Italian Literature* 4:3 [7] (1989): 27-35. I have preferred to see the outer and inner stories as mirrors of each other.

³⁰ Hogle, “Theorizing the Gothic,” 34. Cesaretti remarks on a crucial sense of “smarrimento.” Cesaretti, *Castelli di carta*, 133.

Rational knowledge of a rational floor plan and its dispositions has produced neither safety nor power, nor has it led to the discovery of the sought-after woman in the portrait, the beautiful Lucia. Landolfi's long and exacting narrative of spatial forays only illustrates the uselessness of the soldier's mastery. The protagonist can negotiate a "humanistic" architectural space, he can be at home in classic Italianate spaces, yet the castle retains a gothicizing hold on him that belies that kind of knowledge.³¹ Since the protagonist's behavior has not conformed to reason but to a different, external, and inaccessible power, the value of his "enlightened" epistemological assumptions plummets. Landolfi ups the ante by strategically revealing in a subsequent chapter that the Count is a necromancer, with "supernatural" knowledge.³² (Interestingly, Landolfi published his novel in exactly the same year that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appeared, a work known for seeing "reason" as irrational.)

The reader might well assume that the author's game might now be over, that Landolfi has closed his discourse on elusive subjectivation.³³ This is not the case. The author inserts a long chapter, the tenth, between the secret room narrative and the scene in which the Count raises his wife from the dead. Landolfi moves his character below the Renaissance-style floors to the subterranean realms of the manor. A second spatialized investigation begins, and Landolfi illustrates a second defective knowledge-practice. With new methods of discovery and intrusion, the protagonist negotiates a dark space that opens into a mountain grotto. The protagonist/subject positions himself in space using, this time, bodily instincts and habitual perceptions. He follows breathing and creaking noises with his ears, perceives dampness, and feels changing elevation. As he goes exploring, he fully deploys his embodied knowledge. An inexplicable feeling of attraction draws him into a realm with no plan:

Presi a caso verso sinistra, per entro ciò che pareva una specie di cunicolo. . . il terreno cominciava a scendere; tirai avanti tuttavia, e non so dire quanto durasse la graduale discesa. In capo a un certo tempo, qualcosa m'avvertì che ero giunto in luogo più ampio ... Intravidi così una grotta abbastanza grande, una vera grotta con tanto di stalattiti ... Non nego che un certo sbigottimento mi tenesse, tuttavia

³¹ The "classicizing," Italian Renaissance style of the building would have been "modern" before neo-classical architectural styles of the Enlightenment period; its modernity is precocious in that Italian Humanism is historically the earliest early modern.

³² Landolfi expressed his skepticism about causal explanations in another work: "Osservazione generale in proposito: non tutto si deve spiegare. È una nostra curiosa presunzione e ... un nostro gratuito abito che ogni cosa ne sottintenda necessariamente un'altra, o, diciamo pure, che ogni cosa abbia la sua causa e sia a sua volta causa: perché dovrebbe essere così o come ciò si può dimostrare? Una riforma dei nostri metodi di pensiero è almeno pensabile ... A voler spiegare tutto, si riuscirà forse brillanti, ma non si sa mai dove si può finire, poiché non c'è più modo ad un certo punto di sapere quanto in una data questione mettiamo di nostro, o, più chiaramente, dove cominci il vano gioco e la compiacenza dell'intelletto" (Landolfi, *Rien va*, 103).

³³ "We do not live in a void that would be tinged with shimmering colors, we live inside an ensemble of relations that define emplacements ..." Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 178.

l'impulso mi muoveva. (74)

Roughly phenomenological, the “impulse” fails, just as “method” did. The partisan is in fact again being led, just as he had been by the Count. The Count’s young daughter, Lucia, has willfully created a trail of sounds for the protagonist — “leggerissimo scalpiccio” (77). Without self-direction, he is again acting without “knowing” in the classic sense of the word. Hiding, Lucia continues to pull the soldier’s strings. In a “giardino di Armida alla rovescia,” her power holds Landolfi’s male hero in the manor.

Family power flows

The narrative of the familial bonds in *Racconto* provides a more fraught and fearsome story than the power struggles between the soldier and the Count over the manor.³⁴ The section of the novel dedicated to family horror covers two chapters, 16 and 17, and differs strikingly from the earlier chapters in which the old man and the soldier hunt and hide ceaselessly. Landolfi associates family bonds with perverse domination and incestual sexuality — a staple of such Gothic novels as *The Monk*, in which the rape of a sister by a brother unfolds in a church crypt. The Count’s daughter eventually reveals to the soldier a horrifying family history of violence and pacts of unity beyond the grave. The Count had married his wife when she was virtually a child. Since his daughter’s birth, the father has ruled over his isolated little domain by invoking all the prerogatives of his social status, heritage, and gender. Acts of sexual sadism enforce his power.

Landolfi’s depiction of sadism conforms closely to the model of power he has already built into his Gothic text: subject positions emerge and take form as the characters engage alternately in domination and submission, in advances and retreats. Landolfi attributes specific perversions to the degenerate husband-and-wife pair bound by sadomasochistic practice:

Le prove di adorazione dello sposo si spinsero fino all’erezione d’un altare su cui l’ancor giovane donna doveva rimanere, ignuda, per molte ore del giorno, e specialmente della notte, davanti a candele accese e fra nuvole d’incenso, del che tutta via pareva contenta; e, durante accessi d’ingiustificata gelosia o semplicemente d’amore, a sevizie varie e torture persino, di cui del pari ella non pareva scontenta. Subito dopo queste insanie, egli si rifugiava nel di lei grembo a piangere amare lagrime sui tormenti che le aveva inflitti ... (112)

Sadomasochism (in this symbolic scheme) ensures that each participant achieves some sense, if unstable, of agency — as either victim or perpetrator. Although the husband physically harms his

³⁴ For ancestral bonds see Rodolfo Sacchettini, *L'oscuro rovescio: previsione e pre-visione della morte nella narrativa di Tommaso Landolfi*, (Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2006), 102-03)

wife, he also commits acts of penance and begs for forgiveness like a child. By submitting, the wife allows the Count his “emplacement” (in a Foucauldian sense), and her own selfhood derives from controlling and submitting in turn as well.

Are the husband and wife equally empowered in the sadomasochistic relation? Landolfi assigns the upper hand to female dominator. The power that the wife may gain by submitting and by exacting penance allows her to respond to her husband at times with the greatest force.³⁵ For example, near the end of her life, the wife has been dwelling underground for a year, where her daughter visits her:

Era incatenata con le braccia alzate, ed era tutta nuda e aveva il corpo pieno di segni rossi; quando mi vide aggrottò le ciglia, disse: che vengono a fare le bambine, qui? Ma giacché sei venuta, va a dire a tuo padre che io posso sempre ammazzarlo, che non tiri troppo la corda. Ma poi sorrise: beh, dice, questo però non mi dispiace mica. (118)

On the one hand, the reference to the rope indicates the bond that unites husband and wife. Since the rope can slacken or tighten (“non tiri troppo la corda”), each partner can modulate the bond. On the other, the greatest sense of power derives from an extreme threat: “posso sempre ammazzarlo.” Lucia senior will turn out indeed to be the true monster of this Gothic tale, despite the fact that she dies early in the family chronology. She will wield her powers from beyond the grave.

Landolfi’s narrative of ghostly witchcraft orchestrates a power relation that confounds expected gendered behavior and therefore complicates assumptions about male domination. The author turns the wife’s mysterious death at a young age into a turning point in the familial narrative. Bereavement results in a loss of self-agency as the despotic Count struggles against an inconsistency of being that Landolfi’s narrative had already produced once, in the soldier’s failed power ploy to gain dwelling rights in the Count’s mansion. That lack of “presence” signals a loss of male power and makes room for the ascent of the female monster that Landolfi very carefully plots. Though the old man replaces his wife with his daughter as an object of erotic tortures, he can get no satisfaction. Though he obsessively engages in necromantic rituals for fourteen years and finally succeeds in resuscitating his wife for a short moment, the Count is thwarted by the soldier, who ends up aborting the Count’s ministrations: “al mio grido lo spettro sparve di colpo” (96). In short, Landolfi foregrounds the old man’s weaknesses.

³⁵ For discourse on subjectivity in the context of sexuality and power in the modern period in Italy, see Stewart-Steinberg on fin-de-siècle theorizations of “subjectivity ... where loss of control could double itself into positions of power,” a model Landolfi seems to evoke. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-De-Siècle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 16. Also her treatment of pairings in which “the suggestive relation between incubus and succubus is predicated on the fact that he is at the bottom.” Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, “The Secret Power of Suggestion: Scipio Sighele and the Postliberal Subject,” *diacritics* 33:1 (2003), 71.

We know that classic Gothic novels demonize resurgent despotic powers and project their threat into fictional pasts. Typically, the despot is defeated. Landolfi was himself of noble lineage, yet he had no special reason to defend and no cause to demonize the aristocracy in 1946; it had long been effectively powerless when he was writing, despite the popularity in the postwar years of the royal family of Savoy. Written when the Italian nation was emerging from totalitarianism but before it became a republic, the focus in *Racconto* is not on Italy's horrifying Fascist past but rather on the Allied campaign in 1943 and on the "progressive" nations that battled Nazi-Fascism during the Italian campaign. In this specific sense, Landolfi writes in a post-Gothic framework. Modern history is not a straight shot forward in which democracy progresses. Modern history appears, instead, as an alternation of aggression and submission on both sides of political disputes and on both sides of the war. The battle at the Gustav line is the perfect setting for the frame story of *Racconto* since what goes on in history and what goes on in the manor are parallel: violent, desperate power play.³⁶ In this particular example of mirroring strategy, the presumed totalitarian side, the father/Fascists, and the presumed democratic side, the protagonist/Allies, both participate in struggles for dominance.

Landolfi's novel is clearly not of the "engaged" sort that might narrate victory over Fascist persecutors. It does have moments of invective. The military historian Brian Reid called the Italian campaign "a hurried and improvised attempt to exploit the Axis collapse in the North African campaign by carrying the war to the northern shores of the Mediterranean" and "a remorseless, attritional grind."³⁷ In the historical context of *Racconto*, the devastating effects of the misguided, futile Allied aerial bombing of the monastery at Montecassino³⁸ and of the damaging race between American and the British commanders to liberate Rome are undisputed. Though we must be careful not to diminish tragic, heavy Allied casualties, instances of misconduct should not be minimized either, a point the novel underscores. For example, when troops gathered from some twenty Allied nations under a coordinated command, they were able to outflank and nearly encircle German forces in the spring of 1944, setting a trap meant destroy the Tenth Army as they retreated north. U. S. General Mark Clark surprised his own superiors by setting out for Rome instead of supporting the effort. Reid harshly criticizes General Clark because he "concentrated on reveling in the glory of seizing Rome and denying it to the

³⁶ Stewart-Steinberg has studied how social scientists at the turn of the century produced discourses that assume that "what happens in degenerate couples also take place at the collective level," with reference however to a "despot and his people" (Stewart-Steinberg, "The Secret Power of Suggestion," 73).

³⁷ Brian Holden Reid, "Italian Campaign," in *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, edited by I. C. B. Dear and M. R. D. Foot (Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁸ Matthew Parker, *Montecassino: The Story of the Hardest-Fought Battle of World War Two* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2003), 356-58

British.”³⁹ The German troops escaped to the north, the Allies did not pursue promptly, and the war on the Italian front would drag on for an additional year. In those months, Landolfi’s own ancestral palace in Pico Farnese was damaged beyond repair by bombs. For Landolfi, the Allied brand of democracy was undoubtedly as frightening in postwar Italy as a resurgent aristocracy would have been in post-revolutionary Europe. *Racconto* distinctly monstrifies the Allies over the Fascists.

This is, however, not all the novel accomplishes. Landolfi’s text engages fears not only of political domination by the “democratic” system that developed out of the Enlightenment, but also fears of threats unrelated to the war between Nazi-Fascism and freedom (as we shall see in due course). According to Jerrold Hogle, a familiar “play of antitheses,” Landolfi’s text takes up several anxious concerns at once in his gothicizing practice. Critical of democracy’s self-fashioning as superior and modern in comparison to other systems of government, Landolfi turns the Allies into what the aristocracy had been in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novels: the enemy of independence. When he represents the Allied forces in his novel, the author selects only one of the constituent parties for his historical horror story: North African troops (Moroccans and Algerians part of the French Expeditionary Corps) in southern Lazio during the campaign to break the Gustav Line. These colonial soldiers are, of course, Allies, yet in the narrative they also despise a powerful part of their own group: their European colonizers. The Allied nations had not only colonized North Africa, but now their generals order the North Africans to undertake the most dangerous missions: to crack fortified German defenses in remote mountain areas. As part of his critique of the Allied coalition, the author highlights the point that not all the nations and peoples that comprised the Allied formation had joined it freely.⁴⁰ Landolfi concentrates not on advances against the Axis but on episodes in which the Goumiers unleash pent-up rage at their colonizers, turning it on Italian women (as in Moravia’s *La ciociara*, a book that itself depicts the Allied troops in a negative light by foregrounding rape by colonial troops).

The Allied colonial troops are, in Landolfi’s writing, victims and aggressors at once. The power model is familiar now:

Appartenevano a quei reparti di truppe coloniali che l’esercito liberatore aveva messi in campo onde fare impeto contro posizioni montane giudicate altrimenti inespugnabili . . . Ma essi, che in tempi precedenti avevano avuto a subire gravi torti, nel loro paese medesimo, dai nostri connazionali, giungevano ora qui colla sete della vendetta e l’animo dei saccheggiatori e degli stupratori. (126)

³⁹ Reid, “Italian Campaign.”

⁴⁰ De Luna provides a concise view of the controversies surrounding the Moroccan troops. Giovanni De Luna, “Il caso delle donne italiane stuprate durante la secondo guerra mondiale al centro di nuove ricerche,” *La Stampa* November 25, 2002.

Just how historically accurate Landolfi's, or even Moravia's, depiction of indiscriminate violence by colonial troops might be is open to dispute as studies are in short supply.⁴¹ Vaguely Saracen-like beings in the text, these troops are, on the one hand, part of a larger army corps of unscrupulous Allies. On the other, they are apart, fundamentally unrecognizable as Allies because of their baffling uniforms, ear piercings, hairstyle, and unreadable racial signifiers:

Sopravvenivano tre soldati d'una razza e d'un corpo a me sconosciuti; quattro o cinque altri ne sbucarono di lì a un istante da ambo i lati della casa, che avevano aggirata. Bruni di carnagione e d'uniforme, parendo alle labbra e agli occhi gente d'Affrica, avevano lunghi capelli inanellati sotto l'elmetto e cerchi d'oro alle orecchie . . . È inutile soggiunga che nulla di buono presagivano i loro ceffi, i quali avevano alcunché di crudele, di belluino e persino di diabolico. Mi circondarono ad armi basse. (126)

The mysterious difference of the colonial troops, as Landolfi represents them, works to create his version of the "Allies": unknowable, violent, and set on possession (126).

There is nothing, importantly, otherworldly about the North African soldiers. "Slippage between sexual danger and supernatural danger" does not apply.⁴² While rape is the supreme and perverse threat these men pose, they are not the Gothic monsters of *Racconto*. They are in fact possessed of certain established, conventional powers and emplacements. Gothic theory asks what power discrepancies built into textual representations might appear to be natural or normal. The maleness of the North Africans is the trait that allows them to belong naturally in a powerful cohort, if only in part.

The brevity of the North African assault on Lucia and the partisan episode leaves, additionally, little room for Landolfi to gothicize the attackers. While fourteen chapters treat male-on-male power struggles in the manor in excruciating detail, the assault on Lucia is lightning in the narration's temporal span. Even though the Africans will do to Lucia essentially what her family has done to her, the author weights their monstrosity less heavily than that of some other characters, especially the two Lucias — the sorceresses. Monstrification based on

⁴¹ Parker, *Montecassino*, 265-66. For an informative academic piece that includes archival research see Robert Weisbord and Michael Honhart, "A Question of Race: Pope Pius XII and the 'Colore Troops' in Italy," *The Historian* 65:2 (2002): 403-17; see the Website created by Valentino Rossetti for bibliography drawn from local histories: <http://www.dalvoluturnoacassino.it>; widely differing statistics and readings of them are found. Tahar Ben Jelloun believes that the automatic equation Moroccan/rapist is the fruit of racism (*Il Mattino*, 10 settembre 1993). Cited from the website "La storia dimenticata." <http://ricordare.wordpress.com/perche-ricordare/043-la-storia-dimenticata-gli-stupri-di-massa>. Accessed January 7, 2009.

⁴² Ruth Bienstock Anolik, "Sexual Horror: Fears of the Sexual Other," in *Horrrifying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, edited by Ruth Bienstock Anolik (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2007), 5.

gender difference trumps othering based on racializing and geography ("Affrica"). The paradoxes that the author assigns to the witch figures are numerous and directly horror oriented. (This lack of uniformity in monstification applies of course to any Gothic text, as theorists, especially Rosi Braidotti, have observed.)

Gender engagements and the flow of power

The assault on Italian women in southern Lazio during World War II, called mass rape by some historians, has a horror of its own. Landolfi does not dismiss the suffering of the women raped by French expeditionary corps under the command of the U.S. Fifth Army (women referred to commonly, and obscenely, as "le marocchine"). Young Lucia in the novel is a tragic heroine precisely because she dies defending herself from rape. Beyond attempting to portray a historical reality, Landolfi mobilizes the subject of the rape of women in the final chapters of *Racconto* for other reasons, namely in order to open up several levels of discourse on gendered power relations. The move was, we know, pervasive in Gothic novels, with their "damsels in distress."⁴³

By mobilizing rape, Landolfi pointedly moves "Gothic" sexual interactions into the realm of power struggles between (his) male and female subjects. Women can be taken/penetrated "naturally" in the dominant conceptualization of sexedness that Landolfi draws upon. Men are the actors, the agents. Landolfi is careful, however, to put into play differentiations in his male protagonists. He draws two distinct assault scenarios into contrast by means of narrative machinations and manipulations of the text's temporalities. Landolfi represents the North Africans rather simply as a band of men and loads them with the negativity he ascribes to (his) Allies. They appear in one scene. The author's treatment of the Italian males is quite different. Their sexuality and their male power over females are tucked away for long narrative periods in which women are absent from the narration. Landolfi takes care to dose his readers' knowledge of the men's interactions with each other and with women as he unfolds his plot. Landolfi writes, in other words, a first, long part of the novel (to chapter 14) dominated by maleness. The suspense derives, in this part, solely from the erratic presence and puzzling behavior of the dangerous old Count. A second, short part (chapters 15-18) will feature startling female characters, the sorceresses.

⁴³ Cahill makes the dynamic flow of power relations clear: "Thus, for Foucault, the fact that the body is socially constructed by the play of power does not necessitate its own powerlessness. Rather, its very ability to resist certain expressions of power is itself attributable to the existence of power; however, just as the power which Foucault describes is not omnipotent, the resistance which is possible is not limitless. No embodied subject is capable of resisting any and all expressions of power, for the simple reason that to do so would be to undermine that very subject's ability to act at all." Ann J. Cahill, "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body," *Hypatia* 15:1 (2000), 48.

What the reader has not known, since it was not revealed, is that in the earlier temporal stretch of the novel, the two Italian males have been in fact in contact with female figures, but off the stage of the *récit*. When Landolfi does introduce the two Lucias into the power equation, into the plot, and to the reader for the first time, the change in direction and tone in the novel is stunning. When a previously invisible female presence emerges and begins to act, the horror story goes into overdrive. The partisan's exploration of the manor house suddenly recedes. The dead wife comes to life, the old man dies, and the young Lucia comes out of hiding. This narrative arrangement of the parts of the novel ensures that this new femaleness in the later chapters comes as a surprise attack on the reader.

Interestingly, the colonial male combatants garner little narrative presence while the female "monsters" dominate the final section of the novel. Landolfi tells the stories of the two potential sets of non-conforming "others," namely colonial peoples and women, in distinct ways according to different narrative strategies. When Landolfi cuts the North Africans' stories short, he effectively disavows the possibility for male monstrosity, despite the climactic murder episode. He dwells instead on a narrative of perverse female knowledge. Landolfi's principal monsters in *Racconto* are sorceresses endowed with super-hearing and the gift of speaking with animal and inanimate things. He depicts female knowledge within dominant cultural paradigms: it is thought to be a product of the body, not the mind. Will Landolfi take issue with this idea, just as he did with the notion that the rational is a supreme kind of knowledge? Landolfi had suggested in the chapters on the soldier's forays in the manor that the cultural elevation of "reasoned" knowledge is a technology of power, to use Foucault's term. This kind of knowledge, a knowledge thought to be necessary to "inhabiting" power, was exposed as a failing defense for the male subject.⁴⁴ If Landolfi would disabuse his readers of the supreme cultural value of rational intellect, does he also discredit the idea that female, embodied knowledge is inferior?

As in so many broadly modernist textualities and in so many Gothic ones, gender discourse is an important strategy of experimentation. I do not want to imply that in *Racconto* the distinction between "male" and "female" is simplistic or dimorphic. I do want to point out that gender and sex are "chips" that the author puts on the table and that experimentation with gender boundaries as a source of horror is prevalent in this Gothic novel. To argue that women are exclusively the source of horror and monstrosity would ignore how Landolfi deploys a range of gendering moves and plays with androgyny and boundary transgressions of several kinds. Landolfi constructs, for example, an uncanny androgynous figure for the dramatic necromancy scene. The Count utters the words of his ritual incantations in his wife's distinctive voice, making his character into a troubling, ambiguous, and uncanny hybrid. The old man's own

⁴⁴ Although it is true that the male soldier investigates the manor "phenomenologically," with embodied knowledge, his body fails him and is no defense for the male subject. For the inadequacy of a understanding the world without artistic mediation, see Bellotto, where she quotes Landolfi's assertion that "il mondo fenomenico aspetta dall'arte la propria creazione." Silvia Bellotto, "Tommaso Landolfi al di là del fantastico," *Metamorfosi del fantastico: Immaginazione e linguaggio nel racconto surreale italiano del Novecento* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2003), 189.

magical powers have come to him, additionally, from a distinctly female line. His wife had taught him the black arts. The necromancy scene very suddenly inserts the old man into a female genealogy, creating a distinctive surprise effect in terms of the novel's gendering system. So close, so intimate is the Count to femaleness in the form of Lucia that he begins physically to include the female in his being, a state that makes him ripe for victimization in the novel's symbolic gender economy — a mirror of traditional culture. Although self-agency entails alternations of submission and domination because they are necessary to the differentiation that selfhood must mobilize, there is for the dominators a risk from intense interactions with disempowered beings.

In chapters that detail the Count's attempt to raise his wife, Landolfi plays with gender boundaries to show a man who exposes himself to horror and death: he closes himself in a castle with a female who will subjugate him. The Count has married a vulnerable, powerless little girl, but she grows up into a witch and an infernal spirit who dispatches him, it would seem, to the afterworld. The Count's intractable subservience to his dead wife is the basis of the novel's horror climax. In a dramatic scene, the protagonist listens to the Count's prayers, hearing first the man's voice, then a frightening voice that no longer sounds like the Count's, and, finally, an astonishing "she" whose voice substitutes for the Count's:

Era una preghiera, la sua, una lunga preghiera a un dio ignoto (o troppo noto?); ... Ma la sua voce stessa, devo dirlo? non sembrava la sua ... Non so come giustificare questa ingiustificabilissima fra tutte le impressioni, ma so che accolsi le sue parole, e persino le udii, come di altri. Come di lei. (87)

The father may be a strong "inhabitant" of his class, but Landolfi makes his male sorcerer a weaker "inhabitant" of his maleness because of his bond to the feminine. The same could be said of the male soldier at this point in the story. The young man is also contaminated by femaleness as he watches Lucia senior take over her husband: "uno strano e indefinibile senso mi veniva invadendo, non scompagnato da fisici segni, languore formicolio ribrezzo madore, com'è di chi sia sotto l'impero d'una irresistibile suggestione o d'un sortilegio" (92).

The horror effect is relatively tame, however, when men surrender their agency to the female. The old man speaks with an eerie female voice. The protagonist becomes numb and sweats. The males do not exactly transform into werewolves. The Count's wife, instead, acquires her strongest presence in the story when she returns from the grave to overwhelm her husband in the form of a monstrous infernal spirit (96). Not only is she a punishing, deadly witch, but she also "calls" the colonial troops to the manor to punish her daughter for her attachment to the soldier. When the men appear, young Lucia screams "È la mamma!" (128).

One fact requires a succinct explanation here before proceeding to an analysis of female monstrosity in *Racconto*. Landolfi scholars have not noted or pursued a crucial point of information concerning the long chapter in which the old Count recites prayers as he begins his

magical ritual. While they have noticed liturgical rhythms and images,⁴⁵ they have not noted that Landolfi quotes very nearly verbatim from a notorious conjuration for four full pages of the novel: the “Conjuration of the Four” written by Éliphas Lévi in his *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (1855). From Lévi, a magician and writer connected to “high” magic and syncretic occult traditions of the nineteenth century, Landolfi can directly import an archaic prose style together with a linguistic texture reminiscent of the Renaissance mages with their talk of astral planes and correspondences.⁴⁶ More importantly, though, Landolfi can import a stunning series of supplications to a host of lords and masters who are to come to the aid of practitioners of magic rites.⁴⁷ The female presence that has intruded into the Count’s body performs an imperative, performative prayer taken verbatim from Lévi, with his alchemical and Cabbalistic overtones and his frequent Latin formulations:

“Caput mortuum, imperet tibi Dominus per vivum et devotum serpentem! . . .
Aquila errans, imperet tibi Dominus per alas tauri! ... Serpens, imperet tibi
Dominus Tetragrammaton per angelum et leonem!” (92-93)

[Head of a corpse, the Lord command thee by the living and votive serpent! ...
Wandering Eagle, the Lord command thee by the wings of the Bull! ... Serpent,
the Lord Tetragrammaton commands thee by the angel and the lion!]⁴⁸

In the conjuring words, the “Lord” is the male power that commands the elements of the cosmos.

Speaking magical words is, however, the act that will make the Lord’s power material in the physical world. The female sorceress takes this role and acts by means of incantatory speech to command the spirits that can achieve her return from the grave. She relays power from one reign to another. Her vocal mediation is necessary for the beyond and the world to enter into contact, first, and, second, for the beyond to command the world. The sorceress defies the laws of the natural world.

Her power has nothing to do with the rational, enlightened control of nature. Lucia senior’s character is associated with powerful, magical forces that burst the worldly frame and usher in the otherworldly. As the Count attends to a pot of smoky coals, his wife materializes as part of a

⁴⁵ Cecchini writes of “un pezzo di bravura un po’ manieristico,” Cecchini, *Parlare per le notti*, 100.

⁴⁶ On Landolfi’s interest in occult thinkers, see Bellotto, “Tommaso Landolfi al di là del fantastico,” 192-93. Bellotto supplies important textual references in which Landolfi writes about “magic” and the “abnormal” as well.

⁴⁷ The “Four” refers to the four classes of elementary spirits we encounter in so much nineteenth-century “fantastic” fiction (E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Golden Pot” comes to mind) and in the long alchemical tradition—the watery undines, earthy gnomes, fiery salamanders, and airy sylphs. Lévi’s teachings explain how best to command these elementary spirits. Landolfi provides one prayer for each element (although Lévi does not connect the conjuration to raising the dead).

⁴⁸ Éliphas Lévi, “Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual, Part II.” 1896. G. Redway, 32. April 13, 2009 <http://www.hermetics.org/pdf/magic/DogmaEtRituel_Part_II.pdf>32)

controlled chain of events:

Convolgendosi su se stesso e addensandosi il fumo dette luogo a una grande figura femminile staccata dal braciere, sospesa dunque a mezz'aria, che ancora fluttuava un poco, per largo e per lungo, ma si rapprese e fissò rapidamente in un'immagine precisa, percorsa, soltanto, da alterni correnti di luci, o piuttosto di fumo medesimo; come il fumo fosse, dico il suo visibile sangue. . . a questo irriconoscibile spettro, sembra non esser rimasto che quanto di inconfessato e abominoso la natura di lei poteva contenere, e, delle sue care fattezze, che la sorda materia.

The sorceress first takes over the male Count, producing a gender hybrid, then she becomes unformed, ungendered smoke, and finally she comes alive as foul matter.⁴⁹

Gender hybridity works differently for males and females, as we can observe in this episode: weakening the male but strengthening the female to make her abnormally powerful and perverse. The most horrifying example of gender abnormality appears in the scene in which the mother tortures her child with an heirloom broach, pinning it on the girl's stomach in phallic fashion (116). In this sexualizing episode, Landolfi can construct an unnatural mother, wife, and female by granting her an inverted sexuality. He makes her phallic enough to molest her own sex by penetration. This action virilizes the mother and turns her into an incestuous pedophile.

Landolfi does not intend this unnatural sorceress to furnish an "irrational" alternative to the failed, rationalist male that he has been evoking in the novel in the figure of the partisan. A return to magical thinking in a modern world devoid of it is not proposed. It is legitimate to wonder, though, if Landolfi can at once gothicize the Allies, monstrify Enlightenment discourse, and not himself engage in exactly that which modern belief systems and Gothic novels have done: to monstrify the "otherness" of a new order that would follow the old one. Can Landolfi effectively uphold a distinction between a failed Enlightenment built on disguised domination and some form of power system untainted by rationality? Can he extract himself from received categories that ultimately reify difference until it becomes unnoticed and "natural"?

Powers of intrusion

The figure that dominates the final pages of *Racconto* is the young sorceress, the most

⁴⁹ Luti found in this passage "troppo facili agganci ad un surrealismo di comodo." He considers it "rhetoric." Giorgio Luti, *Tre protagonisti: D'Annunzio, Campana, Landolfi* (Arezzo: Edizioni Helicon, 2007) 78.

ambiguous “monster” of the novel. As with his male characters, Landolfi differentiates his women, ranking them in subtle hierarchies of horror. The mother is a pure abomination. The daughter is a budding mage who commits a few trivial acts of domineering violence. She communes with flowers and furniture but, weirdly, has killed fledglings in fits of rage. She is the true uncanny figure of the novel — her mother’s double, young and old at once, graced with snaky hair, and troubled by a hostile, epileptic body. Her idea of love is warped: she worries that the soldier does not love her because he does not hurt her. She has introjected her parents into her own psyche and sometimes speaks as her mother (“lo senti che delle volte parlo come la mamma?” 122). She knows nothing of the historical world, never having left the manor. Her knowledge is ancient and occult. An uncertain, mixed, separate, and tortured being, the beautiful young woman suffers from marked confusion and from her own inconsistency of being. Landolfi tinges Lucia’s character with incoherence when he narrates her story alone within a stream-of-consciousness style. The author delivers to his readers a traumatized woman with a bizarre, “female” cognitive style but a rich interior world (114).

Unlike her mother, Lucia is, inexplicably, loved instantly by a normal man. Landolfi sets up this “ideal” love narrative only to have it fail, strategically. After the Count’s mysterious death, after the necromancy scene, the young woman enters into a new male orbit. Joining in a love union with the young man, the eccentric female being courageously opens herself to salvation from her past abjection, only the salvation is worse than her father’s sadistic molestations. Lucia in love undergoes the most fearful loss of self-presence of the novel. If Lucia dreams that the partisan could make her normal (122), could give structure to her over-openness, could bring her into a social cohort, into worldly time, and into history, none of the above occurs. Irrationally, she trusts the Allied soldier to transform her, even when he confesses he has had to take a firm upper hand with the labile woman (“le parlai con bontà, e non senza una certa fermezza, ed ella . . . fu contenta” (110). When Landolfi creates an open, trusting, but unthinking and “magical” female character who will be murdered trying to save her lover from being shot and herself from rape and murder, he suggests that an unmediated act of trust is just as dangerous as the soldier’s naïve trust in Enlightened reason. The band of marauding men from the army “detto liberatore” overwhelms and defeats Lucia when she fails to escape to her secret room.

It is not easy to integrate a sorceress into a codified, hierarchical power system. Perhaps that is why Landolfi needs one in his novel and why he gives it the ending that he does. When Lucia dies, the soldier takes an autumn-flowering rosebush and plants it on her grave. He “buries” his own heart there (131), in Gothic mode, as if in a Boccaccio tale. Every year the bush puts forth a rose larger and more beautiful than the other ones (130). Critical as he may be of the discourses of power, the author mobilizes a strong suit of his Western tradition. Lucia remains inhuman but sublimely beautiful in his tale. As if in an alchemical wedding, male and female in love appear as constituent elements of a superhuman form of being. Precious reagents, they join to produce something beyond worldly normalcy and its deathly struggles. Natural and supernatural join forces and prevail, blood nourishes a wild rose, and disparate entities are bound forever.

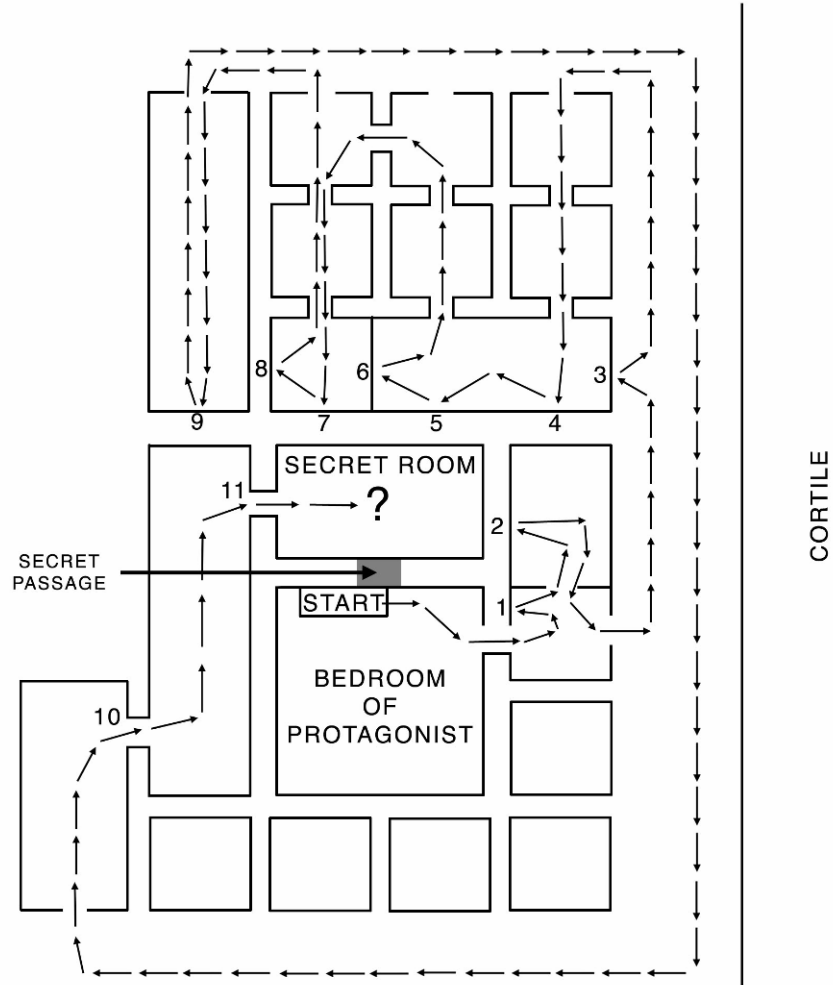
Landolfi's Gothic device of outer and inner frames certainly favors ambiguity, a hallmark of Gothic textuality. On the one hand, the frame story, the historical story, is no story at all in comparison to the esoteric tale of impossible but eternal union. Why not, then, dispense with the war story altogether? Some readers have always wanted to call the frame story a pretext. Perhaps the politicizing, historicizing frame story has a role beyond drawing individual and collective narratives into associative reflections. Paradoxically, it must be there in order to actively disappear, to be eclipsed when "substantial," eternal, supernatural love dominates the narrative's finale. In this way, the political world can be the specific devalued "real" that competes with and loses to "the unreal." Failing modernity, failing freedom, and failing democracy have to be set against magical, alchemical love and beauty so that they become things bereft of an aura. This is more effective than leaving them out. Paradoxically, the supernatural thematics allow Landolfi to create a specific, politicizing critique of the "real."

Racconto's meaning relies in the end on the author's presentation of a power struggle between two narrations, of love and of politics. Should the novel have had the title "Due racconti d'autunno"? Landolfi's crafty title, in the singular, is just one sign of his other authorial sleights of hand. He creates an opposition and struggle between two terms as though there were not more terms that could enter in. The creation of a binary pair makes it possible for Landolfi to exclude from the novel's horizon any political system or power system other than the one he associates with his gothicized Allies. The gothic setting and the juxtaposition of history and love enable crucial absences. Fascism is absent, and so is the victory over Fascism. There is no neo-realism of course. There is no band of women (and women did join forces during the war), no pluralism of class, no dialectics, and no struggle to answer the question the text begs: how could we ever be safe from the many intrusive dominations any subject must negotiate? Landolfi cuts at will, and perhaps too cruelly.

APPENDIX I:

“A hypothetical mapping” (see discussion on page 8)

Graphic by Linda Breda



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