

Malerba's La scoperta dell'alfabeto

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Résumé de l'article

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MALERBA'S *LA SCOPERTA DELL'ALFABETO*

JOSEPH FRANCESE

“mirando il punto / a cui tutti li tempi son presenti”

Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto 17

Abstract: Luigi Malerba uses his knowledge of peasant society to publish, in 1963, his first book of fiction, *La scoperta dell'alfabeto* (*The Discovery of the Alphabet*).¹ While this collection of brief narratives represents the sharecroppers known by Malerba in his youth, the focus of the text (and of this essay) is the narrating voice. Specifically, his transformation from “il ragazzo” (“the boy”) of the opening tale into “l'uomo” (the man) of the concluding novella. The tales of peasant life that comprise the bulk of the text are non-chronologically ordered elements of a *recherche* that, at the book's end, leaves unelaborated and repressed the narrator's participation in and perpetuation of the long-standing system of class oppression of which he is a beneficiary. Moreover, consideration of the modifications wrought in the definitive 1971 edition, when juxtaposed to the two experimental novels by Malerba published in the interim, *Il serpente* (*The Serpent*, 1966) and *Salto morale* (*What Is This Buzzing? Do You Hear It Too?*, 1968), enables us to chart Malerba's gradual supersession of the neorealism of his mentor, Cesare Zavattini.

Introduction

Luigi Malerba (pen name of Luigi Bonardi, 1927–2008) spent his childhood and adolescence summering in the Appenines outside his hometown, Parma (which he describes in *Parole al vento* as “una città civilissima sempre a mezza strada fra una aristocrazia contadina e una contadineria aristocratica” [“a very civilized city populated by an agricultural aristocracy and an aristocratic peasantry”]; 197). This second family home, “una bella casa [...] situata nella frazione di Selva del

¹ All translations from the Italian are mine.

Bocchetto” (“a beautiful home [...] located in the Bocchetto Woods hamlet”; 197), was in Berceto, a town in the Province of Parma. His family “apparteneva alla solida e tradizionale società terriera” (“belonged to the grounded and traditional landed gentry”; 197). Outside Berceto they owned “un discreto numero di biolche² di terra sia agricola che boschiva” (“a fair amount of land, both cultivated and woodlands”; Malerba, “Autobiography”) and “15–16 capi di bestiame, sui quali vivevamo” (“15–16 head of livestock, on which we lived”; Malerba, *Parole* 190). Their land was worked by sharecroppers, some of whom had worked for the Malerbis going back three or four generations (Malerba, *Parole* 188). These adolescent vacations in the Emilian hills with his family were spent “a stretto contatto con i contadini, con grande interesse per i lavori della terra, gli animali, le piante” (“in close contact with the peasants, and with great interest in the farming of the land, the livestock, the plants”; A. Malerba 70). Malerba was also interested in the lives of the people who populated and worked the fields (A. Malerba 70). In this way he gained raw material for *La scoperta dell’alfabeto* (*The Discovery of the Alphabet*), a collection of short stories set in that same countryside in the 1930s and 1940s.

Most of these tales were conveyed to Malerba by his mother; a few are based on his direct experience (Malerba, *Parole* 187). For example, according to Malerba, “il ragazzino che insegna al vecchio contadino a fare la sua firma, nel primo racconto del mio primo libro *La scoperta dell’alfabeto*, sono io” (“I am the little boy who teaches the old farmhand to sign his name, in the first novella of my first book, *La scoperta dell’alfabeto*”; Malerba, *Parole* 7). In fact, he shares, “gli Ambanelli sono rimasti nostri contadini, nostri mezzadri per molte generazioni [...] e in qualche modo è un libro autobiografico, non è in prima persona ma dietro i racconti c’è sempre una prima persona” (“The Ambanelli family were our peasants, our sharecroppers for many generations...and in a way it is an autobiographical book, not written in the first person, but behind the tales there is always a first person”; Conti 106–07).

However, I must stress, no matter how similar writer and narrating voice may be, I do not intend to read this text using a biographical key: Malerba claims he purposely adopts in *La scoperta* “un atteggiamento di allontanamento” (“an

² A *biolca* is an ancient unit of land measure, still in use in the Emilia region. It is the equivalent of the amount of land a peasant could plow using a pair of oxen. In the Province of Parma it is the equivalent of 3081.43 square meters (*Treccani*, accessed 7 June 2022, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/biolca/>).

estranged posture"; qtd. in Bersani and Braschi 1021). But at the same time, since *La scoperta*—indeed, precisely because it is, to use his phrasing, “an autobiographical book”—references to Malerba’s life, when they shed light on the narratives, will be provided in the text and in the notes.

In what follows I demonstrate that the book is much less about the peasants and much more about the narrating voice and his view of the peasants. I do note, also, the literary implications of the autobiographical aspects of the book (including those that come forth indirectly through the brief narrations of the peasants’ lives),³ especially when they make evident the sources of the voice’s (but also the author’s) “disagio” (“uneasiness” or “discomfort”; Guaglianone 31), which I discuss further down, as they subtend the text. But at the centre of what follows is a demonstration of how the condensation of the voice’s past into the present of narration is the means by which the narrating voice conceals—from his reader and from himself—his participation in the cause of the peasants’ misery, the system of class oppression from which he continues to benefit through the time of writing. In addition, I will compare and contrast the version of *La scoperta* published in 1963 and the definitive 1971 edition so as to begin to chart Malerba’s distancing from the neorealism of his mentor, Cesare Zavattini, towards the development of his own experimental prose, grounded in subjective reality.

Writer/author, character/narrator

Underpinning my analysis of this text are the distinctions drawn by Italo Calvino between levels of narrative reality. The first is that of the empirical “scrittore” (“writer”), the second is “l’autore di un’opera” (“the author of a work”), an invention or projection of an aspect of the personality of the “writer.” The third level is the narrating voice, a projection of the “author”; the fourth is the literary character, who possibly may be a projection of the empirical “writer” (389, 384). In what follows, my focus will be on Calvino’s third and fourth levels, the literary character and homodiegetic voice of the opening and closing tales—the protagonist who tells of himself in the third person—and the narrating voice—the extradiegetic

³ Malerba originally conceived of *La scoperta* as a novel, according to Walter Pedullà, vice-president of the Cooperativa Scrittori in which Malerba was quite active, and, like Malerba, had a second home in Orvieto (Ronchini LXXXIX, LXXXVII). However, Malerba opted for the short form, in Pedullà’s opinion, because “è più facile da insaporire in ogni dettaglio, vitalismo allo stato puro” (“it makes it easier to savor each detail; pure vitality”; 18).

voice who (re)tells “from the outside” the stories of the peasants. The narratives are told out of chronological sequence, and in hindsight. The narrating voice, through the filter of memory, tells of the peasantry and previous incarnations of himself. Only after turning the final page do readers arrive at the point where they and the extradiegetic voice are contemporaneous.

Moreover, the narratives appear in relative isolation from each other and as emblematic (for the narrating voice) of peasant society. They stand out in the voice’s mind and, therefore, are significant precisely because they conditioned and informed his views of the peasantry as he developed from “il ragazzo” (“the boy”) of the opening, eponymous, tale (an adolescent who sought a personal relationship with a *mezzadro* [“sharecropper”]) into the self-interested *padrone* (“landlord”) of the concluding novella, “Verde come il mare” (“Green Like the Sea”).

Indeed, by juxtaposing “La scoperta dell’alfabeto” and “Verde come il mare” we bring into focus the narrating voice’s transformation from boy to man. The narrating voice charts this process approximately five years after the events recounted in the closing novella when he sets pen to paper and, as the “soggetto dell’enunciazione” (“subject of the enunciation”; Heyer-Caput 60), writes of himself, the peasantry, and times past.

As mentioned, Malerba draws on personal experience when writing *La scoperta*, a text in which, in his own words, “i contadini vengono sorpresi nei loro snobismi e nelle loro portentose follie” (“the peasants are caught off guard in their snobbery and prodigious follies”; Malerba, *Parole* 60–61). His intention is to set forth “una immagine concreta e non ovvia di un’area contadina oppressa dagli stereotipi inventati dalla piccola borghesia stracittadina” (“a concrete and behind-the-scenes image of a peasant world oppressed by the stereotypes invented by the provincial petit bourgeoisie of Parma”; Malerba, *Parole* 147). Indeed, it is quite possibly the case that Malerba’s representations adhere more closely to reality than the generalizations of other *pramzàn dal sas* (“*parmigiani del sasso*” or “Parmesans of the stone”), those whose families boast generational roots within the city’s Farnesian walls. As Maria Corti avers, *La scoperta* is a collection of “storie ‘fredde’” (“‘cold’ stories”) that demonstrate a “profonda conoscenza della civiltà contadina italiana” (“deep understanding of Italian peasant civilization”; 5). I contend the “coldness” of the tales is due to the seemingly naturalistic presentation of an ancient agricultural society by a narrator who uses mimesis, first-person dialogue, to create a semblance of objectivity, and who vaunts omniscience. For example, in two instances—“Fuoco e fiamme” (“Fire and Flames”) and “La polmonite” (“Pneumonia”)—he reports the unspoken thoughts of men in the final

throes of death. But his vantage is neither objective (as we shall see presently) nor omniscient. In the two tales in which he figures as a character he sees and reports on the peasantry, but he does not see how the peasants perceive him.

The tales are the narrator's interpretations of workers' narrations and his remembrances of what he observed. He does not investigate beyond appearances; that is, he does not interrogate what motivates the peasants' words and actions. Nor does he consider his role in the class dynamic. Rather, the tales are expressionistic referrals of what he absorbed. So his personal narrative ends, in "Verde come il mare," with the voice somewhat disoriented by events and comparing the green countryside in which he finds himself to the sea. That is, the same expanse of water the peasant Pinai recollects, in "L'acqua del mare," was "così grande che non si vede[va] la fine" ("so vast it went on forever"), and so overwhelming that "non capisci più dov'è il davanti e il didietro" ("you cannot distinguish what is in front of you from what is behind"; 47, 46).⁴

Because the voice eschews any sort of dialectical relationship with the objects of his narrations (as we shall see in my discussion of "Verde come il mare"), we see exposed through him the historical root of a centuries-old class prejudice that was not extirpated by the Second World War. Instead, it succeeded in adapting to the new Republican environment, and in extending itself into the future. As the epigraph below the title of this essay suggests, Malerba's text places readers at the point where all temporal dimensions—the past of the narratives, the present of narration/reader reception, and the future—meet.

Malerba, "the first person behind the tales"

Malerba tells how each of his books "nasce da una indignazione o da un grave disagio" ("is inspired by indignation or serious unease"; Malerba, *Parole* 13), and describes himself as a "scrittore rivoluzionario" ("revolutionary writer"), one who hopes to "precedere i politici nell'individuare i vizi occulti della società nella quale vive" ("precede politicians in identifying the hidden vices of the society in which we live"; Malerba, *Parole* 13). The bulk of the characters of *La scoperta* are peasants living in the country outside Parma (*mezzadri* [heads of peasant households], *coloni* [the *mezzadro* and the members of his family], and small landowners).⁵ All,

⁴ All quotations from *La scoperta dell'alfabeto* are from Malerba, *Romanzi e racconti*.

⁵ The term *mezzadro* signifies "sharecropper;" *coloni* refers both to him, the head of the household, and to all the other members of his family. *Treccani*, accessed 8 July 2022, <https://www.treccani>.

in the local dialect, are *pramzàn arjóz* (“*parmensi ariosi*,” “Airy Parmesans”), whose lives are conditioned by the “vero e proprio sistema sociale” (“a veritable social system”; Passaniti 1) of *mezzadria* (“sharecropping”), defined by “tensioni negoziali sul crinale tra la sicurezza minima e il baratro dell’indigenza a caratterizzare quel modo di vivere” (“the negotiation of tensions situated on the brink of minimal security and the abyss of indigence that define that way of living”; Passaniti 4).

The contracts regulating the lives of the characters of *La scoperta*, as set forth in the *Codice civile* (“Civil Code”) of 1865, gave the landowner the power to use leases and long-standing practices to “dettare legge senza che il mezzadro po[tesse] far molto per ribaltare sul piano giudiziario le conseguenze dello squilibrio contrattuale” (“dictate the terms that deprived the sharecroppers of the possibility of legal recourse”; Passaniti 9–10). These feudalistic *patti agrari* (“agrarian contracts”) were weakened somewhat by Law 756, “Norme in materia di contratti agrari” (“Norms Regulating Agrarian Contracts”), of 15 September 1964, passed a year after the publication of the first edition of *La scoperta dell’alfabeto*.⁶ Thus, we may legitimately assume that the condition of the peasantry in Emilia-Romagna from the 1930s through the publication of the 1963 edition of this work figures in the “disagio” that sparked this early effort, and that Malerba, if he did not precede the deliberations of the Italian Parliament with *La scoperta*, at least kept pace.

Another source of “discomfort” elaborated in *La scoperta* may be the war to liberate Italy of Fascist and Nazi occupiers after the deposition of Mussolini and the Crown’s recondite flight to Bari. Malerba was born in November 1927. So he was not affected by the *Bandi Graziani* (“Graziani Announcements”), a series of obligatory draft calls for all men living in areas of Italy dominated by Mussolini’s puppet *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (“Italian Social Republic”), including heads of households, born between 1916 and 1926 (the first of which was issued 9 November 1943). Deserters and draft evaders faced death by firing squad, a fact implicitly reflected in the dearth of young male characters throughout *La scoperta*, especially those set in the war years: “erano quasi tutti nei partigiani” (“almost all had joined the Resistance”; “Il rospo” 136).

The behaviour of the elder, illiterate male characters who populate the tales, particularly as regards gender roles, is decidedly rear-guard, especially by today’s standards. To historicize and not condone, their comportment was reinforced by

it/vocabolario/ricerca/mezzadro/ and <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ricerca/colono/>.

⁶ The *patti agrari* were abolished only in 1982 by Law 203 of 3 May 1964, “Norme sui contratti agrari” (“Norms on Agrarian Contracts”).

Fascism's "rediscovery" of *mezzadria* in the early 1930s (Passaniti 15–17), one aspect of which allowed only the head of the household, the *mezzadro*, to "sign"—quite often with an "x"—the rental contract. This provision reduced the rest of the family of the *mezzadro*, the *coloni*, to "soggetto contraente" ("contracting party") with the obligation for all to produce (Passaniti 18). This injected "all'interno stesso della famiglia mezzadrile un rapporto gerarchico molto più forte e formalizzato di quello che normalmente esiste" ("within the sharecropper family a much stronger and more formalized hierarchical relationship than that which existed in the rest of society"; Sbriccoli qtd. in Passaniti 2). And this, in turn, strengthened, within the *famiglie coloniche*, a "mentalità psico-contrattuale, in cui obbligazione fa rima con soggezione, come forma familiare e status di cittadinanza" ("a psychological-contractual mentality that combined obligation with subjection within the family and defined the sharecroppers' status as citizens"; Sbriccoli qtd. in Passaniti 3). These conditioning aspects of the peasants' lives go unnoted by the voice.

As for Malerba, he took his *esame di maturità* ("university entrance examinations") in early 1944. Almost immediately after the first Allied bombing of Parma (23 April 1944), Malerba, sixteen years old at the time, evacuated with his family to their country home in Berceto, where they remained until 1946, just in time to "assistere alle manifestazioni dei partigiani che erano scesi dalle montagne per festeggiare la Liberazione" ("witness the celebrations of the Resistance fighters who had come down from the mountains to celebrate the Liberation"; Malerba, "Autobiography"; Ronchini LXXII). In the interim, in June 1944 to be precise, one of Malerba's classmates, Marco Pontirò Battisti, "muore in uno scontro a fuoco con i fascisti: la notizia è accolta con dolore e sconcerto dagli amici e lascerà in loro un trauma profondo" ("died combatting the Fascists: the news causes grief and upsets his classmates, and leaves in them a deep trauma"; Ronchini LXXI).

The head of the family, Malerba's father, was not an "antifascista attivo" ("militant antifascist"). He ignored political authority while submitting to that of the Church: "l'autorità suprema, per la mia famiglia, era la Chiesa" ("for my family the supreme authority was the Church"; Malerba, *Parole* 189). It followed that during the war the family's "atteggiamento di fronte al Fascismo era molto chiaro" ("posture towards Fascism was clearly defined"): they adopted the Church's posture of reserve and impartiality (Malerba, *Parole* 189).⁷ This, Malerba clarifies, "mi

⁷ The Roman Church's foreign policy and its posture on the Shoah is far too complex for this venue. As succinctly as possible, Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli, 1939–58), adopted a more "institutional" perspective than had his predecessor, Pius XI (Ambrogio Ratti, 1922–39), who

è pesato molto” (“weighed heavily on me”; Malerba, *Parole* 189), thus suggesting another possible source of “disagio.”

In line with Pius XII’s call to “soccorrere le popolazioni in difficoltà” (“aid peoples in difficulty”; Riccardi 330), Malerba states, “durante la guerra abbiamo ospitato degli ebrei. Il professor Carmi, l’oculista di Parma, famoso, perseguitato, è venuto ad abitare in casa nostra” (“during the war we took in some Jews. Professor Carmi, a persecuted, famous ophthalmologist from Parma, came and lived in our house”; Malerba, *Parole* 188). The counterpart of this benevolence, in *La scoperta*, is “Dignità” (“Dignity”), a narrative that casts into high relief the subsistence level of the peasants’ existence, which is such that their concern for economic survival stifles any impulse of human solidarity. Equally important, for present purposes, is the voice’s matter-of-fact presentation of the peasants’ ignorance of the historical events enveloping and determining life in the hamlet, Il Calamello, because it induces in the reader both empathy for the plight of the peasantry and aversion for their treatment of Fortunato. The disproportion between the gravity of their situation and the narrator’s use of direct dialogue to represent the rudimentary level of their discussions (in “Dignità” and throughout the volume) has less of the naturalistic or objective about it, and much more of the parodic, thus revealing implicitly the voice’s perception of the peasants at the time of narration.

Superseding neorealism

When the first edition of *La scoperta* appears in 1963, Malerba is still influenced to some degree by neorealism, as theorized and practised by his mentor, Cesare Zavattini, with whom Malerba collaborated on screenplays after moving to Rome

had seen the rise of Nazi-Fascism through a more “moral” and “principled” lens. The Church did not counter, in the 1930s and 1940s, the anti-Jewish sentiment stoked by the Nazis in Catholic countries such as Poland and Italy because it considered the USSR the enemy par excellence of the Church and of “Christian civilization” (Miccoli 202–03). So, a primary objective throughout was protecting the Church in countries under German occupation. After the deposition of Mussolini, Pacelli showed he was quite the “Roman priest” (Moro 238), that is, very preoccupied with protecting the city from Allied bombings and German reprisals. Given the paradox of the German military presence in what was supposed to be an “open city,” the Church, rather than openly denounce Hitler and Germany, maintained a posture that has been described as grounded in a stance of “*non possumus*” (Moro 118): Catholics were left to follow their conscience, and to be charitable, avoid exacerbating conflicts, respect human life, and avoid armed combat and causing social discord (Riccardi 330).

(Ronchini LXXVI).⁸ In the 1960s, Malerba's maturation as a writer is impacted by his association with the *Gruppo '63* ("Group '63"), which he claims gave him "una consapevolezza e una libertà aggiunte, e una notevole disinvoltura letteraria di fronte alle contingenze" ("a new awareness and freedom, and a noteworthy literary calm with regards to contingency"; Malerba, *Parole* 28), that is, the wherewithal to move away from the subject matter (the working classes) and themes of neorealism (topicality), and its objectifying perspective.

Significant in this regard is "I mongoli" ("The Mongols"), which appears in both editions, because it is told in a stream-of-consciousness narrative. Thus, it is a harbinger of Malerba's experimentation with a narrative device Malerba calls exterior monologue, a development of a technique dear to Zavattini, "lo sdoppiamento" ("doubling"), which enabled the latter to "osservare se stesso come un estraneo" ("observe oneself as [an]other"; Malerba, *Introduzione* xiii). Malerba's innovation is a form of first-person narration (wherein the voice speaks aloud, seemingly to address the reader and aiding reader identification with the narrating *I*, while in truth speaking to himself [see Francese 2021]).

"I mongoli" takes place in the spring of 1945. The previous fall, Federico's son Rodolfo had gone foraging for mushrooms and was left traumatized by the sight of a platoon of Mongolian soldiers, allies of the Nazi-Fascists and renowned for their immense physical stature and uncommon ferocity. This causes him to lose his temporal compass: "Ma quando è successo?" ("When did it happen?") he asks, "Quanti anni sono passati?" ("How many years have passed?"; 102). In truth, very little time had passed: Rodolfo recalls how in late 1944 a partisan who had come to his house one day told him the war would be decided the following year (103–04): the partisans ignored the "Alexander Proclamation" and fought through the winter. When the tale opens, a discombobulated Rodolfo knows it is spring, but he cannot recollect the month—"poteva essere tanto aprile che maggio" ("it could have been April or May"; 101)—and has no idea if hostilities have ceased. However, readers know the story could not be set in May 1945 because the

⁸ Malerba moved to Rome in 1950; his paternal uncle, Father Giovanni Bonardi, had arranged for him to work in the Holy Year press office (Ronchini LXXIII–LXXIV; Malerba, "Autobiography").

⁹ On 13 November 1944, the commander of the Allied forces in Italy, British Field Marshall Harold Alexander, imposed a ceasefire on partisans and suspended all Allied military activity until the spring of 1945. The partisans, knowing they would be identified and slaughtered if they returned home, remained in hiding and fought through the winter.

Allies declared victory in the Province of Parma on 25 April 1945 (the same day Milan was liberated), with sporadic fighting ceasing the final day of that month.¹⁰

The 1963 and 1971 editions

Enhanced understanding of Malerba's move away from neorealism is gained by contrasting the two editions of *La scoperta*. The second edition comes forth in 1971, eight years after the first. In the interim Malerba participates in the discussions of the Neo-avant-garde and publishes *Il serpente* (1966; see Francese 2022) and *Salto mortale* (1968). In these two texts he experiments with exterior monologue, an important step forward within a gradual process of maturation as a writer. Malerba will use the exterior monologue in numerous future works to investigate "la realtà soggettiva" ("the subjective reality") of first-person narrating voices who recount "una realtà mentale modellata sui desideri (o sulle ossessioni)" ("a mental reality model on desires [or on obsessions]"; Malerba, *Parole* 31) of individuals much closer to him socially and economically.

Additional differences between the two editions of *La scoperta* also make evident the process by which Malerba elaborated his Zavattinian apprenticeship.

An important change is the deletion from the 1971 edition of "Una pulce al Grand Hôtel" ("A Flea at the Grand Hotel" [Malerba 1963, 173–88]), the concluding story in the 1963 edition. As Paolo Mauri writes, the removal of "Una pulce"—for Mauri "una specie di fuori testo" ("a sort of tacked-on addition"; 186) makes the collection much more cohesive. However, his indication of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* as a "modello lontano" ("distant model") is a bit off the mark. Both books are indeed "collections of novellas linked by a shared environment" (Mauri 186) and are written from the perspective of a man looking at the adolescent he used to be. However, unlike Malerba's narrator, Anderson's George Willard is an integral member of the community on whom he reports. George strives to understand himself and also, equally if not more importantly, the "many people and things" he "was never able to understand before" (Anderson 6).

Furthermore, Malerba adds six new tales in 1971, and rearranges somewhat the order of the old. Doing so makes for a much more feral opening, which in turn conditions our reading of the rest of the volume. "L'anello nella neve" ("The Ring in the Snow") moves from the twelfth slot to the third, immediately after

¹⁰ On 26 April 1945, the Fifth Army entered the city and the partisans took control of all public buildings ("Parma liberata" and Becchini).

"Fuoco e fiamme." In "L'anello nella neve," Dina contemplates separating from her husband, Otello, and tells him she lost her wedding band in the snow. Otello, in his pique, has her remove the snow that has accumulated in their garden (where she claims she lost her ring) with her bare hands (18). In "Fuoco e fiamme," the main character, Petronio, proves his devotion to the object of his unrequited love by amputating the tip of his pinky. When the object of his love dies, he rigs a guillotine and uses it to commit suicide.

The impression of bestiality created by the opening tales of the 1971 edition is strengthened by the addition (in the sixth position) of "L'amore in fondo al pozzo" ("Love at the Bottom of the Well"), which, like "Fuoco e fiamme" is a novella about a violent husband. The main character of "L'amore," Govi, rather than passively watch his disenamoured wife move out of their home, grabs her by the ankles, lifts her into the air, then throws her headfirst into their well, where she drowns. Significantly, Petronio and Govi are two of the very few characters for whom the narrator provides a physical description.¹¹ He does so only when such depictions help propel the plot. Petronio has something of the animalesque about him; he is "Alto, magro, con i denti lunghi come quelli di un cavallo" ("Tall, lean, with long teeth, like those of a horse"; 8). Govi is "un uomo molto piccolo" ("a very small man"; 37), yet endowed with uncommon physical strength, sufficient to murder his wife in the manner just described.

The 1971 version also gives greater resonance to the war (only a muted presence in a few of the 1963 narratives) through the addition of "La bomba" ("The Bomb"). Its main character, Mocellino, wants to better his lot in life by raising a pig, only to have a random bomb, collateral damage as we have come to euphemize it, destroy his pigsty, killing the hog he had raised to maturity (120).

Three other new tales—"Il toro argentino" ("The Argentinean Bull"), "Federico e Napoleone" ("Federico and Napoleon"), and "Le oche volano" ("Geese Fly")—provide new perspectives on Ambanelli and his wife, Angiolina. They come in contrast to "La scoperta" and "Il rospo" ("The Toad") (present in the 1963 edition) whence emanates Federico's gruff affection for his spouse. In "La scoperta" he would share his new-found literacy with her (6), in "Il rospo" he shows concern for her fate, economic and otherwise, after his imminent demise. In the tales that appear for the first time in 1971—"Il toro argentino," "Federico e Napoleone," and "Le oche volano"—he is much more the boorish authoritarian, willing to raise his hands in anger to bend others to his will. In these tales, too, the

¹¹ The others are Mocellino, as we shall see, the exceptionally tall Coriolano, and Fortunato.

voice's seemingly objective representations of the conversations between Federico and Angiolina have a parodic air about them: the dramatic, existential strife that drives the plots have transmogrifying effects on the behaviour of the characters.

In the last addition, "Il museo" ("The Museum"), an elderly Pinai steals from each of his neighbours one article emblematic of peasant society. He would use these articles to preserve its memory for posterity in a museum to be housed under the leaky roof he plans to redo. However, the weight of the items is too much for the aging walls of his house; they give way under a heavy rain and collapse, crushing him.

In 1977, Malerba attempts to preserve the language of the peasantry, coming forth with *Le parole abbandonate* (*Forgotten Words*), a linguistic "museum"—or better, glossary—filled not with artifacts but substantives. For Malerba, knowledge of a dialect—not necessarily as language of affect, but "come lingua dell'inconscio" ("as language of the unconscious")—can offer Italian writers "un registro supplementare" ("an additional stylistic register") that "arricchisce il nostro orizzonte linguistico sia come lessico che come sintassi" ("enriches both our lexicon and our syntax"). However, he admits (obliquely acknowledging the difficulties encountered by neorealist authors), between the working knowledge of a dialect and using it in a narrative text "c'è un abisso" ("there is a deep chasm"; Malerba, *Parole* 67). Indeed, in *La scoperta*, any neorealist ambition of integrating elements of popular speech or syntax into the standard language is limited.¹² The text

¹² I was able to identify in *La scoperta* three lexemes taken from the *parmense*, all easily grasped from the context: Mosconi's "bascola" (57) is a scale for weighing legumes and chickens; Poglietta studs his bull "di sfruso" (80), on the sly, off the books; and "spatagliare" (142), to bustle about. "Casanti" (64), according to Malerba, is used to refer to those who rent houses, without land, in the towns, poor individuals who cannot afford to live in Parma (*Le parole abbandonate* 101). "Umbriaco" (69, 74, 121), for *ubriaco* ("drunk"), is central-southern Italian, hence more widely comprehensible than its Parmesan equivalent *imbriagh*. The *dialettismo* "in capo a" (34, 36, 65, 66, 76, 136), instead of *tra*, is easily grasped. Barozzi's "Vi ho visto da bambino e poi più" (150; [*A vò vist da putén e po a n' vò pu vist*: "I saw you as a child that one time"])—is more difficult to decipher hence rendered in standard Italian. "I ginocchi" and "i diti" (rather than the more proper *le ginocchia* and *le dita* ["knees" and "feet"]) appear not only in *La scoperta*, but throughout Malerba's works where they are used by characters of all stripes and to different effects. I propose that in *La scoperta* they are meant to reflect popular speech. I venture this because in "Il rospo" Federico speaks of "i corni" ("the horns") that he suspects were given to him by an unfaithful wife (132), while the residents of Il Calamello use a malapropism, "ridicoloso" (88) to describe Fortunato's chimney. In addition, the peasants refer to the foundations of their homes not with *fondazione* ("foundation"), as one might expect, but

is written in a language—the standard Italian of the narrator—the characters in “La difesa della lingua” consider exotic—“sembra arabo” (“it sounds like Arabic”; 105) and the property of the educated (105), especially of those in positions of power: the *padroni* (105, 108) and law enforcement (111). Indeed, the text bears out what “[s]ocio-linguists are fond of saying: ‘the difference between a dialect and a national language is that a national language is a dialect with an army’” (Scott et al. 33).

The narrator

The narration of *La scoperta* alternates between direct dialogue and the free, indirect discourse of third-person narration, the latter technique a strategy that allows writers, as Pasolini avers, to speak through the character (1345). That is to say, as we read, to reiterate, we must consider the narrating voice’s situatedness (that is, the reliability of his reporting). The narrator constitutes a filter between characters who are socially and economically unlike him and the reader. Mimesis is distorted in each of the tales by the prism of the narrator’s subjective perspective.

The voice does not explore the motivations behind the peasants’ actions. He does not identify with them; rather, he views them *en touriste*. Their possibilities for self-realization are impeded severely by economic oppression, yet protestations are absent from the narrations until the concluding tale, “Verde come il mare” (penultimate in the 1963 edition), where they are muted. Their abandonment of the countryside after the war surprises the narrator, even though it had been foretold by one of their grandest “portentose follie”: braving the unknown expanses of the sea in the first decades of the century in order to better their lot in life.¹³

The development, in time and as persons, of the *coloni* matter little to the narrator, as shown by the non-chronological ordering of the tales. In fact, we glean from the text that what matters to him is the cumulative effect of the recounted events on his own process of maturation. To this point I juxtapose “La scoperta

as the “zoccoli dei muri” (“hooves of the walls”; 76). Similarly, “tartagliare” (38) replaces the more standard *balbettare* (“to stutter”).

¹³ Here my reading diverges from that of Pedullà, who, in underscoring Malerba’s break with neorealism, contends: “Malerba non manda più i contadini a lottare per la terra contro un padrone, che qui non c’è o è buono. Li mette in grado di parlare e di agire e a loro basta” (“Malerba does not send his peasants to fight with the owner for land. Malerba enables them to speak and to act, and that is enough for them”; 29).

dell'alfabeto," the opening tale (in which he tells of himself as an eleven-year-old boy willing to teach one of his family's sharecroppers—Federico Ambanelli—to sign his name), and "Verde come il mare," in which the voice, "il figlio dei padroni" ("the son of the owners" 150) returns, referring to himself simply as "l'uomo" (150)—par excellence, it would seem—after a lengthy absence to act in the stead of his parents.

To quickly verify the non-chronological ordering of the novellas, we need only look at those in which Pinai appears. In "L'amore in fondo al pozzo" (the sixth tale, as noted above), Pinai tells of the "exotic" farm equipment he recently saw in the 1910s, in America (38–39). These same threshers and balers are common throughout the countryside in the first novella (6) and in the fifth ("Il silenzio" ["Silence"]); both take place in the late 1930s. Pinai is elderly in the seventh tale, "L'acqua del mare" ("The Water of the Sea") and dies in the thirteenth, "Il museo." He reappears in the fourteenth narrative, "I mongoli" (set, like "Il museo," between winter 1944 and spring 1945), and again, as a relatively young man, in the eighteenth tale of the 1971 edition, "Le ruote della civiltà" ("The Wheels of Civilization" 121–22). "Le ruote della civiltà," I propose, takes place in the early 1920s, soon after Federico brought from America not only "I dollari" ("His Dollars" 23–27) but also the loose change he uses to pay the comparatively elderly storyteller Davide (121), the only character in the book old enough to remember a time when the *jus primae noctis* was common practice ("Le ruote della civiltà" 123). Storytellers such as Davide disappear from the countryside after the introduction into the peasants' homes of the radios present in tales that precede "Le ruote della civiltà": "Ferro e fuoco" ("Iron and Fire" 22), "Storia della moria" ("The Story of the Great Death" 73), "I mongoli" ("The Mongolians" 102), "La difesa della lingua" ("Defending Our Language" 105), and "Le oche volano" (113).

The timelessness of the peasants

Malerba's peasants live, following David Ewing Duncan, in a "forever" time that goes back at least to Charlemagne, when a "new political and economic order in Europe," feudalism, a "system that would dominate Europe for centuries," was formalized. Commoners looked to nature for "predictable cycles and cues" (127) and lived "in a continuous cycle of days and years that to them had no discernible past or future" (125). Time circled slowly forward in "a progression of youth and old age, birth and death, and as always the rise and fall of the sun each day" (128) on its way to Armageddon.

The non-chronological order of the narratives reflects the narrator's disregard for "realistic" mimesis of the cyclical time of traditional agricultural society and for the inflection point when the younger generations abandon—*en masse* and without looking back—the "tempo esistenziale" ("existential time") of country dwellers for the "tempo quantificato" ("quantified time") of industrial society (Heyer-Caput 82). The tales come forth, in both editions, as a somewhat randomly ordered cluster of events retrieved and reprocessed years later.

Before the Second World War, the peasants seem to exist outside history. The text gives no indication as to when Dina lost her golden ring ("L'anello nella neve" 18), leaving me to assume this story takes place prior to the "Giornata della Fede" ("The Day of the Wedding Ring"), 18 December 1935, the day on which the National Fascist Party encouraged women nationwide to donate their gold to the Fatherland, to exchange their wedding rings for an iron replacement. If the peasants seem to exist outside time, it is due to their almost complete lack of opportunities (save the occasional significant life event, such as marriages and births) to achieve and accomplish, mileposts we typically use to give depth to our pasts as individuals.

In *La scoperta*, if we attempt to piece together the story of the man "il ragazzo" believes was an "amico del vecchio" ("friend of the old man"; "La scoperta dell'alfabeto" 6)—Federico (because all events are filtered through the voice, we cannot know the extent to which the bonhomie was reciprocated)—we know Ambanelli dies in the spring of 1945 after almost thirty-eight years of marriage ("Il rospo" 132). At this point in time, Federico, according to his son, is in his early seventies ("Il rospo" 128). For this to be accurate, Federico would have been born in the 1870s, and in his thirties when he wed (in 1907) and sired his first child, Rodolfo. This means Rodolfo—since local custom dictated couples have a child within the first few years of marriage ("L'anello nella neve" 19)—was most likely born in 1908 or 1909. In 1944 Rodolfo would be approximately thirty-five years old and exempt from the *Bandi Graziani*, which would explain his draft-exempt status in "I mongoli."

Similarly, in "I mongoli," Pinai says he saw the sea fifty years prior (47, 48). Soon thereafter his tale becomes a bit taller: "più di cinquant'anni" ("more than fifty years") had passed, he claims, since he had last seen it (49). He states he is "ottanta e uno" ("eighty and one") years old but feels like a man of sixty (45). Although the narrator relays without comment Pinai's statements, it is more likely Pinai is sixty years old and looks eighty. If he were indeed eighty-one when

he dies (in “Il museo” his funeral is held with the Resistance in the background), he would have been in his late forties when he fought in the Libyan campaign (September 1911–October 1912; 49), and in his fifties when he was working in the American restaurant where he saw Woodrow Wilson (“L’amore in fondo al pozzo” 37).

I propose Pinai lost track of his age, and, like Federico, is worn out from a life of hard work well-nigh impossible for today’s reader to imagine. According to the voice, the sloping hills facing Il Calamello are “campi quasi tutti dissodati da Federico con le sue braccia, metro a metro, d’inverno, spaccando il ghiaccio per trovare la terra” (“fields almost all of which were first ploughed by Federico, by hand, metre by metre, during the winter, breaking through the ice in order to work the land”; 131). The narrator does not contemplate what Federico thought about breaking up for cultivation (and valorizing) fields he did not own, during the only time of year he was not overburdened with chores, then splitting the yield with *i padroni*.

If we gain perspective on the collection in its entirety, we see the peasants in a liminal area between cyclical (or qualitative) time and linear (quantitative) time. They orient themselves using a belief system that is a syncretistic mix of superstition and the chronologies of the ecclesiastic and the secular calendars. Angiolina recalls her wedding anniversary using both a religious feast and a specific date, “San Luigi, il 21 di giugno” (“the Feast of Saint Louis, 21 June”; “Il rospo” 132). La Santa del Calamello (“The Saint of Il Calamello”) convinces Angiolina and the others that leap years bring misfortune: an earthquake in 1936 and, in 1940, the death of all their chickens (“Dignità” 89); 1944 brings Fortunato’s unsettling presence (“Dignità” 89) and the mysterious disappearance of farm equipment (“Il museo” 95). After the war, Tonino uses a religious feast—Saint Martin’s Day (“Verde come il mare” 151)—to mark the date of Agnetti’s departure, while Barozzi claims to have moved beyond church bells and the position of the sun in the sky to reliance on his wristwatch (if he ever possessed one) to determine the hour of the day (“Verde come il mare” 150).

As for the voice, the *recherche* he traces over the course of the text is indicative of his own loss of a sense of time as progression. Following the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, I propose considering each novella as a time-image of fragmented, non-chronological memory. As we move from one story to the next, we see the lack of sequence casting into relief the disjunction of temporal flux and thought. Thus, we should not read with the expectation of discerning a continuous temporal flow

because each novella is a representation of a qualitative image of thought. Each is one of a series of discontinuous intervals that divide and regroup diegesis in the voice's memory (Rodowick 1997, 15). At the time of writing, the tales return pell-mell to the present of writing, culminating in "Verde come il mare."

"Verde come il mare"

"Verde come il mare" tells of the return of "l'uomo" "in quei posti dopo esserci stato da ragazzo" ("to those places after having spent time there as a boy"). The previous night a group of city dwellers had camped in the house abandoned by Agnetti, and they had left behind a "giornale [...] di ieri" ("yesterday's newspaper") that told of "il discorso di Krusciov" ("Khrushchev's speech"; 151), which I assume is a reference to the secret speech denouncing Stalin, published in the West in late June 1956. The voice's thoughts go to Agnetti's daughter, Teresa, who had moved to Parma while the city was under bombardment (152), that is in 1944 or early 1945. He then enters the house where the sight of empty beer bottles disturbs him. He is loath to touch anything, but without reflecting, grabs a few bottles, puts them in the "secchiaio" ("a rudimentary kitchen sink"), thinking "qualcuno le porterà via" ("someone will discard them"). This causes his mind to return immediately and "inconsiamente a Teresa" ("unconsciously to Teresa"). Had she been there, I infer, it would have fallen to her to tidy up. However, he recollects, once again, that she had moved to the city to work as a maid at least five years prior; he recalls chancing upon her once in a neighbourhood in Parma centre, the Prati Bocchi ("Bocchi Woods"), and she had paused to chat (152).

Here we see clearly his memory has separated from its temporal moorings and collapsed the past into the present. Teresa had lived in town for five years when the narrator met her in Parma, that is, in 1949 or 1950; not in 1956, when he inspected Agnetti's house; nor five or so years later, in the early 1960s, when, I assume, he writes about these episodes from his past.

Through Teresa, I would interject, we can identify yet another source of the voice's "disagio": the economic oppression that makes possible his standard of living. Teresa had left during the war, and had found more positives than negatives in her new home. As she told the voice, her husband has steady employment and, as for her: "mi trovo bene in città, il cine a due passi da casa, vado al cine quasi tutte le sere" ("I am doing well here, there is a cinema close to my home, I go there almost every evening"; 152). Tonino blames the flight of the peasants on television

(151),¹⁴ not on their real living conditions. But it is highly unlikely a sharecropper in the years after the war would have had the means to purchase his own TV set. Indeed, prior to moving to Parma, Agnetti had never had the opportunity even to watch, a fact subtly parodied by the narrator: when Agnetti went to the cinema “quelle teste tagliate” (“those chopped off heads”) seen on the screen upset him (153).

Pride of ownership

The discomfort felt by “l'uomo” in viewing the state of neglect of his holdings is not inconsistent with a “paternalismo di sapore cattolico del padronato” (“paternalism tinged with Roman Catholicism of the owner class”) present in central Italy, that allowed the *mezzadri* “una relativa tranquillità e margini di sopravvivenza” (a relative tranquility lived on the brink of survival”) (Prosperi 163).¹⁵ The narration alludes to enhancements at Ambanelli's farm, Il Perlaro, that were unusual for the area, such as a wooden floor (“Il silenzio” 35) and a large hay silo with a brick floor (“Il silenzio” 29). Agnetti's home, Casa Palanca, boasts a slate roof (“Verde come il mare” 151) that provides occupants better thermic insulation than tile. The same

¹⁴ According to Malerba, “Autobiography,” after the war the countryside was in crisis because “i contadini avevano cominciato l'esodo verso la città dove speravano di trovare un palcoscenico come quello proposto dalla TV pieno di luci, canzoni e ballerine con le gambe nude” (“the peasants had begun their exodus to the city, where they hoped to find a stage, like the one seen on TV, filled with lights, singing and bare-legged dancers”). The reality, he adds, “era ben diversa: molta disoccupazione e miseri alloggi nelle periferie assai più squallide delle rustiche case della campagna” (“was quite different: high unemployment and miserable lodgings on the city's outskirts, even worse than their old rustic country homes”).

¹⁵ In *Parole*, Malerba remembers that his father's spiritual legacy included a “rapporto con la terra, con le cose che possedevamo” (“a relationship with the land, with our possessions”; 188). Malerba also recalls, with approbation, his father's paternalism: “C'erano i mezzadri, allora; e alcune famiglie lavoravano per i Malerba da tre-quattro generazioni, perché si erano stabiliti rapporti civili” (“Back then several families of sharecroppers had worked for our family for three or four generations, because we established and maintained civil relations with them”; 188). Despite this rapporto, the peasants would keep more than their contractual share, and “quando i contadini rubavano, mio padre diceva: ‘Bisogna lasciarli rubare un po', perché sono così contenti di fregare il padrone che dopo lavorano di più’” (“when the peasants stole, my father would say, ‘you have to let them steal a little, because they are so happy when they steal from the owner they work harder’”; 188).

can be said of the walls, which had to be constructed to bear the slate's greater weight. In other words, Casa Palanca was much more solidly built than a typical *casa colonica*, such as the home bought by Pinai with what he had earned working in America ("L'acqua del mare" 45).

This explains the narrator's displeasure while ascertaining the peasants' abandonment of his family's properties. He returns at the point in time when, after centuries of neglect, investments in infrastructure—such as the new lane of freshly crushed gravel leading to Casa Palanca ("Verde come il mare" 151) and the public road leading down to Pietramagolana "nuova, con la terra fresca sui lati, ancora con i segni della ruspa" ("new, with fresh dirt and the tracks of the bulldozer still on its sides"; "Verde come il mare" 151)—finally begin to counter the area's severe underdevelopment. Failure to contain the hydrological instability of the farmlands had permitted the landslides colouring (thus, its nickname) "Rio Merdoso" ("Shitty River"; "Il rospo" 131) to repeat themselves unchecked. At the same time, the lack of a dependable supply of water—desperately sought by the geese of "Le oche volano" and necessary for the personal hygiene of the residents of the area ("bastava appena a tener[li] in vita" ["barely enough to keep them alive"; "Le oche volano" 113])—was, as Prosperi points out, a cause of the spread of tuberculosis in the Italian countryside (78).

The narrating voice in "Verde come il mare" betrays a certain disdain for the locales to which he returns—"tutto così desolato e le case così piccole e misere" ("all so desolate with small, miserable houses"; 150). However, his scorn is directed not at the owners but at their former occupants. When he observed them as a "ragazzino" ("little boy") the farmers were larger-than-life, seemingly immortal characters (153–54); but, when recollected by "l'uomo," they were mere mortals, like everyone else. Indeed, they had grown old "senza accorgersene" ("without noticing"; 152), and then they died (154).

In sum, he is compelled to rationalize his own well-being: "A Pietramagolana il pane si faceva con la farina mischiata a crusca, che si otteneva usando dei setacci con le maglie molto larghe. Ne veniva fuori un pane ruvido e scuro come quello che i cittadini chiamano 'integrale' e pagano più caro dell'altro" ("In Pietramagolana the bread was made with a mix of flour and bran, obtained by using wide-meshed sifters. The result was a coarse and dark bread like the one bread city-dwellers call 'whole wheat' and pay more for than for white bread"; 56).

Bread

On numerous occasions, Malerba underscores the importance of agriculture in creating the wealth of his home province. In *Città e dintorni* (*Cities and Surrounding Areas*), he tells of how, going back to the Middle Ages, the area's peasants were "protagonisti di questa civiltà Agricola perché su di loro si fondava l'autonomia economica e quindi la Potenza della città" ("the protagonists of this Agricultural civilization because on them the economic independence and, therefore, the Power of the city was founded"; 68–69). Their contribution, he reports, is celebrated in a series of statues dedicated to each month of the year by Benedetto Antelami, who, in 1166, built and decorated the Baptistry of Parma. The statue dedicated to June shows a peasant tightly holding a scythe in one hand, and stalks of wheat in the other. The month's proverb, "Giugno dona caldo e sete, al contadino che miete" ("June gives heat and thirst to the peasant who reaps"; 70), reflects the fact that, as Prosperi avers, *il pane bianco* was almost completely absent from the diet of peasants who, indeed, grew grain but lived on polenta and "pan vecciato," bread made from a mix of flour and vetch (60–61). Elsewhere, Malerba acknowledges that *il pane bianco* was a "myth" among peasants who, before the Second World War, cultivated the Mentana strain of wheat used to produce the "bianchissimo" ("extremely white") bread destined exclusively for the table of the *padroni*. During the war the farmers ate "del pane nero o giallo per la farina di granturco o qualche po' di segatura" ("bread that was black or yellow, made from ground corn and some sawdust"; Malerba, Prefazione vii). Even after the war flour continued to be a luxury only the few could afford (De Renzi qtd. in Prosperi 78).

For present purposes, in *La scoperta dell'alfabeto*, who eats which quality of bread is important because Agnetti uses this staple to draw a clear line of distinction between the farmworkers and city-dwellers: in his parlance, "i mangiapane" ("bread-eaters"; "Verde come il mare" 153). As the voice—making Agnetti's phrasing his own—recalls, "vivevano all'ombra quando lui stava a arrostiti sotto il sole" ("lived in the shade while he roasted under the sun"). Indeed, the narrator muses, referring to the city-dwellers who had spent the night in Agnetti's house, "i mangiapane erano entrati in casa sua senza bussare alla porta" ("the bread-eaters had entered his home with bothering to knock"; "Verde come il mare" 153), repressing the fact that Agnetti would have numbered among "i mangiapane" not only the tourists but preeminently "il figlio dei padroni" ("Verde come il mare" 150) who also, unbeknown to Agnetti, had entered his former abode.

Names

As stated, what interests the voice is the impression the recounted events made on him. So, peasants who are not central to the unfolding of events (for example, Petronio's parents in "Fuoco e fiamme") are not identified by name. Poglietta's wife plays a significant role in "La polmonite," but we know her only as "la vecchia" ("the old lady"). The same can be said of "la figlia di Coriolano" ("Coriolano's daughter"; "Storia della moria" 70, and "La difesa della lingua" 112). Similarly, in "Il toro argentino," Federico's father is too old to work, so is called simply "il vecchio" ("the old man"; 77, 80). Also unnamed in "Il toro argentino" are two "bambini" (77): a "bambina" (78, 79) and a "bambino" (78, 79) (who might well be Federico's younger son, Oreste, as we shall see).

Nonetheless, the names of the characters are significant.

To begin, we learn in "Il rospo" that Federico Ambanelli's son, Rodolfo, farms "I Campacci" (130), "i peggiori campi della vallata" ("the worst fields in the valley"; 54). Since we have already read in "Il letto caldo" that Agnetti also has a son named Rodolfo who married and moved there to work the same fields (53), we are confronted with the unlikely coincidence that two men, both named Rodolfo, farm them. Previously "I Campacci" were without a tenant because "c'era una vena d'argilla e ogni anno, quando arrivavano le piogge d'autunno o di primavera, i campi cominciavano a franare. Anche la casa e la stalla bisognava puntellarle da tutte le parti perché era come se volessero scappare via" ("a vein of clay ran through them, and every year the autumn or the spring rains caused landslides. Even the house and the barn needed propping up on all sides because they looked ready to run away"; 54).

The slim odds favouring such a coincidence shrink to none when, in "Verde come il mare," readers learn that after Federico's demise his son Rodolfo moved to Argentina and "I Campacci," left unoccupied, were reduced to "una frana da cima a fondo" ("a landslide from top to bottom"; 151).

This leads me to think that the voice in "Verde come il mare" confuses one *mezzadro* with another. Support for my hypothesis comes when the voice mentions that "il figlio di Agnetti" ("Agnetti's son") was called Stelio (152). The lapsus is striking also because Fascism's "riscoperta" ("rediscovery"; 15) of *mezzadria*, which I discuss above (Passaniti 15–17), obligated the sharecropper to "comunicare ogni variazione del nucleo familiare" ("make known each change in the nuclear family"), giving the *padrone* dominion over matrimonies (Passaniti

18). In other words, the *padroni* would have known precisely who married whom and occupied this property.

Equally (if not more) important, there is a narrated I, but no narrating I. In other words, there is no one who says “I am writing about myself, about the person I was and the person I became.” In “Verde come il mare,” the narrator refers to himself indirectly in the third person, as “il ragazzo” and as “l’uomo.” By leaving himself nameless, and speaking of himself as Other, he purposely distances himself from who he is.

Names, as Christian Moraru writes, are more than metonymies: they do not just “stand for” what they name (50). “Il figlio del padrone,” following Pierre Bourdieu, is a person to whom biology has given a social identity (121). As Prosperi reminds us, “in quelle campagne il padrone era e doveva essere chiamato proprio così—‘signor padrone’—dal riverente contadino col cappello in mano” (“in the countryside the *padrone* was the *padrone* and had to be addressed in precisely this manner—‘Mr. Padrone’—by the reverent peasant, with his hat in hand”; 61). Indeed, Prosperi writes, the economic and social distance separating the owner from the peasant was insurmountable and maintained rigidly in place (58).

For this reason, the namelessness of “l’uomo” brings to mind a character in Alessandro Manzoni’s masterpiece, the man who “era arbitro, padrone negli affari altrui [...] temuto da tutti” (“arbitrator and master of the affairs of all [...] feared by everyone”; 372) to such an extent that the voice of *I promessi sposi* has no choice but to call him “l’innominato” (“the unnamed”; 375).

“Il figlio dei padroni” struggles with his self-image in “Verde come il mare,” the concluding tale, because the real properties that help define him have been abandoned. Nonetheless, his status continues to impose on him both a right and an obligation: “what he is and how he should conduct himself.” To borrow Bourdieu’s phrasing, “the indicative”—the appellation “il figlio del padrone”—“is an imperative” (119–20). Over time, “il ragazzo” of the first tale, “La scoperta dell’alfabeto” (5), is “inherited by the heritage [...] invested in the things and appropriated by the things” (Bourdieu 122), which he himself is destined to appropriate. He returns as “l’uomo” in the concluding tale and would live “in conformity with his social essence”: he would be what he already was (Bourdieu 121–22). But complicating matters for the narrating voice in “Verde come il mare” (and challenging his self-image and disorienting him) are the tourists who abuse the abandoned properties, and especially the peasant Barozzi’s delinquent occupation (he does not work the land) of Casa Palanca. The tourists are out of

reach, so the voice's only redress is to snub the former baker ("Storia della moria" 64) by refusing Barozzi's offer of hospitality, as we shall see.

As for the peasants, to borrow Prosperi's phrasing, they do not enjoy "l'onore di un nome proprio" ("the honour of a proper name"; "Dignità" 89) even though, Malerba claims, the assumption of family surnames—among the affluent classes, I would add—has its roots in the Middle Ages (*Città e dintorni* 58). Many of the characters of *La scoperta* are known by an idiosyncratic name further specified by a toponym derived from their hamlet of residence: for example, "Poglietta del Calamello" (79, 109, 112).

The identity of many of the peasants, even those with uncommon names, are further specified by toponymical surnames. The only exceptions are Federico and Angiolina. Federico Ambanelli is the only character with both a name and a surname, consistent with what appears on his lease. In addition, Federico, it would seem, is the only peasant with whom "il ragazzo" had something of an interactive relationship. This social distance helps explain the narrator's blurring together Ambanelli's son Rodolfo and Agnetti's son Stelio (I explore further the significance of Stelio's name below). Outsiders, such as the priest and the physicians are referenced only by their professional titles. The only person known by both his job and name works for "l'uomo": "Tonino [...] il fattore ("Tonino [...] the overseer"; "Verde come il mare" 153).

In any case, Federico and Angiolina have a second son, Oreste, a central character in "Il silenzio." Oreste is evoked in "Le oche volano", but he does not figure in any of the tales with Rodolfo, accentuating the near isolation of each tale from the other Deleuzian "time-images." "Il silenzio" culminates during the war. Oreste would have been an adolescent when he lost part of his leg, sometime in the 1930s (the only marker of time in this narrative is Angiolina who braves the bombing of Parma to buy her fully grown son a prosthetic device). Thus, I assume Oreste was born after Federico's deportation from America (which, given the closure of sea lanes during the First World War, likely occurred in 1919 or the early 1920s), and so he is at least a decade younger than Rodolfo, hence subject to the *Bandi Graziani*, unlike his elder brother. This is why Angiolina is grateful for Oreste's handicap; as the voice reports, it forced him to remain at home while others his age were off fighting in the war ("Il silenzio" 31).

According to Scott et al., the surnames Westerners take for granted "are modern inventions." Surnames that stretch down to the lowest economic strata are "a relatively recent phenomenon intricately linked to the aggrandizement of state control." They are necessary for "the imposition of credible private property

systems” and for administrative functions such as tax collection and conscription. By contrast, in “the small, vernacular communities [...] local residents know the names they need to know [...] They are rarely in doubt about who is who” (6, 7, 11, 8). Local appellations—such as a given name and place of residence are “appropriate to a particular sphere of social relations” (13–14). Moreover, they reflect the “embrace of friendship, the mutual recognition and commemoration through names (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 15). “L’uomo” does not participate in peasants’ fellowship.

Ambanelli’s surname appears only in the tales in which the voice appears as heir or landlord, hence the voice’s confusion over the paternity of Rodolfo (and Federico’s unique endowment of both name and surname). In the eponymous tale, Ambanelli wants to learn to sign his name because the signature signifies power. For the literate classes, as Derrida indicates, the signature makes of signers a presence when and where they are not (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 15). Among the illiterate, Prosperi contends, the symbolic value of the ability to write was extremely high (14). Writing had for them a practical value, too, because the *padrone* used the peasants’ illiteracy to keep under his exclusive control the accounts stored under lock and key in his writing desk (61).

Writing

For Ambanelli, writing is also an assertion of his individuality and his humanity. However, the illusion that learning to write would give him dignity is shattered by workers at the Consorzio Agrario (Farmers’ Consortium), who, to protect the illusion of superiority conferred by Fascism on them as members of the lower-middle-classes, deride his initial, not-completely-successful effort at signing his name. They give him a derogatory nickname, “Amban,” the voice, by reporting it, helps perpetuate (Malerba, “La scoperta dell’alfabeto” 6).

For that matter, the voice also disseminates, while assigning to unspecified others, the pejorative stereotypes imposed on the residents of Pietramagolana, “cattivissimi” (“extremely unpleasant”) he reports, according to those who lived in nearby hamlets (“Storia della moria” 56). Moreover, the voice of “Storia della moria” tells of how “I forestieri” (“outsiders”) say the inhabitants of Pietramagolana spend so much time with their chickens that they have come to physically resemble them (60).

Much more tragic than Ambanelli’s attempt at self-improvement is Armisdo’s go at self-realization through language. In the story “La difesa della lingua,” the

title does not make clear if the peasants are defending their language (the dialect) from extinction, or if the *carabinieri* are defending theirs (standard Italian) from peasant encroachment. What is certain is Armisdo learned to read in prison, and, after his release, decides to speak only Italian, not the local vernacular. Doing so causes resentment among and estrangement from his family and community. The others resist his desire to speak like “un professore” (“a professor”; 105) and like “*i padroni*” who, when they came to conduct business, “parlavano più che altro in dialetto” (“spoke dialect for the most part”; 105). So the others give him the ironic moniker “l’italiano” (“the Italian”; 107). Ultimately, his endeavour leads him to madness (112).

Before returning to my discussion of names, I would point out how Mocellino also demonstrates a similar pretense (the “snobismo” mentioned above). In the story “Il letto caldo,” Mocellino inherited a house and small parcel of land from his grandfather, who, according to Mocellino, was a lover of the Empress Maria Luigia of Parma and custodian of the property that *nonno* expropriated, I assume, when she abandoned Parma consequent to the French Revolution of July 1830. Mocellino claims he is a descendant of Maria Luigia (50). This claim cannot be documented, but according to the voice there is a physical resemblance: Mocellino’s “faccia lunga” and his “naso aquilino” (“long face and hooked nose”; 50) recall portraits of the young noblewoman. So Mocellino would have his only daughter marry “uno dello stesso livello” (“someone of equal standing”; 53). Instead, she finds herself pregnant, and must marry her lover—a peasant named Rodolfo, as we have seen—and follow him to I Campacci (54).

One could make the case that the narrating voice considers equally pretentious Agnetti who, unlike Federico, refused to die as he had lived. Agnetti occupied Casa Palanca for forty years later before leaving to join his daughter in Parma. As for the voice, he cannot help but note with a touch of derision, Agnetti “non era riuscito a diventare uno di città” (“never made the transition to city-dweller”; “Verde come il mare” 153).

Nicknames

When we name infants, Bodenhorn and vom Bruck aver, we “insert” them in “a social matrix,” “entang[ling]” them “in the life histories of others” (4). For Susan Benson, “our names [...] represent and define our selfhood in the social world” (179). As William Murphy writes, “Given names, surnames, nicknames, and assumed names have numerous important significances in the development

of individuals, and often give clues to their attitudes toward themselves and others with whom they have been closely associated” (105). Names are also a form of recognition of personhood” (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 27). And since naming, as we have seen, is “a quintessentially social act” and “a critical element in processes of social incorporation and the constitution of personhood,” names “belong as much, if not more, to the givers of the names as to those that bear them” (Benson 180).

Agnetti’s son is a significant case in point. We learn in the concluding tale, “Verde come il mare,” that Agnetti “lo aveva battezzato Erminio, ma poi si era pentito di questo nome e aveva cominciato a chiamarlo Stelio” (“had baptized him Erminio, but later regretted giving him this name and began calling him Stelio”; 152). The stem *Stel*—which entered Latin via Greek (στυλ- or *styl*-, which translates as “post” or “pillar”)—connotes moral support, rectitude, resoluteness.¹⁶ What motivated Agnetti to call his son Stelio matters, but less than the fact that his son seems to have embraced this name.

First names, Murphy argues, are often “syntonic with the ideal ego” (101) and “become “highly cathected during the preœdipal period” (105). In “I mongoli,” “il figlio di Agnetti” risks capture and comes home “vestito da partigiano” (“dressed as a partisan”) to inspire the others to rebel. He encourages them to move, after the war, to the city and join with workers who would soon wrest control of the means of production from the owners (103). This could very well be why his sister Teresa does not wait for hostilities to cease before leaving home.

Stelio dies in combat at the hands of the Nazi-Fascists in February 1945 (“Il rospo” 127). Through him (or, better, through a series of lapsus), the narrating voice belies another of his “disagi.” The voice—who offers up no war stories of his own—mistakenly has Stelio live on as Mocellino’s son-in-law “Rodolfo” in “Il

¹⁶ *Stelo* in Italian denotes the stem of herbaceous plants, and, by extension, any long, thin object (Treccani, accessed 4 June 2022, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/stelo>). Olivieri attributes the graphic variant—*stylos*—of its Latin root (*stīlus*) to an arbitrary association with the Greek *stylos* “pillar” (666) which, when used metaphorically, denotes moral support; for example, male children are the *styloi* of the house. The Italian *stèle*, an oblong sheet of marble or stone (Treccani, accessed 4 June 2022, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/stele>), derives from the Greek *stèle*, or “column” (Olivieri 664). I take this opportunity to thank my former colleague at Michigan State University, William Blake Tyrrell, for his help with this etymon. I thank also Federico Merli, for clarifying aspects of the Legge 1964, and Giuseppe Mezzadri, coordinator of the Consulta per il Dialecto Parmigiano.

letto caldo,” and fails twice to mention the partisan by name in “I mongoli and in “Il rospo,” where he is known only as “il figlio di Agnetti.”

Murphy argues that it is possible for a subject to use an unliked name to justify poor behaviour (97). In “Storia della moria,” readers do not know if Mosconi (“Horseflies”; 57) is the surname or merely the nickname of an unscrupulous merchant. We do know that Napoleone (Napoleon) is the given name of a second merchant, even though all the locals “credevano che lo chiamassero così per la sua furbizia” (“thought he was called Napoleon because of his underhandedness”; “Federico e Napoleone” 92), but *nomen est omen*: it was given to him at baptism (“Federico e Napoleone” 92). By contrast, as we learn in “Verde come il mare,” one of the peasants, Poglietta, was also baptized Napoleone, “come quel mercante di vacche imbroglione di Fornovo” (“like that swindling cowtrader from Fornovo”; 148). However, “Poglietta, mi hanno sempre chiamato così” (“everyone has always known me simply as Poglietta”; 148).

According to Benson, nicknames confirm and reinforce identity; they help shape the behaviour of its bearer (186). Evaluative nicknames—nicknames whose original assignation was based on a personal quality or life event (Phillips 284) or that select, encapsulate, and amplify an incident (Skipper 28)—facilitate the acting out of identifications (Murphy 93). That is, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, La Santa del Calamello is considered widely a seer (“Fuoco e fiamme” 14). She also serves the community as a midwife, by preparing “decotti e impiastri per tutte le infiammazioni” (“tisane and bandages for all sorts of inflammations”; “Il rospo” 128), and many rely on her as a confidante (“La difesa della lingua” 107). The conformist, self-righteous Zerbino (“Doormat”) did not acquire his property with the sweat of his brow. Unlike those—Pinai, for example—who emigrated and brought home sufficient capital to become small property owners (“L’acqua del mare” 45), Zerbino, we learn in “Buongiorno e buonasera” (“Good Day and Good Evening”), established himself economically as a hustler in Parma.

Xenia

To conclude, in the closing novella, “Verde come il mare,” Barozzi di Pagazzano (“Barozzi from Pagazzano”; 150) now occupies a property owned by the family of the narrating voice. “L’uomo” arrives with Tonino, who pushes open the door, pokes his head inside, orders Barozzi out, then quickly puts the elderly man on the defensive with a seemingly innocent question, “Come vi trovate qua, bene o

male?" ("How are you getting on here, well or poorly?"; 150). Barozzi grasps the subtext, and he responds with allusions to his advanced age, physical inability to farm, lost eyeglasses, and a prediction of a poor harvest. He would minimize this airing of his woes—he laughs and says he was joking—but Tonino reproaches him for living in the house while leaving the land fallow. Barozzi reminds the *fattore* that his eyesight is poor, but only to be rebuked again: Tonino asks Barozzi if he has gone looking for his misplaced eyeglasses. Barozzi says he indeed had gone searching and lost his wristwatch in the process (150–51).

Realizing the weight of his remarks within this power dynamic, Barozzi abruptly brings the subject of conversation to a more agreeable topic: the slaughter of the snakes that had invaded his village. The elderly man takes credit for suggesting the utilization of chickens brought in from Pietramagolana, a boast the narrator pre-emptively undermined in "Storia della moria," his textualization of an event he witnessed first-hand (66).

Other topics—for example, the bomb that destroyed Barozzi's home in Pagazzano ("La bomba" 119), necessitating his relocation, at approximately the same time his only son was killed in the war ("Il silenzio" 30–31)—are not broached.

The encounter then comes to a swift end with an exchange laden with symbolism. On behalf of "l'uomo"—who clearly knows the rural environment (he readily distinguishes between nascent wheat and grass; "Verde come il mare" 150)—Tonino refuses Barozzi's offer of a glass of wine and bids goodbye ("Verde come il mare" 151). Tonino, by not accepting, on behalf of our *innominato* (who need not speak to Barozzi), effectively spurns an offer of a shared humanity, the reciprocity symbolized by a glass of wine.

Motivating Barozzi's behaviour is *xenia*, a custom, as Franco Masciandaro writes, at "the foundation of the Western tradition, which coincides with Greece and the Bible," and, I would add, Ancient Rome. Following Èmile Benveniste, Masciandaro tells of how "Homer's notion of 'friend' (*philos*)" is intimately connected "to the notion of 'stranger,' who is entitled to the rights of hospitality and is thus welcomed as both stranger and friend" (Masciandaro XXVII–XVIII). According to Benveniste, in the Greek world, the word *philos* denotes a commitment "to a reciprocity of services which constitute 'hospitality'" (278). In Latin, also, the "primitive notion" conveyed by the term "guest" ("*hostis* and *hospes*") "is that of equality by compensation: a *hostis* is one who repays my gift by a counter-gift" (Benveniste 76). *Xenia*, thus, is encoded in the Italian language,

where “ospite” denotes, more commonly, “the guest,” *la persona ospitata*. But it also signifies “the host,” *la persona che ospita*.¹⁷

In “Verde come il mare,” the two men take their leave, and we see the extent to which the voice’s memory has detached from its temporal moorings. An abashed Barozzi continues speaking—“Sono rimasto solo [...] non so mai con chi parlare” (“I am all alone [...] I have no one to talk to”)—“mentre i due già si erano voltati per andarsene” (“while the two men had already turned away to leave”; 151). In other words, a preconscious memory—Barozzi hoping to end the conversation with an appeal to compassion (“mentre”; “while”)—intrudes on the narrator’s conscious memory of an abrupt truncation (“già si erano voltati”; “they had already turned away”; 151). When Barozzi speaks, the voice and Tonino had already begun to walk away from Barozzi, and had begun discussing the weather and its effects on crops.

The narration makes manifest the voice’s “disagio”: he recalls looking at Barozzi (“L’uomo lo guardò”; “the man looked at him”), but he does not remember turning back to do so. He remembers waving goodbye, a second time (“lo salutò ancora”; “he waved again”), and granting an uncomfortable smile (“fece un sorriso imbarazzato”; “made an uncomfortable smile”; 151). L’uomo and Tonino then proceed to Casa Palanca, where Agnetti had lived and where the narrator rationalizes the mass exodus from the countryside, as we have seen. There his story ends with him looking down at Ambanelli’s empty home, surrounded by “campi abbandonati coperti dall’erba tenera di primavera, verde come il mare” (“abandoned fields covered by the tender grass of spring, as green as the sea”; 154), a vista quite similar to the foreboding expanse of water whose atemporal “forever” had left “his” emigrating peasants disoriented, unable to tell what was in front of them, and what was behind.

Telling of himself in the third person, thereby erasing himself from his text, enables the voice to conceal (from the reader) and repress how he had lived his adolescence and early adulthood. This attitude of detachment, a defence mechanism, is of a piece with his treating Barozzi merely as a means for satisfying the voice’s own requirements—the narrator’s habit of taking (collecting rents in kind) rather than giving (investing)—and not as a person possessing inherent value. Since the voice has no desire to establish any sort of human bond with a squatter, he obtains what satisfaction he can from rebuffing the elderly man (see Fairbairn 26–27). The refusal of hospitality, of *xenia*, renews and reinforces the economic

¹⁷ Treccani, accessed 27 December 2021, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ospite/>.

and social chasm separating the peasantry and “il figlio dei padroni,” casting into high relief the “historical root” of class divisions mentioned above and its extension into the future.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Dedicato alla memoria di mio suocero, Luciano Crocco, “contadino irriverente” che non si levò mai il cappello.

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