

“Fragments of (urban) space and (human) time: Gadda, Baudelaire and Benjamin”

Almost the entire *oeuvre* of Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973)¹ can be said to be dominated by fragmentariness. All the volumes published by him until the Garzanti edition of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957; Gadda was then 64), that is: *La Madonna dei Filosofi* (1931), *Il castello di Udine* (1934), *Le meraviglie d'Italia* (1939), *Gli anni* (1943), *L'Adalgisa* (1943-1944) and *Novelle dal Ducato in fiamme* (1953) (plus *Il primo libro delle Favole*, which – as a compilation of fables and aphorisms - is different in nature, but still inherently fragmentary) present themselves to the reader as collections of more or less disparate texts of different length (including some very short and obviously incomplete ones), often already previously published in literary journals or other periodicals. These texts are frequently coming from different narrative “building sites”, or other horizons of writing (also non-fictional, for instance journalistic), internally connected by what Dante Isella (in his *Presentazione* of the Garzanti edition) accurately described as a “sistema a vasi comunicanti” (communicating vessels system), making it possible for the same passages or groups of texts to resurface, over the years, in different editorial contexts. Another useful metaphor (this time from the botanical realm) for looking at the deep shape of the whole of Gadda’s production in those years is perhaps that of the *rhizome* (a horizontal structure of underground roots and shoots), especially as exploited in a philosophical and literary perspective by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (in *Milles plateaux*, Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

There are good reason to say that fragmentariness continues in Gadda even after the more chaotic period of his production (from the ‘20s to the ‘40s), remaining a feature of his major novels (*La cognizione del dolore* and *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*), which some critics consider good examples (in more than one way, that is, both structurally

¹ The complete works of Gadda are available in the magnificent edition in five volumes supervised by Dante Isella, Garzanti, 1991-93.

and stylistically) of the “unfinished”. For this reason I started by saying that almost the whole of this writer’s work could legitimately be seen as fragmentary.²

We must now turn to the reasons for this state of fragmentariness. Two antithetical ones, the first negative and the second positive, can be (and have been) advanced:

- 1) In a negative mode, it could be said that Gadda, quite simply, is the kind of writer who finds it very difficult to finish what he starts; this “inability to complete”, of course, could then be linked to either personal, psychological and in any case autobiographical issues, or be connected to a broader (cultural and social) state of malaise, making it hard for the artist (and not just Gadda) to find the right circumstances and setting, conducive to full realization of any programmatic intentions.
- 2) In a more positive perspective, one might refer to some of the poetics enjoying currency at the time, and likely to lend theoretical support to a practice of fragmentary writing: we can think of the “poetica del frammento”, or the practice of “prosa d’arte”, variously associated with influential periodicals such as *La Voce*, *La Ronda*, *Solaria*, etc. Along this line, some critics have felt authorized to go as far as speaking, for Gadda (and other European writers, such as – but from a completely different background, of course – Samuel Beckett and Ferdinand Céline) of an anticipated, precursory form of postmodernism.³

There is merit in both of these lines of thoughts; ultimately, a writer is always affected (but rarely fully determined) by personal history and the environment. So, in the case of Gadda, it is perfectly legitimate to look both at biographical data and contemporary movements, trying to link them with his work; but it is almost invariably a fatal mistake to make too strong a connection between writing and “determining factors”. Likewise, taking the long-term perspective to look at possible connections with and influences on later trends is fine, but the risk of anachronistic (con)fusion and forced assimilation must be avoided.

So, whilst the hypotheses mentioned above deserve to be taken into account, I don’t think they provide a sufficient explanation for the peculiar fragmentariness of Gadda’s production. In order to add some significant points to the analysis, I propose to take a very

² There are exceptions: *Eros e Priapo* and *I Luigi di Francia*, for instance, as well as some other shorter works, can be regarded as complete and non-fragmentary.

³ See, for instance, Norma Bouchard, *Céline, Gadda, Beckett: Experimental Writings of the 1930s*, University Press of Florida, 2000.

brief look at the origins of Gadda's writing, and precisely at the years when, whilst reluctantly engaging in a career as an engineer, he was hesitating in the pursuit of his innermost aspirations between literature and philosophy.

Apart from some aborted narrative attempts, the most significant piece of writing undertaken by Gadda prior to 1924 is his war diary, the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*; this, however, is not a narrative work, was never meant for publication, and came out only in 1965.⁴ The first serious attempt at narrative writing takes place in 1924 when, upon his return from Argentina, Gadda (in the hope of winning a literary prize) sets out to compose a novel provisionally entitled *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento*. This was never finished and all that is left is a mass of fragmentary notes, contained in two *Cahiers d'études*. Of all the remarkable amount of significant information therein included on Gadda's early literary outlook, I wish to retain a fundamental point: the would-be writer is, at that moment, very clearly intent on writing a "canonical" novel, that is, one based on models or poetics belonging to the previous century. His avowed influences are Manzoni and the likes of Flaubert, Balzac, and Dostoevsky; and he envisages a wide and well structured narrative organism, linking character psychology with historical context in a dialectic whole, which at one point he describes following the well-known idealistic, Hegelian formula of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (re-named *la Norma*, *l'Abnorme* and *la Comprensione*). This, of course, is not to say that there is nothing original in Gadda's ideas; but the main direction is certainly traditionalist rather than openly innovative.

A second, crucial moment in the development of Gadda's ideas is represented by the *Meditazione milanese* of 1928, a philosophical work in the most traditional of all philosophical forms, the dialogue. Again, there is a great deal that is interesting in it at the level of detail, but nothing indicating a desire to be radically innovative in terms of methods and practices.

So, in both cases it can safely be concluded that, at the time when Gadda is still striving to become a writer, his intentions remain fairly traditional and in any case far removed from any notion of iconoclastic experimentation.

It has been hypothesised that, following these beginnings, a change of heart may have taken place, leading to a new, more "open" poetic; unfortunately there is nothing to support this hypothesis in the fairly numerous and very interesting writings in which Gadda directly addresses the motivations and modes of his own writing. His position can always be

⁴ The text is incomplete, since a few of the notebooks went missing at the time of the Caporetto defeat.

reconciled with a desire to pursue an organic and systematic form of literary production, where language and style are consistently rooted in social realities, and ethically motivated. Neither *frammentismo*, nor futurism or any other avant-gardes or experimentalist poetics are ever mentioned in a positive light. Gadda's views don't seem to have changed, and neither has his allegiance to the most unlikely of the forefathers (given the actual characteristics of his style), Alessandro Manzoni.

When Gadda actually becomes a published writer, in the '30s, it is easy to see that – in spite of his practice of fragmentariness and his inability to accomplish the grand project that he has in mind – an instinct of totalization is still at work in his writing. This is visible in the dual form of a tendency towards encyclopaedic completeness and systematic closure. Both have a philosophical as well as a literary application; in his thinking and his imagination, in the world that he describes and in the categories that he employs to understand it, Gadda strives for exhaustiveness. Both totalizing instincts, however, are defeated by a subject matter and writing practice that irresistibly tends to exceed the limits of the text, and by a style that is constantly unstable, unable to adhere to either encyclopaedic or systematic completeness.

In fact, the encyclopaedic element is fighting against the systematic: it is the accumulation of materials, linguistic means and ideas that systematically prevents the consolidation of a closed system. There are two clear symptoms to this syndrome: lists and notes. Gadda is a great practitioner of (especially comic) enumeration, and of manic annotation. Some of his footnotes (notably in *L'Adalgisa*) run into several pages of historical digression or scientific popularization, fracturing the compactness of the narrative and turning it into a (tendentially) all-encompassing encyclopaedia, whilst at the same time depriving it of structural stability and closure.⁵

The important point is this: the chaotic, unsystematic and ultimately fragmentary appearance of Gadda's text is the result not of his adhesion to some currently circulating or prophetically anticipated "poetic of the fragment", be it modernist, avant-garde, or pre-postmodernist, but rather the result of a permanently unresolved conflict between the ideal and the real. A victim of this conflict, Gadda is, in fact, bereft of poetic and lives his writing as an endless struggle, in a permanent state of tension between opposing forces.

⁵ Of course, Manzoni, too, makes abundant use of digressions; this elicits a range of interesting questions, which cannot be addressed here. See Olivia Santovetti, *Digression. A Narrative Strategy in the Italian Novel*, Peter Lang, 2007.

I would now like to take a closer look at one example, and I have chosen the already mentioned *L'Adalgisa* because I think it functions particularly well to elucidate the points made so far, and then take the analysis further.

L'Adalgisa, published in 1943-44, is a fragmentary book about a city, Milan; it contains ten texts of variable length, not all ostensibly connected to each other by a common thread. More precisely,⁶ we can separate them in three groups: the first text is an isolated residue from the old *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento*; number 5 and 7 derive from the “building site” of the *Cognizione del dolore*; whilst the largest group, number 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9 and 10, belong thematically to the “building site” of *L'Adalgisa* proper (and related projects). At a closer look, however, they all share common roots, presenting (as we shall see) different facets of a single, incomplete whole. The book is, therefore, a good example of the “communicating vessels” (or rhizomatic) structure mentioned above; it brings together apparently unrelated narrative projects, without attempting to resolve the multiplicity of settings, styles and perspectives into a unified organism (and thereby exposing its own fragmentariness), whilst at the same time revealing a deeper interconnectedness of all the different strains of Gadda’s writing in those years.

We could read *L'Adalgisa*, therefore, as a broken mirror reflecting images of a single object (we could call it “reality”) through a multiplicity of authorial perspectives, none of which can individually satisfy the voracious instinct of totalization that drives the act of writing. Completion is made impossible not only by the infinite complexity and detail of the object (which is simultaneously physical, psychological, social, historical, etc.) and the variety of modes and styles employed to its enumeration, but also by a significant and almost schizophrenic fracture in the authorial disposition towards it.

This becomes more clearly visible by separating the texts into the two main groups: the world of *La Cognizione* and that of *L'Adalgisa* are one and the same (albeit thinly disguised, in *La Cognizione*, by an imaginary south-American setting), but they are regarded through opposite lenses. In *L'Adalgisa*, despite the very considerable presence of a component of social criticism addressed primarily to the Milanese bourgeoisie, the main atmosphere is nostalgic and inclusive (the - marginally - intra-diegetic narrator presents himself as part of a world that has now disappeared, and that he remembers affectionately); in *La Cognizione*, however, an attitude of destructive (and ultimately self-destructive)

⁶ Here I follow, for the essential, Guido Lucchini’s summary in his “Note al testo” (in the Garzanti edition of Gadda’s *Romanzi e racconti*, vol. 1), to which I refer the reader for additional details.

criticism reveals the protagonist as irreparably and antagonistically separated from a world that he detests. The problem is: those two worlds are the same one, the Milan and the Brianza of the '20s and '30s, its middle-class, its habits, its life; the ambiguous, *amore-odio* narratorial and authorial relationship to it is, in *L'Adalgisa*, more openly visible than anywhere else, thanks to the simultaneous presence and mixing in the same volume (but in different parts of it) of the two separate strains. For this reason *L'Adalgisa* is a crucial passage in Gadda's evolution; in it, Gadda's discordant relationship to his social environment (the sole object of his art) is revealed with utmost clarity, perhaps for the last time. From then on, bitterness and destructive criticism will prevail.

I would now like to look more closely at what could be seen as the broader⁷ object of *L'Adalgisa*: the city. To find a statement of the authorial sentiments for the city (which is at the same time a sort of poetic declaration of intent, clarifying the main emotional orientation of the most part - but not all - of the narrative) we must look deep into the folds of the text. It is at the end of a comical digression (on public toilets), in the middle of the second chapter, that we encounter – as is often the case in Gadda - a sudden change of object and register, from scatological to lyrical, culminating in a poetic citation: “la forme d’une ville – change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’un mortel”. The passage is by Baudelaire and comes from *Le Cygne*, one of the poems of *Les fleurs du mal*, and more precisely from the section entitled “Tableaux Parisiens”. Bearing in mind that the subtitle of *L'Adalgisa* is “Disegni di vita milanese”, it becomes clear that the citation is far from accidental, signalling in fact some sort of deep proximity between Gadda's and Baudelaire's contemplation of their respective cities.

If *Le Cygne* can elicit a variety of symbolic, ideological and political interpretations, its primary object and tone are relatively easy to describe: the *dépaysement*, sense of non-belonging and impotence, the contrast between reality and memory, the sudden and painful awareness of the irredeemable passing of time, the vision of the changing city in a halo of decomposition and death. This is the sense of Baudelaire's verse, certainly for Gadda; what attracts his attention is the role of time, and its effect on space, more precisely on urban space. Another passage from *Le Cygne*, that Gadda doesn't quote but definitely has in mind, helps clarify this point: “Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N'a bougé! palais

⁷ But certainly not the only one: the book also gives ample room to the analysis of the two main characters (Adalgisa and Gonzalo), as well as several minor ones – not to speak of course of the many, important digressions. This multiplicity of objects, too, contributes to deprive it of a unitary feel.

neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie, / Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.”

What is this universal “allegory”, which devours everything transforming it into something else? It’s nothing else but time itself. Every aspect of the city, under the gaze of the poet, acquires a non-literal meaning, becoming an allegory of the passing of time. The old (“vieux faubourgs”) and the new (“palais neufs, échafaudages”) are all signs of a single movement, now revealed in its funereal, destructive essence. What, in this perspective, is a city? Rather like a human face, it’s space visibly worked by a linear time subtracted to cosmic circularity or redemption, and therefore irredeemably affected by loss, by death. The agent of this (de)realization, of this sudden awareness of time as death, is memory (“mes chers souvenirs”).

Such is also Gadda’s main disposition in *L’Adalgisa*: one of nostalgic regret for the inevitable passing of time, destroying a world that certainly deserves to be criticized, even hated perhaps, but not to die, because the narrator is attached to it by a myriad affects and memories. So, the main role of literature is to contrast time, vanquish death, and make that submerged world live on, forever. The opposite disposition (that of *La cognizione*) is also present, with its destructive desire for revenge and justice over a society inherently false, perverted, and perverting otherwise noble souls (this is an explicit theme in *Racconto italiano*). The contrast is, therefore, ultimately insoluble, between, on the one hand, writing as *pietas* and even *caritas* and, on the other, writing as an act of impious and uncharitable vengeance. Even the latter, however, is an affirmation of life against time and death; the (significant) difference is in the focus: what literature wants to preserve from death is in one case (*Cognizione*) the oppressed life embodied in the revolt of an individual against injustice and ugliness, in the other (*Adalgisa*) the fragile life animating a world inexorably destined to oblivion.

The reference to Baudelaire, the perspective on a changing city and the notion of allegory facilitate the transition to the third and most unlikely name in my presentation. Baudelaire is, by far, the most often quoted author in one the great monuments to fragmentary writing of the 20th century: Walter Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk*⁸ is an enormous “Zibaldone” of thoughts and citations that (also precisely for its fragmentariness,

⁸ Translated in English as *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, 1999. *Passage*, in German and French, just like *passaggio* in Italian, also means excerpt; this resonance is entirely lost in the English translation of the title of Benjamin’s work.

intertextual substance, interdisciplinary outlook, posthumous status, genre ambiguity, and incompleteness) has acquired an iconic status in contemporary philosophy and literature. But what can the connection be, between two authors who knew nothing of one another?⁹

First of all, there is a structural similarity between the *Passagen-Werk* and the *Cahiers d'études* for the *Racconto italiano*, both preparatory works for a book that never materialized (in Benjamin's case, it would have been an *Urgeschichte* of the 19th century, seen through the prism of the city of Paris). Secondly, there is also a similar contamination of literature and philosophy; Gadda's intellectual path shows very clearly the vital link, or even the coexistence, of artistic creation and thought, and so the gnoseological (or, as he often said, heuristic) value of literature. But, more importantly, the Gadda of *L'Adalgisa* shares with Benjamin a deeply negative "sense of time" in relation to urban environment: in other terms, the awareness of the destructive presence of death in the life and constant transformation of a metropolis.

Finally, it is also possible to establish interesting (albeit, undoubtedly, subtle) metaphorical links between Gadda's oeuvre and the vision emerging from the *Passagen*. And, first of all, let's recall to mind the primary meaning of the word "Passage" in Benjamin's perspective; it refers to a physical feature of the Parisian urban environment, the *passage*, that is, a covered pathway penetrating inside a compact block of buildings, linking different parts of the city. The Parisian arcade (open to the public and housing commercial activities, but less visible and accessible - for instance to vehicles - than and from a street) creates a special, semi-private atmosphere; and it is itself the sign of a form of life that is disappearing and dying out.¹⁰ The city transforms itself, but at a price - a loss of forms of life - that is, in turn, soon inevitably forgotten. Gadda's *L'Adalgisa*, too, is partly pervaded by the gaze on a city that changes, leaving behind a wealth of human experience destined to oblivion - if writing doesn't save it. Those forms of life are intrinsically connected to urban and architectural spaces, which are the objects of intense attention on the part of the Milanese

⁹ It is not unlikely that Gadda - a voracious reader - may have become aware of Benjamin's work, but only much later in his life. There is, however, no reference to the German philosopher anywhere in the *Opere*.

¹⁰ See for instance Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), almost entirely set in a *passage* close to the Seine. With reference to this novel, Benjamin writes: "If this book really expounds something scientifically, then it's the death of the Paris arcades, the decay of a type of architecture. The book's atmosphere is saturated with the poisons of this process, and its people are destroyed by them" (*The Arcades Project*, p. 875). However, Zola is also the writer who describes the other side of the same coin, for instance the destruction - by the new, rampant capitalism of big commerce in alliance with banks - of large swaths of the city to make room for the new *grands magasins*. See, for instance, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883).

writer, especially in *L'Adalgisa* (Milan) and *Quer pasticciaccio* (Rome); in both works the city is “felt” in its phylogenetic and historical evolution, in its stratification, which ends by crashing and forever obliterating the past that only a few decades (or centuries) before was a living people in its day-to-day existence. Space devoured by time.

The whole of Gadda's oeuvre can be seen as a vast *Passagen-Werk*, a metaphorical urban body connected by semi-secret passages, and fed, internally, by a circulatory system distributing the same blood to all parts, and externally by an ample and varied intertextual and ideal hinterland; and also a universe of building sites, active or abandoned, a textual city in perennial transformation and never finished, only temporarily and apparently arrested in one of its states by virtue of some editorial decision (or the irrevocable decree of death), but in truth never free from the process of constant addition and evolution dictated by the totalizing imperative, or by reality itself. In that sense, too, the body of Gadda's writings is a “work of passages”.

L'Adalgisa, like Baudelaire's “Tableaux parisiens” and Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk*, is (also) the diffracted image of a city. Not a *civitas Dei*, nor an ideal *polis*, but a *civitas hominis*, a human city inevitably subject to the corrosion of time, but preserved from it by the most human of all human prerogatives: memory, care, writing. It is within this context that I have sought to understand Gadda's fragmentary writing.

Oxford University