That Awful Mess

Carlo Emilio Gadda
The most easily observable, and probably the most easily describable, trait of the Pasticciaccio is its lexical richness and variety. Such variety in the Pasticciaccio is favored by a double foundation of Roman dialect (though there are also present in lesser measure the Neapolitan, Molisian, Abruzzese, Milanese or Lombard, Venetian and other dialects, not to mention a heavy presence of foreign borrowings) and an Italian which is elevated, or literary, or to put it more precisely, scholastic, meaning heavy with elements Gianfranco Contini calls "di una cultura nobilmente liceale" - an Italian which, in general, raises the register of Gadda's prose far from the lingua d'uso.

So the page in the Pasticciaccio gathers together dialectal words (of many regions), and Italian words, the latter coming from extremely dissimilar phases, varieties and applications of Italian, such as trecento terms and contemporary terms; regionalisms and pan-Italian terms; formal, colloquial and trivial Italian; or the sectorial: the scientific, bureaucratic, or technical. In other words a kaleidoscope of varieties which one can attempt to classify with the diastematic information of the kind often given in dictionaries, when they indicate whether or not a word or expression belongs to the unmarked standard "core" of the language that can be used at all times and places.

The obviousness and the importance of the linguistic elaboration, indisputable in Gadda, are therefore of primary concern to the translator. Much effort is being made, in the present version, to preserve the diatypes of the original, where possible.

Given the impossibility of translating into another language the aura parlativa peculiar to an environment (in this case Rome, and in lesser measure, Southern Italy), the translator must, however, try to conserve, in some way, the heterogeneity of registers that the introduction of colloquialisms and dialects represents. The Roman and other dialects in the novel, as in Gadda's other works, are never adopted for mere naturalistic verisimilitude, but blended into a more general "macaronism" which affects the narration at the minimal and maximal levels of syntax (for example the narrator's comment "perché quanno non cià sordi er mejo impiego che po trovà una vedova è de trovanne un artro che se la risposa") and morphology (reduced articulated prepositions such as 'n, pe, and a', for instance), as well as vocabulary.
(pispillorio, tritticò, aranciasse, etc.). I have, for reasons that I hope are obvious, avoided rendering any one dialect (or dialectal mixture, such as Ingravallo’s speech, a cross between Roman, Neapolitan and Molisano) with any particular English localism. For one thing, there are too many differences between the use of dialect in Italy and in English-speaking places (one main difference between the use of dialect in Italy, historically, and their use in English, is that social class in Italy did not so much determine their use, which was and remains mostly a diatopic feature).

The English in the 1963 translation of the Pasticciaccio, currently in print, regularly tends towards the very linguistic medietas Gadda takes every possible step to avoid. It is hoped that the version offered here may remedy the extremely heavy losses of formal features which make reading the older translation an experience so very distant from that of reading Gadda’s original Italian.

In addition, current scholarship (by Gian Carlo Roscioni, Giorgio Pinotti, Fernandino Amigoni, Aldo Pecoraro and others) has resulted in a nearly complete re-interpretation and re-evaluation of Gadda’s masterpiece. The publication, from 1988-93, of Gadda’s complete works in a reliable edition makes it possible, for the first time, to verify intertextual references throughout that work. This new translation is a small part of the renewed understanding of this great literary work.

Note: I would like to thank Robert Dombroski, Pier Massimo Forni, Emilio Manzotti, Aldo Pecoraro and Eduardo Saccone for their continued help and support.

Synopsis of chapters 1-3:

In Rome in the years of Fascism (the novel takes place in 1927), the 35-year-old police inspector Francesco Ingravallo (called don Ciccio for short), a detective-philosopher from the southern Italian region of Molise, is called on to investigate the theft of jewels that has taken place in an apartment building at 219, Via Merulana. In the building live also a couple, Remo and Liliana Balducci, friends of Ingravallo: the wife, whom Ingravallo admires for her sweetness, and with whom he is perhaps secretly in love, is of a family whose wealth has been built in large measure on speculation during the First World War. During a lunch with the couple, don Ciccio guesses that Liliana’s obvious melancholy has been caused by her sterility, a calamity she attempts to soothe by temporarily “adopting” several girls from the Roman provinces, mostly servants that she showers with gifts and other blandishments.

Three days after the robbery, whose investigation is so far inconclusive, Ingravallo is shocked by the news that Signora Balducci has been found murdered in her home. He rushes to the scene and takes part in the preliminary inquiry, wondering whether there is any link between the two crimes.
Liliana’s cousin, the young and handsome Giuliano Valdarena, is present at the murder scene having discovered her corpse. Suspicion falls on him as the murderer with money as motive; Liliana’s husband Remo is away on a business trip and cannot be apprised of the murder. As chapter four opens, he returns and learns of his wife’s death. Liliana’s cousin, Valdarena, is under arrest at a Roman prison.

Chapter IV

On the 18th, after twenty-two hours of collective anxiety, Balducci showed up, claiming unanticipated engagements. Police headquarters had been contacted in the meantime: Milan, Bologna, Vicenza, Padua. To Ingravallo and dottor Fumi, his reappearance was pure relief. Supposing Balducci had gone on the lam, their enquiries would, of necessity, have extended to half the peninsula, via a methodical monsoon of phoned messages.

Also the knot, already fairly scrambled, in that case would have become hopelessly snarled. Miraculously unaware, Balducci stepped off the train at eight o’clock, the collar of his overcoat upturned, face not at all ruddy, in point of fact a bit sooty, tie loosened and with an air of one who’d slumbered profoundly, badly, and on top of incessant jouncing. The train and he had stuck to the terms of the telegram, somewhat vague besides. But there were no express trains destination Termini at eight but the Sarzana which, amid a final screech of brakes, came to a standstill smack on time in obeisance with the new directives from on high clockdial beneath the roofing and platform shuddering in anticipation. The terrible news was broken to him with all due consideration and mitigated with the most appropriate cushioning right there on the platform, while from the carriage windows, travellers went right on contending for porters via by turns imploring and imperative commotion, porters having assumed the tones of their golden opportunities (detraining Swiss and Milanese, apposite baggage): it was imparted by the relatives of the wife, in various shades of mourning, hastened there at Ingravallo’s request: Aunt Marietta at the fore with a black stole on her shoulders in the mold of a baboon’s neckmane, a chain of small black globules, a cloche à la teacher of pedagogy, the face of a public prosecutor. Next, in back, Auntie Elviruccia and son Orestino, a big gossoon with yellow buckteeth, the spittin’ image of unca Jew-zeppy, rest his soul. A funeral mug on him too. Even the sargeant, in uniform, was present: Di Pietrantonio. After they’d drilled inna poor uncle Remo, piecemeal, what’d occurred, first thing the poor chump did was lay down his suitcase: the porter’d handled the other, heavier one. The news didn’t appear to shake him all that much. Maybe the drowsiness, maybe the fatigue of all those nights on the road. You would’ve said he wasn’t listening to what they
were telling him, or wadn’t all there even.

The corpse, in the interim, had been removed and transported to the morgue, where the coroner had carried out a surface examination. Nothing. Having clothed and lain her out again, he’d wound her throat in white bandages, like a carmelite nun on her deathbed, her head wrapped in a kind of Red Cross nurse’s bonnet, but without the cross. Seeing her like that, white and immaculate, the men doffed their hats straight off. The ladies all marked the sign a the cross. The state coroner’s office, in the person of Instructing Magistrate Cav. Uff. Muccellato at Via Merulana, and later Asst. Prosecuting Attorney Commendator Macchiaro at the morgue, witnessed the examination, pro forma. His Optics over at Chigi Palace’s eyes’d lit up at the chance to out-shout everybody: “The perpetrator of this heinous crime should have faced a firing squad six hours ago!”

But Balducci hadn’t read the newspapers.

On the body, nothing, after the knife and the scratches, the nailmarks.

Once home, poor Remy was prevailed upon to open drawers and some recalcitrant buffets. For some he couldn’t for the life of him come up with keys. As to the whereabouts of other latchkeys, come across by chance, he was wholly in the dark. They were tried once, twice, here, there. No joy. No-one had even broached his small den. A desk, fitted with “Universal Marengo” locks, bore no signs of tampering. He opened it: all in order. Same story for a metal filingcabinet where he stored certain cartaceous matter: a bottle-green, bake-varnished cabinet, mint condition, that went with a wooden bookcase half empty, half jammed with dogeared opuscules, like a budding, fresh-faced accountant with the harridan in love, moistnosed and loaded, whose estate he administers and fleeces. The whole mute inspection was beheld by the pair of ladies, the two aunts, by Oreste, the sargeant Di Pietrantonio, actually a topsargeant, a police officer, one Rodolico, and ultimately by Mrs. Manuela Pettachioni, the concierge. Even Blondie stuck his nose in a moment later. With both Pompeo and with Blondie (of Terracina) Ingravallo could breathe easy. The others were s’many knuckleheads, try’n drum in a little psychology...! But those two, they had a knack for sizing up a customer at a glance by his face without tipping their hand. And what mattered to don Ciccio most were the expression, the attitude, the immediate psychic and physiognomic reactions, as he put it, those of the drama’s actors and spectators: i.e. the whole goddamn combo platter a sons a bitches and their leaky sluts.

After some stabs, to no purpose, by Rodolico, who merely popped a button no-one could tell from where, they called Bottafavi to lend a hand. The expert marksman came down with a long-handled carpenter’s box on his arm, brimming with an assortment of pincers, hacksaws, planes, hammers, pliers, plus a monkeywrench, plus a won-
drous hodgepodge of nails, straight and crooked. As a last ditch they called a locksmith, bonafide keyhole don juan girded with a buncha whosis with lil’ knobs on ‘em: ‘n all dongiovanni hadda do was give ‘em a tickle with one or the other so right away they jus’ felt they couldn’t resist, like a chaste woman letting herself go. Balducci immediately noted the absence of the essentials, the money and jewels that the wife kept in a small metal coffer, second bureau drawer: the coffer had vanished, with its contents. Not even the key turned up, which usually lay in an old, black velvet handbag embroidered with forget-me-nots in the mirrored wardrobe, bound with a dainty powder-blue ribbon to the elite among its genteel and jingling sister-keys. “The handbag, it was here, that handbag... Lemmee jus’ see...” Balducci ransacked with his hand from the bottom up in those purls of silk, among all those corselettes, slips, stitched handkerchiefs. Right: the bag had disappeared as well. Also the two bank passbooks: “Holy Christ! Can’t even find them!” “Find what?” “The bankbooks, Liliana’s bankbooks.” “What color?” “Color!... One for Banco di Santo Spirito, one for Banca Commerciale.” “In... her name?” “Yeah... Poor Liliana!” “Made out to bearer?” “Personal.”

The volatilization of the loot (there was no danger as to the passbooks) seemed to completely floor Mr. B. Judging by appearances, by the immediate psychic and physiognomic reactions, maybe more than the horrible news imparted to him at Termini. A gratuitious impression, misleading, granted: and yet none of those present could shake it off - neither the sargeant, nor Orestino nor, above all, aunts Marietta and Elviruccia, spiteful and embittered at the scrutiny a that billyo all in agony - “That’s right, try your hunting now, now that the hare’s gone scot free!”, – that crumb-bum who kept on bouncing off the ‘partment walls trying all the cupboard drawers, poking his nose inside... see if anybody’d made off with a pin, even.

Gone ashen, made acquisitive just at the thought, and by the great ferment that the latent avarice common to all Valdarena kin had caused (in the space of that incredible night of domestic diatribe, hard on the telephonic brouhaha of the day before, with its concert for multi-regional voices of police accompanied by the incontestibly Roman organ of Manuela Pettachioni), just now they were chagrined, aunt Elviruccia as much as aunt Marietta, chagrined by a fleeting chagrin. Huh? Our wee Liliana? Not even a souvenir she’d left her cousins? Her aunts? Auntie Marietta who’d cradled her in her arms, so to speak, ever since her ma’d died? Not even a tiny medal of the Madonna! An’ with that whole jewelry shop she was keepin’ under lock ‘n key? The poor thing hadn’t thought of making out a will! When they haveta go and die like that, they can’t tell in advance, can’t get ready! Ah Mother Mary, what a world, what a rotten worl’!

Besides they had Giuliano to fret over. That arrest, they deemed
it an outrage, an affront to themselves, to the proud Valdarena household. "The one and only best family inna whole neighborhood!": the most flourishing, the most entrenched in the soil, menfolk, ladies, small fry. The idear that the poor thing could've been hurled straight into the devil's arms with the the best gifts from her wedding, coin and jewels included, 'thout leaving behind a single token, a word of farewell, the very idear, poor aunties, was beginning to gnawr away at their insides. Murdered like that. Rancor, horror, terror, a cry in the gloom! At the surge of demonic tension that so implacably reduces to fritters both the folio certificates of civil status (comune or parish) and the prolonged, vigilant hopes, the human kinships, the gentes, tend to reclaim by right, if not in fact, the thing lent. Commodatum repetunt rem. They recall it from darkness and from night. They want, they want back the torn-stemmed flower!, the so-many-percent-lost of their lives. Like iron filings on the magnet, the tiniest fibers of their entrails are polarized by the return pull. They feel they must re-absorb the exteriorized gamic or biological unity, the once living, eternally living being, alienated by sacrament, in marriage, to a Whosis. All pine to dispose, once again, of the nuptial possibility, the nuptial strength tendered to a third party: to the groom (in this case), to the brother- or son-in-law proffered up by the populace. And that gamic unity which one claims as belonging to oneself implies, likewise, an economic quantity. Here was a superb child, and there was a coffer of jewels: the one and the other ripened by the years: by the gradual, tacit years. Once there was a dear girlchild with a darlin' little box wid a widdle key that they, the Valdarenas, had entrusted to the husband, along with the right of use, clickety-clickety: the sacrosanct usufruct. And the coadjutor of Christ, at the Church of Santi Quattro, had blessed the accord with repeated asperges in nomine Domini: without overdoing the sprinkles. She'd bowed her head under her veil, beneath the blossomed bridal wreath. So let him give, so let him give back then the ill-gotten goods, this harebrained hunter, this travelling salesman. What use's he made of the beauty? Or what waste? Of such sweet beauty? And the shekels? those iddybiddy shekels, so sharming also? Where'd he piss those off to? Dose gold doubloons with that plugugly mug of that old gent minted on 'em, nice roun' 'bloons all golden from when there still wan't Duke Dookey at Chigi Palace bellowing from the top a his lungs offa balcony like some ragman? She use to have fortyfour, little Lily, foaty-fo' 'zact change count 'em, that went jingle jangle in a pink silk sack, part of granma's wedding gift, forty-four weighed more'n a pair of Christmas kidneys. "Where'd they end up now?" they wondered. "What can ol' oaf here tell us?" Manet sub Jove frigido. How'd he use his bride in marriage, how did he ever use the carnal and doweral strength of his wife? What match-deals did he make with them, this chucklehead rambler, with that tender flesh and its consub-
stantial dough? With the little bundle bound over to her by time's obstinate rumination, by the creditors' economic might and virtue? Come down to her as had her warm flesh: from the accumulated fervor of the generations, after so many harsh and toilsome mornings. They seemed to be saying, Liliana's relatives: "O sweet bride, stuffed with wampum, treasure of the equinoxes! Let him restore, let him spit it out then, this schlock salesman! Don't let him dare accuse Giuliano, unable to bear the comparison, Giuliano, upright pillar of our breed!" In their brains, those of those two rutabagas auntie Marietta and auntie Elviruccia, they went steeplechasing over hill and dale, delirious: "Giuliano, flower of the Valdarenas! Turgid and pubescent offshoot! Curd of life!"

There is a dramatic site of all rancor, from the spleen to the gallbladder, within the gnawing of the liver even unto the penumbra behind the house furnishings where the Lares preside: the Penates who see all in silence, as they breathe inna smell a mothballs dead inna cupboards, but who, at the first flash of the blade, had trembled at being unable to cry out: and who blanched and wept now within the room's impenetrable bodies with the true nerves of martyrs. Well there, 'tween the legs of the sarge an' a locksmith, swervin' around Manuela's hind cheeks, all those poisoned chimera flitted about. Flinty and unbending the aunts awaited justice. Oreste, even he didn't know what kinda mush to put on.

Meanwhile, at Collegio Romano, Valdarena had undergone repeated interrogation: the alibis produced (office, officeboys) checked out until 9:30, no later. He claimed he'd been around town. Around where? With who? Clients? Women? Cigarettes? Two or three times he blushed as if lying. The barber's was thrown out, only to be retracted right away: whoops, day before. No tenants, in fact, had seen him at that hour. Only at 10:35, when he'd alarmed the neighbors. The small Felicetti girl, the kiddie'd run into the lady cheese peddlars climbing up to greet the Bottafavis, when set down before him, said she hadn't seen Giuliano on the stairs. "Naow...", she murmured from lips scarcely unglued, "thith man... wathn theh...", Then she went mute: and pressed by further questions and urgings of every variety, she hung her head and fell to whimpering. She made as if to go yes: but on the tick of making up her mind she clammed up. Then, fat tears on her cheeks, everybody thought she was going to shake her head no. Mama knelt there, cheek to cheek, stroking her head where testimonies come from, kissing and cooing into her ear: "C'mon, sweetykins, tell mommy the truth... D'you see this nice young man here? Look how blond he is, like an angel! C'mon honeypot, don't cry, wittle mummy's here with you... C'mon, say it to mommy..." She let loose with two big smacks and cooed, "Don' be 'fraid of the doctor, doc Ingarballo here idn't one of those boogy mans'll give you a boo-boo...
He's all dressed in black it's true, but he's a real nice man...", feeling round her tummy under her little frock to see if it wasn't damp: certain outpourings of testimony are occasionally accompanied by those of another sort. "C'mon, tell mommy, tell it to mommy and doc Ingarballo'll give you a dolly whose eyelids go up! and down! with a widdle pink apron with nice blue flowers, I pwomise. Whisper to mommy, in her ear..." The kid hung her head and went "yes". Giuliano went white. "And what was the young man doing? So what'd he say to you?" She burst into tears and began to scream, between sobs: "I wanna go home! Wa' go home!" After her mother'd blown her nose, sayonara. Couldn't squeeze out another syllable. Mommy dearest held ("I swear!") she was an extraordinarily bright child, for her age. "You gotta know how to handle kids... You know how it is." To Ingravallo instead she looked like an imbecile, completely befitting her mother.

The Pirroficoni case had not yet vexed the columns of the Eternal City's local news. Death's-Head-in-a-felucca was already droughty, however, for the suspect's peacock panache, to be able to stick it where He stuck feathers, peacock's or rotten chicken's 'at stinks.

But it seemed wise to proceed with a certain guardedness, already in those days. Don Ciccio sniffed this out, and doctro Fumi likewise, after public opinion, in other words the collective spasm, had got its hands on the event.

"Making use of" the event - that whatsoever incident that rogue weatherman Zeus may've dunged in front of your nose, plup, plop - to the greater glory of a characteristic pseudo-ethical activity, in verity protuberantly put on and slimily staged, is the game of whomever, individual or body, wishes to confer on propaganda or tirade the weight and scope of a moral activity. The psyche of the frenzied politico on display (pseudo-ethical narcissism) gets its claws on another's real or supposed felony, to roar over it like a brute with dick for brains pointlessly furious over an ass' jawbone; managing in that way to exhaust (to pacify) with the inane paradigm of a punitive myth, the sordid tension that forces him to act, whatever act, as long as he acts, acts coûte que coûte. And presto, the other's crime "made use of" to placate anguimaned Megaera, or mad multitude mollified not wi' so little, like sacrificial goat or hart unto the whiskling, disheveled wretches or maenads who rend it to pieces, everywhere ravenous in the pyrall combustion of the bacchanalia kindled by their howls, and festooned purple-red with blood and torment. A pseudo-justice and a pretend severity, an ersatz patent given the vox populi thus acquire legal course, of which both the arrogance of a rash and summary trial and the cephalobalanitic hysteria of an overhasty sentence are plain confirmation. Pray reread, in War and Peace, book III, part three, chap.
XXV, the rueful and atrocious story of the summary execution of the wretched Verestchagin, wrongly imputed a spy: Count Rostopchin governor of Moscow, preening on the Palace staircase before the stormy expectation of the mob, orders his dragoons to bleed him to death with the cuts of their sabres with the populace as witness, in virtue of those fine inner grounds "qu’il leur faut une victime." It happened in the morning, at ten o’clock. “At four in the afternoon, Murat’s troops entered Moscow.”

Much more base and theatrical, chez nous, that plumèd Beastyface; nor is it for us to grant him, as to Rostopchin, the immediate and attenuating circumstances of the dread (of being lynched himself), and of the anguish and of the anger and pandemonium (total mob psychosis) and of the enemy at the ramparts, after the sharp cannonnades and the bloodbath (of Borodino).

The hapless Pirroficoni was walloped to within an inch of his life by an ad hoc gang, there in the “observation room”, for the cushy reason that they wanted to extort from him, at any cost, the earnest confession of having violated certain bimbettes. The accusation hit him, and him ‘im again, like a ton of bricks and he begged no, there must be shome mishtake, s’not true, but he was tarred to a pulp anyhow. O, the generous Manes of Cesare Beccaria!

In the middle of one of its throes of public decency and federzonitis, the Urbs was to become acquainted, in fact (1926-7), with several intermittant stranglings of female minors: the sorrow and the remains forsoken in the meadowes, with the forlorn, prostrated innocence, down there, yonder extra muros, past the suburbanicarian votive shrines, past the antiquity of the marbles, the sanctuaries. Consule Federzonis, Rosamaltonio enixa: Maledito Merdonio dictatore impestatissimo. The Ficoni Pirro, poor ass, was courting his courtesan, rather more suety than not as well as a lil’ ripe roun’ the edges, but of somewhat obstacled access: fifth floor; solid apartment house with concierge on the qui vive; husband present in working order... in house-slippers what’s more; clusters of neighbors ad libitum, greater glossators by nature than Saint Irnerius. Wherefore, considering the circumstances, a pathetic vertical oscillation of autographs of various import thanks to the intercession of a wee colleen brawl (aged thirteen), who bore them up and down with a modicum of discretion, her heart pit-a-pat, to their target. With confabs in sign language and mixed pantomime from window to lane, and viceversa. The chivalrous expert in dactylology was removed under arrest from the sidewalk in the very act of dispatching certain six- or seven-fingered signals (love, when) towards a fifthfloor window (a “planned distraction” in the eyes of the police) and of confiding a billet for madame, diversionary tactic number two, to the petite colleen of hern, all atremble and blushed to the tips of her ears at having to carry out a
like assignment. Pirroficoni, as he was wont, had extended some caresses to the maiden: which gesture, and the flushing of her cheeks, were his undoing. Armed with this nice evidence Skull-with-a-wang-doodle belched forth “the Roman police in less than 48 hours, etc. etc”. At which the fuzz, comforted by the lofty words of the Dook, on with the brass knuckles. Only the dubitative intervention of some honest official saved the said Ficoni’s hide, by then pretty well tanned, to tell the truth.

During the afternoon of that same March 18, Balducci was interrogated in his turn for several hours by the chief commissioner at Santo Stefano del Cacco. The instructing magistrate intervened as a formality, for “the police still have the investigation well in hand.” This time, Ingravallo didn’t have the heart even to attend that little get-together, much less do the questioning. A friend, it’s hard. And then, it was clear things would get sticky: the scabrous interrogation was bound to lapse into the byzantine meandering of some categories of inquisition, pour forth into sickening crudeness in an already utterly crude inquiry. The relations... between Balducci and his spouse: frames of mind. All that baffling tale of nieces and subnieces popped up again: the victim’s strange “mania” of wanting a girlchild, come what may. She would’ve snatched up a hand-me-down kid at Campo dei Fiori, all else failed. As for potatoes, it didn’t take long for commissioner Fumi to persuade himself that the couple, both man and wife, were in envously easy circumstances. With that kinda ballasht, no shtorm or inflation could shink you!

The widower drew a makeshift outline of their bonds, off the top of his head... both his and Liliana’s. To ease the proof, he declared, ‘cause he, there was no call, ‘f course, to suspect him, even fr’ a second. “Me? My Lily? What, ‘re you kiddin’?” His lips began to twitch and he broke into sobs that set his necktie bobbing. Having dried his tears, he had another stab at the inventory of belongings, jogging his memory by means of an agenda he’d brought, in crocodile skin: deluxe article. Their holdings were all set out. Liliana had the bank safe deposit box, branch 11 of the Commerciale, ultramodern vault together with safety deposit service, in Piazza Vittoria just opposite the market under the portico: you got it, corner a Via Carlo Alberto. N’ then though she had another at Corso Umberto, at Banco Santo Spirito. “Liliana’s dad, my father-in-law, rest his soul, was an up-front guy, had a real instinct. Didn’t believe there was gonna be a revolution, not this round... N’ y’ can’t trust a joint-stock company f’ nothin’, first of all... just ‘cause they’re anonymous, don’t know what their names are, dunno what they do, where they’re at... N’ if one fine day get it inna their heads, say we’re gonna ream out this chump, you whaddaya gonna do? Rush up to Milan hat ‘n hand, say ‘please mister joint stock, here I am, want my dough back?’ Got a prayer! Oh, no.
Treasury bonds, he’d say, s’ better ‘n gold, he says, that the price goes up ‘n down on, n’ maybe some consolidated funds, at 5%. Stuff’s guaranteed by the state. The ‘talian state! S’ a block a granite, the state, believe me! Leastways there’s no asshole’d grab it away. What’d be in it for them? Not to mention they’re getting their act together, they say, this time.” The father-in-law citation played out, at a wan smile from Fumi, Balducci limited himself to producing exact lists, in detail. For himself and for Liliana. He furnished “model” bank and business references and made assorted disclosures regarding his occupation in sales, textiles branch, for several northern producers. Money questions between him and his wife didn’t exist, so to speak. “We had everything we needed, me and Liliana. No hardship, lack of liquid funds, no loans, tide us over for one day... Promissory notes?” Didn’t even know what the word meant, in their family.

“Commercial notes, sure, my business... Can’t work without ‘em.”

So how was it that with such means they lived there in the middle of all those chintzy retail sellers, retired merchants, 1500-lire-a-month commendatori?

“Bah, the idear a moving, laziness... My father-in-law’d bought the place and lived there too, with Liliana, she was little. S’where we met.” Once more the poor man couldn’t keep back tears. His burly voice shook: “Got married there, to Lily!” Dottor Fumi felt a lump in his throat too, like the water level rising in a well. Liliana’s father, it was. He could sniff out a deal. “You know how it is, commish.” They’d had business contacts for a couple years. So then... She, only child: orphaned of her mother. A beauty! Ah, those were the days!

They’d got engaged, tied the knot in that house. Then, once they were man and wife... Loved each other, kept each other company. Pretty middling tastes, a certain self-restraint. “The desire not to have t’ hustle, get your blood pressure up for not much. What’s more you’re gonna kick off some day or other anyway. And without kids, even if she’d’ve had ‘em right off the bat... And then the armistice, the end of the war! An’ besides, we were all settled in, gotten used to it... There’s central heating, even if it’s not all that warm, but still...! Not complaining... There was the plumbing... Coupla cracked dishes, some wobbly chairs... Who doesn’t have? Liliana didn’t much like having company around anyway. With that obsession she had, by then, of adopting some girl, by hook or by crook! An’ that poor little dog Lulu, didn’t wanna budge for nothing! Not even her! Where’d she end up now, poor mutt? A rotten sign!”

The war! That pile a worries so as to get an exemption! All that paperwork! Piles! But he’d managed to get around it. Exempted no, but just like. A big leather holsterbelt and regulation pistol, “that you’d shake in your boots to see me.” He shook his head. “So in Via
Merulana, in '17, 'bout two years into our engagement, I was telling myself, these guys aren't ready to cut out this war business anytime soon. So let's get it over with. You know, if we gotta marry, let's. You 'member how it was with the housing situation? All those refugees? At my father-in-law's there was room, nothing anyplace else. So the gist is I ended up... at his place, no other solution. The house was just like ours, I mean, like mine and Liliana's...

"It was like your nest, Ishee."

"You got it: you can sit around in your shirtsleeves whenever you feel like." A great wish for peace and quiet, after work off the train, do whatever he wanted, not have to get involved in all the muckups of his housemates and neighbors.

And Liliana's melancholy. That kind of... fixation. And then with Santi Quattro right nearby. "Liliana, Christ help me, really, if she got wind of me talking about moving 'er away from Santi Quattro...!"

So everything had conspired to keep them stayed put there, in that damned 219. He regretted it now... Anybody else, in their place, would've gone out looking for something better. A nice suite in Prati, a pretty home along the Tiber... He sighed.

"And ah, anything else?"

"What else? Well, we're guys, right? Take a trip... A little extra onna side, time to time, you know..."

Fumi looked at him, and in so doing noticed, in his subject, a kind of fleeting hesitation, a greater reddening, though barely, of the natural ruddiness of his face.

Giuliano Valdarena had undergone three interrogations in twenty-four hours, not counting the first on Thursday at the scene of the crime, present, so to speak, the corpus delicti. Three lawmen were on the case, a triad of "bloodhounds" – don Ciccio to start with, the most dogged of all, then dottor Fumi and sargeant, or corporal, Di Pietrantonio. Crucial hours and days. Ideas, surmises, hypotheses came to dead ends. Valdarena and Balducci, cousin and husband, were brought face to face on the morning of Saturday the 19th. Balducci had passed the night at the hotel D'Azeglio. The spouse serious and somber, Valdarena more agitated and anguished, more nervous. They looked each other in the eye, conversed: it seemed they were meeting again following years of absence, each seeking in the other's expression the motive for the awful drama, but without blame. Ingravallo and Fumi didn't lose sight of them for a second. No hints of animosity. Giuliano, at intervals, appeared fretful, as if contending with recurring gusts of fear. No contradictions could be made out in what they had to say. To what had already been detected they added little or nothing.

Just as dottor Fumi was getting ready to dismiss them both, he was informed of a visit by "a priest". "Who is it?" Don Lorenzo Corpi was seeking admittance in order to communicate something urgent
Carlo Emilio Gadda

"concerning the painful Via Merulana affair". He’d spoken to the desk sargeant. With a gesture the chief commissioner took leave of the pair: Valdarena under escort, Balducci with instructions to remain on the premises.

Don Corpi was shown in, doffing his hat slowly: with a broad prelatial gesture.

He was a handsome priest, tall and massive, with raven hair just flecked with gray, and two large owl’s eyes set close to his nose which, there in the middle, infallibly took on the profile of a beak. Enveloped decorously in his cassock, don Corpi held in his left hand, together with his brandnew hat, one of those black portfolios clergymen carry every so often, when they go preach to a lawyer (to get him to see the light, as well as understand from whose side it shines). A pair a black gondolas, long, sturdy and doublesoled, for ascending and descending the Aventine and the Coelium on his feet. A man of great pre-eminence and superior sturdiness, to judge by his carriage and by his stride, as well as by the handclasp with which he regaled dottor Fumi, by the swell of his cassock, above and descending to the waist, and by the stirring it made below, where it ended up: ‘cause it was a rum cassock, of broad cloth, a real judgement day banner.

After some slightly embarrased, or at least prudent preamble, the more soothing glances from dottor Fumi engaging him to continue, he stated that having left Rome to go see some friends, up there on the summith at Roccafringoli, near Monte Manno, that you get to from Palestrina on muleback, and having came back “right on learning of the terrible occurenth”, not even twenty hours ago, he’d lost no time in looking for the holograph will entrusted to him straight from the hands of the “late lamented” Signora Balducci, to whom he’d “paid a visit” at the morgue, last evening, “God rest her soul.”

“Initially”, he assured, still prey to shock and horrified by the “thing”, he’d had reason to fear... that the document might have been spirited away. He’d looked up and down in his study, flinging papers from drawers every which way without managing to uncover it. And then suddenly, in the middle of the night, it’d hit him: he’d deposited it, with other envelopes and various... personal effecs, at the Banco di Santo Spirito. He’d repaired there that very morning, as soon as it opened, after celebrating six o’clock mass. His heart was knocking against his ribs, almost.

From that black calfskin pouch he took and held out to dottor Fumi, who received it in his very white hand, a white envelope, half foolscap size, with five scarlet seals: “Holograph Will of Liliana Balducci”. Envelope and sealingwax seemed untouched.

The three officials, or rather Ingravallo and Fumi, decided to open it post-haste, to enact a reading of the “last wishes of the deceased” and make a deposition in the presence of don Corpi and
four witnesses, plus the husband, called back. Last wishes that doubt-
less dated back a couple months: the last, in that they were unaltered.

Preparatory to anything else they consulted Doctor Gaetano De
Marini, notary in Via Milano, 292.784, who, according to don Lorenzo,
"must be acquainted with this matter". After ringing repeatedly they
finally snagged him on the phone. He was deaf. A Neapolitan secre-
tary came on the line to assist. Both were struck dumb by the news.
Balducci knew De Marini, whose services had been sought on occa-
sion by both him and by Liliana’s father, but “felt he could rule out”
his wife’s having entrusted her own will to that old bamboozler, ami-
able and cunning as a fox, true, but atrociously deaf in the stronghold
of his practice.

They called in two police officers and a pair of clerks to serve as
witnesses. The ceremony was expedited anon, at noon or just about:
another morning frittered away with no answers.

The further dottor Fumi read in the will, with vivid emphases,
Neapolitan inflections resonating from the four corners of the ceiling,
the more it veered from what had been expected, as if it had been
drafted, during a state of high agitation, by a person if not de facto
touched in her faculties, at least inclined to let her pen run away with
her. From that warm, suasive, supple reading, adately orches-
trated in the most harmonious tones of the Gulf (of Naples), the observers
were able to gather with waxing interest, and mounting surprise, that
the poor Signora Balducci had bequeathed to her spouse a minor part
of her property, plus some gems and jewelry: the legal portion, so to
speak, nearly half. The lion’s share, by contrast, went to “my beloved
Luigia Zanchetti, known also as Gina, daughter of the late Pompilio
Zanchetti and Irene Spinaci, born in Zagarolo on April 15, 1914.” To
her, poor child, seeing that “the inscrutable will of God has not seen fit
to grant me the joy of motherhood”.

Balducci didn’t breathe a word. He was making a face as if he
were the guilty party: or maybe, more likely, at the thought of all those
potatos (crickey!) making their way toward Zagarolo. Until their ward
came of age, the dough was to be given in trusteeship to two honest
men or guardians as it were, one of whom none other than Balducci,
“my husband Remo Eleutherio Balducci, father in spirit, if not by
blood, of the abandoned Luigia”. According to the will, Gina’s mother
was “afflicted with an irremediable malady” (tuberculosis, probably
complicated by priapomania). Now and then she tied one on in Tivoli
with her stud, a butcher by trade, and then it took a load of elbow-
grease to get the police not to pack her off to Zagarolo with her walk-
ing papers, given her “incapacity to support herself with her own
means”, and the added grounds of public scandal. The said butcher-
man, it was never zactly clear how, always managed to keep a lid on
things, almost certainly with the unquenchable argument of a “top
filet” (top quality). The fact is that his Tivoli roastbeef agreed with her much more than the all too rarified air of Zagarolo and resultant hollow appetite. On other occasions he beat her silly, the poor thing coughing and spitting blood, if not little jelly bits of lung: “What’d I do, anyway?” She’d gathered violets at Villa D’Este or spring daisies at Villa Gregoriana, a short way before the waterfall. A future subject of the Moustache-monster, fitted with a Zeiss, exploring with that nice binocular the whole hillock of Venere Brodolona inch by inch, grassblade after grassblade, Teuton fashion, suddenly what does he spy under the blazing hot sun but a kind of inhaling-exhaling spider: a strange knot in the shadow of a broad laurel bush, one of the most gregorian, according to his Baedeker, of all Tivoli’s shrubs; a sort of back, in a jacket such as hoers wear, with four legs and four feet, two of which were, however, upside-down. And that hellbent back seemed gripped by a metronomically regulated and uncontrollable frenzy of alternative nature. The lorgnetted walrus had then thought it his duty to report to management – “Verwaltung, Verwaltung!... Wo ist denn die Verwaltung? Driüben links? Ach so!...” – that he’d sought in a sweat right and left and finally discovered, but not a soul was stirring: all out to lunch (then hitting the hay to digest). The following Sunday at nine o’clock Father Domenico thundered (whadda pair a lungs!) from the pulpit of San Francesco that he’d had it with some women, shameless (all around), swearing ‘em all to hell way down underground where they had waiting just the place. He shimmied his head and shook his fist, s’ if he was haranguing by turns now Marta, now Maddalena, then Pietro, then Paolo. But all his flock understood from the first roar where he’d wind up, with those eyes bugged out and that fury, s’ if he wanted to take a bite outa somebody, that by and by, of course, he tamed down, little by little, going on to lay into the devil, taking it all out on him: and not a peep out of the other one while he played dead, he was so scared. Then the preacher mounted all sweetness and light back up the slope towards “the wonders of art and the patriotic charity so becomingly bestowed on this ancient Tibur by the providential hand of the Roman Pontiff Gregory XVI, after the great telluric cataclysm of 1826 and the harrowing flood of our own Aniene”, flooding of which the reverend father shared the pride, being native of Filettino, close to the river’s source and 3500 feet above sea level, “in our day contaminated, alas”, the wonders, “by the reeking, pestilent breath of darkness, lying ever in wait, wherever it knows it can claim a life, tear a soul away from eternal salvation”. Even in the bushes at Villa Gregoriana.

Having come to the irremediable malady, dottor Fumi faltered and started to cough, as when a little tad of something attempts a detour and lodges in the windpipe. In the heat of recitation, at one point a drop of saliva had gone down the wrong tube. And on and on,
that fit of coughing bent on ripping his lungs out.

The face nearly colorless, but the veins on the forehead swollen, the whole works turgid but still intact from the explosion of that internal freight. Slapped on the back, by and by he recovered himself and got going again: indeed with refreshed voice. One would have thought, presently, one were listening to a counsel for the defense who plunges into the abysmal folds of his harangue with apparent composure, yet forbidding the worst, and ready to conjure up that diabolical malignity: "of the forsaken Luigia". A tidy sum, forty-eight thousand, to her cousin, dottor Giuliano Valdarena, son of Romolo and Matilde nee Rabitti, born et cetera. Item: a diamond ring "bequeathed to me by my grandfather, Rutilio Valdarena, as a sacred legacy, as well as the gold watch chain with a fob of semi-precious stone" (sic: nec aliter)" that belonged to the same." Item: a tortoise-shell snuffbox "with gold trim", and lastly some onyxstone briolettes or small pearls of lapis-lazuli, also of agnic provenance, "in order that he may remember me like a sister, who from heaven will bear him constantly in her prayers; and that he may follow the shining example of his Valdarena grandparents and of the unforgettable Uncle Peppe" (uncle Peppe, coerced grantor of the local fascia, was in fact still pinching snuff from his turtle in 1925, Viale della Regina, 326). "And may he ever strive to proceed along the path of goodness, the only capable of uniting us, in life as in death, with God’s mercy." She had not left out, either, the old (now retired) housemaid, Rosa Taddei, paralyzed at the San Camillo hospital; nor Assunta Crocchiapaini (actually Crocchiapani: an error doubtless due to the handwriting or to a lapsus on the commissioner’s part), Alban virgin without any palsy whatsoever surmounted with lofty silence, with flashing eyes: "for whose flowering womanhood I hope and pray, now and ever, with all my woman’s heart, the supreme felicity of Christian offspring." She was leaving to Assunta, among other things, six king-size bedsheets, eighteen pillowcases, plus twelve fringed towels, specifying which ones. There followed various, but far from negligible, bequests to feminine charities and institutions: some legacies to the nuns of Sant’Orsola, others to some acquaintances and friends, as well as to a variety of infants and young girls, "today tender flowers of innocence, tomorrow, with the Lord’s keeping, holy mothers cherished by our nation."

Finally a small pile, twenty thousand lire, to the present-and-all-ears-without-letting-on don Corpi, besides an ivory crucifix on a cross of ebony, "so that he may aid me by his good word, as he has in this vale of tears here below, by his paternal counsel and the doctrine of our Holy Church, through the paths of Purgatory to the hope of Heaven."

"This", exclaimed dottor Fumi, striking with the first two knuckles of his right hand those poor sheets where had moved the charming
fingers of the slain woman (he held them at the same time with the left), “is a woman whose kind you don’t see anymore!”

All hushed. Balducci, notwithstanding those endowments, seemed the first to have tears in his eyes. In truth, without going so far, he too gave signs of having been persuaded. The warm, deductive sonority of the voice and phrasing had convinced just about everyone - some to take, others to renounce - huddling ships formerly sailed astray within the safe harbor of God’s will. A fine, male Parthenopean voice, when it emerges from the limpid profundities of deduction, with the light nakedness of a siren rising from the aquatic milkyness ‘neath a Gajola PL moon, comes completely unencumbered, in its every twist and turn, of that angrily assertive aspect belonging with certain brutes to the north and their goose-stepping führen. It pleases, is pleasing to our ear to surrender to proof melodiously disposed, like an enchanted float lulled by the depths and borne on the sweet downtide. Sonorous flow is but the symbol of logical flow. The fount of Eleatic exposition purls and spreads out into the distinctions and dichotomies of the spirit, or the into blind rotations of chance, streaming on in an histrionically heraclitean flow, pentad de Polemoj, brimful of curiosities, of desires, of yearnings, of expectations, of doubts, of anxieties, of dialectical hopes. The listener finds himself enabled to suppose in all directions. The appeal of the adversary turns to dust in that musical voluptuosity, is remoulded with a new nose, like a Janus face seen from the front, then instantly from behind.

All were hushed.

To read and hear read that text, in truth a bit out of the ordinary, with such conviction, one would have thought that in the act of writing that will poor Liliana, prey to a kind of madness or divinatory hallucination, foresaw her proximate end, or had even pondered suicide. The will was dated 12 January, two months before. Her birthday, Balducci apprised them, just after Epiphany. “The venting of an overwrought mind”, someone silently observed. To her husband, as well as to don Ciccio and don Lorenzo, the handwriting also betrayed a certain choppiness, a kind of turmoil: good practise for a graphologist. An odd elation at parting from things, from their names, from symbols; that keen pleasure in leave-taking that straightaway characterizes heroic spirits, as well as minds unconsciously inclined to self-destruction, like those who, even prior to embarking on a voyage, are surprised with one foot already on the ferry landing, on the dismal shores.

Ingravallo was thinking. He got to thinking that Christmas, the crèche, then the Epiphany... with their frankincense and myrrh... with their kids and their presents... with that nimbus of gold filament beneath the infant Jesus... crèche straw, light of the divine wellhead... may all have heaped together, in Signora Balducci, as in a mental
stormcloud, certain melancholy obsessions: January 12th. The poor testatrix must have let her feelings run away with her, that day. And yet, darn it all!... Yet she'd retained every provision, changing nothing, not even later on, in February or March. Not one syllable. That was why, moreover, she'd entrusted her will to don Corpi, imploring him to "hide it and forget about it".

An enigmatic choice of words: but clear, now, to don Ciccio: forget the document as long as she lived, as if the poor woman were pining to see that sordid list of belongings buried as soon as possible: those goods that only a final forgetting of self had allowed her to cast off. Those possessions which, at each new day, re-anchored her to life's vain motives and its obligations, while her soul (her precious soul!) was already listing toward a sort of expatriation from the useless land, to maternal quietude. The city and its people would hail the future. As for her, Liliana... Oblivious to the shouts and the stalls, at the sweet hour when all goodbyes must be said and the colors of the walls, still warm, fade into gloom, Hermes of brief opaline wings would appear to her in his real essence, mute yet imperious, at the threshold of the door of departure, to leave the city and its babble to finally descend, to travel down into more forgivable inanity. Evasi, effugi: spes et fortuna valete: nil mihi vobiscum est: ludificate alios. Read on a sarcophagus, at the Lateran Museum, Liliana had held onto those words, had entreated him to translate them for her.

"That giving, that bestowing, that sharing!" Ingravallo thought. So many manifestations, to his mind, that jarred with the carnal, and consequently the psychical, nature of woman (puny females, he thought of certain ones, petite-bourgeoises), who rather tends to hoard and to harbor for herself or her little ones, white, black or coffee-creme. Or to waste come what may, to dissipate without giving to others, sending up in smoke a hundred thousand bills in the cult of self, of her own neck, her own nose, her earlobes, lips; never, however - don Ciccio mused pitilessly on in a sort of pre-ordained delirium - never, however, in honor of her competitors, all the less if they happen to be younger women. That throwing away, that scattering of petals in the wind, of flowers cast in a stream, of all that counts most, kept most under lock and key - the bedsheets! - all contrary to the laws of the human breast which, if it gives, either gives only in words or gives what it doesn't own - all that had finally revealed to don Ciccio the emotional disturbance of the victim: the characteristic psychosis of unsatisfied women or deeply humiliated souls. Almost, in a word, a panic dissociation, a tendency to chaos; a longing to start again from zero, from the prime possibility: a "regression to the indeterminate". In the sense that only the indeterminate, the Abyss or the Darkness, can re-discover, to the chain of determining causes, a new ascesis: a renewed form, a renewed fortune. For Liliana, it was also true, the
inhibitory or, better, the cohibitory puissances of Faith were still impelling: the formal precepts of doctrine; the symbol operating as light, as certitude. Irradiated on the soul. Thus Ingravallo mused. The twelve lemmas had had the effect of channeling her psychosis towards the conduit of a perfectly legal holograph will. Death’s budget was balanced to the digit. Beyond the confessor and the notary, the pure spaces of Mercy. Or, for others, free ages, the unknown freedom of non-being.

The female personality - Ingravallo groused inwardly, as if affirming its properties to himself - what was that all about?... The female personality, typically centergravitated toward the ovaries, differs from that of the male in so far as the very activity of the cortex, in th’ brains a winmen, is expressed in an assimilation, and in a re-making, of a reasoning - if you can call it reas’nin’ - of the masculine element, or indeed in an echolalic re-issuing of the words bandied about by the man she most respects: a prof, a hotshot ‘ttorney-at-law, a manager, or that slob onna balcony over at Chigi Palace. The morality-individuality of the woman is concentrated on and emotionally solidifies around the husband (or one discharging that function), plucking from the lips of the idol the diurnal oracle of implicit reprimand: for there is not a man born, who does not feel himself an Apollo in the Delphic shrine. The markedly echolalic quality of her soul (the Council of Mainz, in 589, granted her a soul: by a majority vote) drives her to flutter, softly, round the prop of matrimony: pliable wax, from the seal she beseeches the imprint; from the husband the word and the warmth, the ethos and the pathos. Whence, that is from the husband, the pausing and grievous gestation, the laborious issue of sons and daughters. Failing to provide her with children, Ingravallo judged, the fifty-eight-year-old husband is demoted through no fault of his own to the rank of dear albeit flimsy friend, to agreeable house ornament, delegaged to secretary-general of the confederation of knick-knacks, to mere image or rather dummy bridegroom: and man in general (in her unconscious assimilation) is degraded to puppet: an unfruitful creature, a parade mannequin. A now useless gadget, an unthreaded gimlet.

It is then that the poor creature comes apart, like a once-bright flower or corolla shedding its petals to the wind. The tired and gentle soul flees toward the red cross and, in the unconscious, “abandons the husband”: indeed, all men as sexual beings. Her personality, structurally founded on envy towards the male and pacified only by offspring, lacking these, enters into a sort of desperate jealousy and, at the same time, forced sororal simpatia towards the co-sexed.

It yields, one might infer, to a form of sublimated homo-eroticism; that is, to metaphysical paternity. God having forgotten her - Ingravallo was, by now, writhing with pain and rancour - she kisses
and caresses in her dreams the fecund wombs of co-sisters. She looks at the children of others, among the garden flowers, and she cries. She applies to nunneries and orphanages just to have "her" baby, just to "make", she also, her little one. Meanwhile time presses, and the years call from their dim cavern. From one year to the next, counseling charity has supplanted the soft vial of love.

... 

In the small desk near the balcony, in Via Nicotera, Sergeant Di Pietrantonio, seconded by officer Paolillo, came across ten thousand lire in ten crisp notes. The members of Giuliano’s family, filled with consternation over Liliana’s death, then by the arbitrary arrest, they said, of the young man, could not determine the money’s source. The people at Standard Oil maintained they’d given him nothing over what normally came to him at the end of February. Ten thousand lire! Slim chance that Giuliano had, even in a year, put it aside out of his pay, on his recent graduate’s, representative’s and goodlooking young man’s salary. With the costs of a wedding in view, which comes down to saying already in part paid out.

A salary, adequate as it was, plus a percentage on the sales he handled might allow him, in Rome, to feed, dress and cleanse himself, as well as pay the rent on the nice room with bath at Signora Amalia’s; cigarettes and manicures not included, ditto his grandmother’s fettuccine. Women, seeing his charm, of which don Ciccio was so jealous, presumably didn’t cost him all that much. In the words of his family, as well as those of the owner (of the apartment, if not of the townhouse), “he got a lot of invitations”.

“Yes, he had visitors to his room, yes. No, not the lady in the photo. Some ladies of the aristocracy...” (she warbled). Ingravallo let a mental sigh out of deference. The room had a private entry. In announcing this convenient peculiarity the landlady’s voice took on the serious and haughty tone of a building contractor who proclaims “prime location, three baths”. “But most of all a whole lot of invitations. Because everybody was very fond of him.” “You mean every female”, don Ciccio grumbled to himself, getting a load of the great sunken eyes on Signora Amalia, rimmed by a pair of blue crescent moons that matched the twin gold quarter-moons hitched to her ear-lobes. At the first toss of her head you expected them to jingle-jangle like on a Sultan’s odalisque.

Ingravallo put Valdarena, already heard that day, through an umpteenth interrogation. Dark out already, seven-thirty. He’d lit, as a bolster, a “special” lamp that shafted light onto his table. At a given moment, without forewarning, he uncovered the crime evidence: the chain, the diamond ring, the ten thousand-lire notes. He’d also thrown
the photo of Liliana (not evidence) into the pot for good measure. At the sight of that money and those objects on the table with Liliana’s portrait Valdarena turned instantly red: don Ciccio’d yanked away a newspaper screening them all. The young man sunk into a chair, then rose again slowly, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He got ahold of himself and looked his inquisitor in the eye. His neck, his whole head jerked with a sweep of hair: as if steeling himself to call it quits. Instead, after hanging back an instant, he entered into the bold, in fact nearly eloquent phase of his stubbornness and self-defense.

“Officer”, he shouted, with the imperiousness one feels in recognizing oneself as the object of the actions and sentiments of another and claiming their legitimacy, “there’s no point in me keeping my mouth shut, out of fear for what people might say, or respect for the dead, for a poor murdered creature, or out of shame for myself. My poor cousin Liliana... yeah, she loved me. All there is to it. She wasn’t in love with me maybe... That, no. I mean... not the way another woman would’ve loved me in her place. Oh! Liliana! But if her woman’s conscience (sic) had let her, if the religion she was born into and grew up with... then, well, yes, I’m sure she would’ve fallen for me, would’ve loved me, madly.” Ingravallo went pale.

“Like all the others.”
“Yeah, all of them.”

Giuliano seemed not to take this in. “Her life-long dream, the great dream of her life, was to... join herself to a man”, he glanced at Ingravallo glowering there, “to a man, or maybe a snake, even, who might be capable of giving her the baby she was dying for: ‘her’ baby, the kid... she waited in vain for and cried over then for so long. She’d cry, she’d be praying... When she started to realize that the years were slipping by, then, so long! Poor Liliana! In her excited state she didn’t want to accept her own incapacity. Flatly refused to admit it. She never said it in so many words, but she had fantasies that with some other man, maybe... Believe me, Officer, there’s such a thing as physical pride, a bodily vanity, deep down. Of course we men, we’re all a bunch of cocks of the walk, showing off our feathers, get our kicks strutting up ‘n down the Corso, some more, some less.”

“But women are vainglorious also: physical vainglory, I mean. You probably know better than I do.” Ingravallo choked back his spleen, black as a thundercloud. “Poor Liliana, in talking to her on our own, among cousins, I could really tell... she thrived on this fantasy of hers, like: that with some other man... Another man! Not exactly a picnic, with all her religion! So in her dream, way down inside... she had this impression, the belief... that that other guy, that man, you know, could’ve been me...”

“Ah!” went don Ciccio, with a dreadful scowl, his features black as pitch. “My most heartfelt congratulations!”
“Don’t laugh, officer!” the suspect cried exaggeratedly, his youthful pallor aglow under the light’s glare. “Don’t! Don’t laugh! All the time Liliana talked to me about it! Every time she told me she’d loved Remo... truly: in my view sort of foolishly, poor thing.”

Ingravallo couldn’t help but grant him this, deep down: “An only daughter! Without a mother, zero experience...”

She’d loved him, of course, “from the very first day she’d seen him”. “She loved him still now, thought highly of him, poor Lily!” Giuliano’s voice hesitated, then came free: “Religion aside, she wouldn’t’ve dreamed of cheating on him for anything in the world. But then feeling the years go by like that, her prime, without even any hope... of some fruit of their love... for her it was an excruciating disappointment. She felt humiliated, like all women feel when no kid turns up: more than sorrow there’s bitterness at thinking other women are victorious, and they no. The most galling of life’s disappointments. So for her the world was nothing but weariness, nothing but a vale of tears. But even crying was no relief. Weary, weary, weary. A morass of tears.”

NOTES

1. **Termini:** Rome’s central train station.
2. **Sarzana:** train arriving from Sarzana, a town in the La Spezia province.
3. **Cav. Uff. Mucellato:** Cavaliere Ufficiale, an official title graded above Commendatore.
4. **perpetrator ... ago:** actual words of Mussolini during the Girolimoni case (see note 14 in this chapter).
5. **Terracina:** a seaside town in the Latina province.
6. **One ... Commerciale:** two major Roman banks.
7. **gentes:** family.
8. **Commodatum repetunt rem:** “they ask for the restitution of the thing lent.” In legal terminology, the “commodato” is the free, temporary concession of goods.
9. **asperges in nomine Domini:** you will bless in the name of the Lord. Latin benediction formula, part of the Catholic rite.
10. **that old gent:** in the original Italian, *marenghi* are gold coins first coined by Napoleon after the battle of Marengo (1800). The reference here is to those coins subsequently minted bearing the face of Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoia (1820-78), called the *galantuomo brutto* (the ugly gentleman).
11. **Manet sub Jove frigido:** quote from Horace’s *Odes*, I, 1, v. 25: “he lingers under the cold heavens”. The citation, which stands out within a colloquial passage dealing with the Valdarena family’s condemnation of Balducci, reflects a judgement by the narrator. The rest of Horace’s lines read: “Multos castra iuvant et lituo tubae / Permixtus sonitus bellaque matribus / Detestata. Manet sub Jove frigido / Venator tenerae contius immemor” (“Many like the military life, the sound of trumpets and the wars cursed by mothers. The hunter lingers under the cold heavens, forgetful of his loving bride”). Balducci
has both dodged the war (see later in the chapter) and his responsibilities as husband.

12. **Inopinate ... equinoxes**: stock dividends were paid out to account holders toward the end of March, i.e. at the equinox.

13. **Oreste**: the various members of the Valdarena family are modelled on the tragic figures in Aeschylus’ cycle, *Oresteia*. In addition to the nephew, Oreste, the aunts would therefore correspond to the Erinyes or Furies (Alecto, Tisiphone and Megaera, the latter referred to by Gadda later in the chapter), whose essential function was to avenge crime, particularly offenses against the family.

14. **Pirroficoni**: allusion to the real case of Gino Girolimoni, unjustly accused of having sexually assaulted several small girls in 1927 and then absolved in March 1928. He was used as a scapegoat to demonstrate the efficiency and moral reform of the Fascist regime.

15. **brute ... jawbone**: allusion to the Biblical story of Samson in Judges 15, 15-16.

16. **coute que coute**: whatever the cost.

17. **anguimaned Megaera**: one of the three Furies or Erinyes, usually represented as having their hair entwined with snakes (*anguimaned*).

18. **vox populi** voice of the mob.


20. **qu’il ... victim**: “that they need a victim” (in French in Tolstoy’s text).

21. **Murat**: J. Murat (1767-1815), who commanded the French cavalry during Napoleon’s Russian campaign in 1812.

22. **chez nous**: in Italy.

23. **Borodino**: Russian defeat of Sept. 7, 1812.

24. **O ... Beccaria**: sarcastic appeal to the *Manes* (the spirits of the dead to whom relatives pay homage with gifts, in ancient Roman religion), here to the spirit of Cesare Beccaria (1738-1894), celebrated jurist and author of *Dei delitti e delle pene*, an early attempt to reform the penal code and do away with, among other practices, precisely torture as means to extort confession. The allusion in Gadda to Beccaria is also to Beccaria’s grandson, Alessandro Manzoni, to whom the entire passage pays particular homage for its defense of a victim of official abuse.

25. **federzonitis**: forced moralization of Federzoni (see chap. 3, note 6).

26. **extra muros**: beyond the city walls.

27. **Consule ... impestatissimo**: an inscription invented by the author in macaronic Latin: “Under the consulship of Federzoni, Rosa Maltoni the mother (*enixa*, “having given birth”), in the time of the pestilent dictator Maledito Merdonio”. Rosa Maltoni was Mussolini’s mother.

28. **ad libitum**: as much as one likes.

29. **greater ... Irnerius**: famous medieval commentator of Roman law, who lived from 1060 to 1130.

30. **snatched ... Fiori**: at the market in Piazza Campo dei Fiori.

31. **Commerciale**: Banca Commerciale.

32. **Prati**: Roman residential neighborhood developed after 1870.

33. **D’Azeglio**: hotel near the central Termini railway station.

34. **Aventine ... Coelium**: two of Rome’s seven hills.

35. **Roccafringoli**: a locality invented by Gadda.
37. Villa D'Este ... waterfall: two villas in Tivoli, noted for their gardens and imaginative fountains fed by the Aniene river.
38. Zeiss: a brand of German binoculars.
39. Brodolona: author’s invention, probable reference to the epithet "anadyomene" applied to the goddess Venus who emerged from the sea at birth. "Brodolona", from the Italian meaning “to spill over oneself”, probably refers to the fountain statues which are plentiful at the Villa D'Este.
40. bush ... shrubs: a laurel bush, imported to Italy by Pope Gregory XVI (1765-1846), according to the Baedeker travel guide.
41. Verwaltung ... Ach so: “The headquarters, the headquarters!... Where are the headquarters? There on the left? Ah, right!...”.
42. Tibur: ancient name for Tivoli.
43. charity ... Aniene: the Pope was instrumental in the works to repair the channel of the Aniene river after the flooding of 1826.
44. Filettino: town in the province of Frosinone.
45. sic: nec aliter: thus and not otherwise.
46. coerced ... fascio: forced to finance the local section of the Fascist Party.
47. Gajola: Gaiola, a town in Campania on the Gulf of Naples.
48. Eleatic: reference to Parmenides of Elea (520-440 B.C.)
49. heraclitean: typical of the philosopher Heraclitus (550-480 B.C.). He believed that unity could be found behind the apparent opposition of contraries (pónta de pÔlemon, “all is war”).
50. Janus face: the statues of the Roman god Janus had two faces, front and rear.
51. Hermes ... wings: see chap. 1, note 53.
52. Evasi ... alios: “Having reached the end, I crossed the threshold: farewell hope and destiny: I no longer have anything to do with you: make sport of others”. Inscription on pagan sarcophagus dating from the third century, A.D. in the Lateran Museum, as indicated by Gadda in an earlier draft of the novel.
53. dissociation: a psychological term meaning “the disintegration of personality”.
54. twelve lemmas: the twelve propositions of the Christian credo.
55. Apollo ... shrine: the god Apollo was especially honored at the shrine of Delphi, famous for its oracles.
56. Council ... 589: Magonza in the original text, the Italian form for the German city of Mainz. Despite the importance of the bishopric of Mainz in 589, there is no record of any such council. In 585 there was a council in Mâcon (see Gregory of Tours, The History of the Franks, VIII.20) in which “a certain bishop” denied that women belonged to humankind and possessed a rational soul.
57. simpaqi: in the original text, Gadda simply spells the Italian simpatia (sympathy) with Greek characters (the corresponding Greek word is actually sumpaqaia).
58. weariness ... tears: Gadda alludes here to the poem by Giacomo Leopardi entitled A se stesso: “Amaro e noia / la vita, altro mai nulla; e fango il mondo” (vv. 9-10).