

Hamlet's ghost: the re-writing of Shakespeare in C.E. Gadda.

Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) was fascinated by the work of Shakespeare throughout the course of his life. There is uninterrupted evidence of this, from the earliest known private writings (the war diaries of the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, 1915-19, where we find the first of a long series of references¹) to the very last statements (as late as in 1972 – one year before his death - Gadda "confesses" to be reading the *Sonnets*²). In a 1958 interview Gadda names Shakespeare as the *one* writer whose work he would "perhaps" take with him, if he had to leave the planet never to return (Gadda 2007, p. 67). The catalogues of what remains of his libraries (now held in Rome and Milan) reveal a significant presence of the English author, including the complete oeuvre in the original and the collection of all the plays in Italian translation, in addition to several different editions of individual works (among these, three of *Hamlet*, two of *Macbeth*, three of the *Sonnets*), as well as a handful of critical volumes on Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre. My contribution will try to provide a brief answer to a double question: why was Gadda so interested in the English dramatist? And what was the influence of the latter's work on his own?³

Gadda's interest in Shakespeare has not escaped the attention of critics, but for a long time generic awareness failed to give rise to sustained analyses. After initial hints, cursorily provided by some among the best representatives of early Gaddian criticism (in particular Gianfranco Contini, Giancarlo Roscioni, and later Guglielmo Gorni), it is only after the turn of the new millennium that the matter of the relationship between Gadda and Shakespeare has started to become the object of proper investigation. It is easy to understand the reasons why the Shakespearian connection did not – despite its obvious relevance – receive adequate prominence in the early critical approaches. The link between Gadda's unique and unclassifiable style and his literary lineage is perceived to correspond to a very complex diagram of diverse preferences and influences, including (for what concerns just the "local" components): the classical Roman writers (Horace in particular); the "macaronic" poetry of the 16th century (Teofilo Folengo); and the "Lombard" line, represented by several, contrasting strains (the Enlightenment thinkers; Giuseppe Parini; Alessandro Manzoni; the dialectal poetry of Carlo Porta; and the Milanese "Scapigliatura" of the late 19th century). Foreign influences were quickly detected⁴, notably from French, Spanish and Russian literatures (Rabelais, Flaubert, Balzac, Céline, the Spanish Baroque, Dostoyevsky), but not explored in any great depth; and more subtle or distant – but equally intriguing – consonances and echoes (Joyce, Beckett, Leiris, Faulkner, Dürrenmatt, etc.) became objects for analysis only more recently. In all of this, the true significance of Gadda's explicit and constant reference to Shakespeare remained, as it were, drowned in the general noise and, for a long time, taken for granted but under researched

¹ See *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* (Gadda 1992, p. 1123).

² See Gadda 2007, p. 172.

³ This essay takes as its starting point a short entry (*Amleto*) that I wrote for the *Pocket Gadda Encyclopedia* (Stellardi 2008).

⁴ Guglielmo Gorni, for instance, suggested that it is abroad that one should look for the most original and significant stimuli absorbed by the Milanese writer and used in creating the protagonist of *La cognizione del dolore*, among which he specifically named Shakespeare: but, curiously, Gorni at the same time liquidates this influence, on the one hand, by declaring it obvious (and therefore unworthy of further examination) and, on the other, by reducing it, in the wake of Roscioni, to a matter of style (with reference in particular to aspects of the comic and the grotesque). For specific references, see Bertone 2004, pp. 108 and 128.

and, for the most attentive readers, somewhat enigmatic. It is only more recently that the matter started to attract adequate attention⁵, and that Shakespeare's centrality within the vast array of Gadda's models became apparent.

Let's start by saying that the particular issue of Gadda's relationship to Shakespeare needs to be seen within a broader context. The question of how to classify Gadda's aesthetics remains to this day an open and controversial one⁶, with critical opinion divided in associating the Milanese writer with one or the other of the available formulae (Modernism, Postmodernism, Expressionism, etc.) – or none at all. The difficulty arises because of Gadda's reiterated (but contradictory and ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to define his own poetics, and the obvious clash between some of his statements and his actual style; it is this permanent conceptual tension which still makes it impossible to reach firm conclusions, but at the same time maintains an aura of originality and even uniqueness around Gadda's oeuvre.

Be it as it may, it is clear that Shakespeare plays a very significant part in Gadda's literary imaginary⁷. To summarize, we could say that the English author is a crucial component of the diagram of combined and opposing forces that, together, constitute Gadda's literary cipher. If this system cannot be reconciled and reduced to a single poetics, it is also because it remains fundamentally fractured between antagonistic principles, which however are not hermetically separated. So – to simplify – we have Manzoni on one side (representing linguistic and ethical clarity, and life guided by belief), and Shakespeare on the other (representing "baroque" complexity, and life subjected to chaos). The two influences are not diametrically opposed: on the contrary, it is most likely *through* Manzoni that Gadda first read Shakespeare (Manzoni was an admirer of the English author; see Bonci 2012, ch. 1.3.2 and 2.3); and, furthermore, there are clear consonances between the ways the two Italians interpret the English dramatist. For instance, the ethical dimension (and especially the notion of moral responsibility) is something they both hold very dear, even though Manzoni's Christian faith and consequent adherence to a providential vision of human history clearly separates him from both Gadda's and Shakespeare's vision of life.

An important point to underline is that, from very early on, Gadda's interest in Shakespeare goes well beyond the level of simple aesthetic consonance or stylistic affinity. It is certainly true that Shakespeare represents for him (together with many other writers of the 16th and 17th centuries) the rich inventiveness and formal liberty of a literary language that rejects all academic shackles in favour of total expressive freedom; but this is not all. Shakespeare's impact goes much deeper, and this in at least two ways:

- 1) On the one hand, the future writer is not only attracted to the playwright's mastery with words and inventive ability, but also (and particularly) interested in his *thought*, that is, in the way his work conveys a vision of the world, a *Weltanschauung*, a more profound understanding of the human condition; using an adjective dear to Gadda, it carries *heuristic* meaning, as well as artistic value (and indeed, for him, the two must necessarily combine in order to create a true

⁵ I am especially indebted to the work of Benedetta Biondi (2002); Manuela Bertone (2004), who explicitly describes *La cognizione del dolore* as a "riscrittura gaddiana dell'*Amleto*" (p. 109); Roberto Bonci (2012); and Cosetta Veronese (2013). In addition to critical interest, the Gadda-Shakespeare link is also prominent in Fabrizio Gifuni's *Gadda goes to War* (Gifuni 2013), a dramatic performance consisting of an original contamination of the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* and *Hamlet*.

⁶ It is impossible to provide here a comprehensive discussion of these complex issues; the interested reader will find a full account of my position in my article "«In nome di quale poetica?»: l'antipoetica di Gadda", forthcoming in a special issue on Gadda of *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*.

⁷ The work of Roberto Bonci is particularly useful in mapping out the schematics of this relationship. I register here my gratitude to him for allowing me to refer to the findings contained in his (as yet) unpublished thesis (Bonci 2012).

work of art). A clear signal of this meta-literary perspective is that in the mid-twenties, when Gadda was studying in Milan for a degree in philosophy, he also envisaged writing a critical essay, precisely on Shakespeare's thought⁸.

- 2) On the other hand, there is in Gadda (as is often the case with his literary allegiances) a strong component of subjective projection and identification, in this case not with the dramatist himself, but with some of his characters – and one in particular. This autobiographical dimension is crucial for a correct understanding of the role played by Shakespeare, and I shall return to it in a moment.

Clearly those two aspects identify a sort of polarity and therefore an opposition – or at least (again) a tension – between, let's say, universality (the world, and the need to grasp it conceptually) and particularity (the self, and the need to express it emotionally): a contrast which is massively present in Gadda's work (and also in his mind, with at times very painful consequences), but also a fundamental component of much artistic creation in general, and of tragic imagination (including Shakespeare's) more specifically.

Concerning the first point (the importance of *thought*, as opposed to *style*), it should perhaps be remembered that a literary career was not, for the young Gadda, the only or the automatic choice: whilst his family (and specifically his mother) exerted constant pressure to coerce him into some form of "serious", professional training⁹, in terms of his own inclinations he was for a long time drawn to both literature and philosophy. This dual vocation became particularly visible after his return from Argentina (1924), when – at the same time as enrolling in a formal course of philosophical studies – he decided to write a novel, which was provisionally entitled *Racconto italiano di ignoto del novecento* and remained unfinished. He never completed a degree in philosophy, either, but in 1928 he composed a philosophical dialogue (published only posthumously), entitled *Meditazione milanese*. Both *Racconto italiano* and *Meditazione milanese* include references to Shakespeare, as well as ideas that can be directly connected with Shakespeare's *thought*, as expounded in Gadda's later essays: clear proof that the English dramatist was, from very early on, central to Gadda's reflection and very close to his heart, indeed to both chambers of his heart: the literary and the philosophical.

One thing that is evident from an even superficial examination of Gadda's writings, and which critics have duly highlighted, is the central space occupied for him, among the vast Shakespearean canon, by *Hamlet*. The first explicit reference (in a text published during Gadda's life) can be found in *Le meraviglie d'Italia* (1939; see Gadda 1991, p. 105). But the posthumous materials show that his first encounter with the play dates from long before.

In *Racconto italiano* the names of both Shakespeare and Hamlet make a significant appearance. The Prince of Denmark takes on the role of a sort of "model character", that is (quoting Gadda's own words in the preparatory notes), someone who, in a play or a narrative, a) is an active agent in the dramatic plot ("gestore del dramma"), b) knows what is truly going on ("conoscitore del dramma gestito"), and c) provides the link between the particular and the universal, on both a theoretical and practical level ("riallacciatore con l'universale"). Whilst most characters represent one or two of those fundamental perspectives, only very few combine them all: Hamlet is one of those very few, and in fact becomes for Gadda not only a great theatrical creation, but the very

⁸ See Dante Isella's notes to the "Racconti incompiuti", in Gadda 1989, p. 1306.

⁹ Gadda succumbed to the pressure: upon his return from the First World War, faced with the family's financial hardship, he completed his degree in engineering and went on – albeit reluctantly – to practice the profession, both in Italy and abroad, until 1935. He was, in fact, known throughout his life (also among the literati) as "l'Ingegnere".

quintessence of dramatic figuration¹⁰. So much so that he finds it impossible to replicate its complexity within a single character in his own projected story, and decides instead to diffract it in two separate figures: 1) Grifonetto Lampugnani, the type a) character, who makes the plot move forward, but in the course of the narrative also turns into a type b) and begins to discover the "abnormal" under the "normal"; and 2) Gerolamo Lehrer, representing the type c) character, the one who overlays a philosophical judgement on the events (see Bonci 2012, p. 63)¹¹.

If *Racconto italiano* consists in a first, clumsy and unaccomplished attempt to project a burning autobiographical matter onto the screen of literary creation (and, in so doing, identifies Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a precedent and model), *Meditazione milanese* moves in a different orbit, that of pure¹² philosophical theory. But here, too, *Hamlet* plays a crucial part (and is explicitly cited); in the dialogue, the correspondence of the abstract distinction being/non-being to the ethical dichotomy good/evil is posited as central to Gadda's reflection. The link with his future discussion of Shakespeare (in the 1952 essay, see below) is evident and was pointed out, among others, by Elio Gioanola (Gioanola 2004, p. 55). This correspondence constitutes the lynchpin of his masterpiece, *La cognizione del dolore*. It can therefore be legitimately suggested that *Meditazione milanese* acts as the (secret, for a long time) conceptual connecting link between the beginnings of Gadda's narrative ambitions (*Racconto italiano*) and the deployment of the great masterpiece of his maturity. Shakespeare and Hamlet are central to the entire trajectory, as they constitute a powerful, external validation and artistic manifestation of Gadda's own vision of life (Bonci 2012, p. 59). To understand more clearly what this vision is and how it connects with Gadda's personal experience we must now move forward in time, to the moment when Shakespeare publicly emerges as an object of critical reflection for Gadda.

Within Gadda's writings over the course of almost fifty years, *Hamlet* not only is the first and most frequently quoted of all the plays of the "Shakespearian canon"; it is also the only one that has attracted direct, detailed and extensive critical analysis on the part of the Milanese writer, in one of his most significant essays. "Amleto al Teatro Valle" is ostensibly the review of a performance of the play in Rome; it was published (with a slightly different title) in 1952, and subsequently included in Gadda's most important collection of non-fictional writings (*I viaggi la morte*, in Gadda 1991). The piece, however, exceeds the limits of an occasional theatrical review, moving from the evaluation of the performance¹³ to the discussion of the philosophical content of the play itself.

It is on the meaning of the term "Hamletic" that Gadda insists in a very polemical manner, and with considerable vehemence, both of which betray a profound and deeply personal involvement. He attacks especially the interpretation of the adjective that sees in the hero the embodiment ofgnoseological doubt, if not even of moral vacillation and indecision. Whereas, for Gadda, "in lui non si contorce il dubbio, chi mai ha inventato questa scemenza? Si palesa invece un dibattito" (Gadda 1991, p. 539). The core of the essay, arguably, consists of Gadda's contemptuous rejection

¹⁰ See Gadda 1993, p. 415.

¹¹ The strategy of duplication or diffraction of dramatic (autobiographical) content through different characters, which is temporarily abandoned by Gadda in *La cognizione del dolore*, is again adopted very effectively in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (published first in *Letteratura*, 1946, and then in volume by Garzanti in 1957).

¹² "Pure" only to a point: I believe that the theoretical intention of Gadda's dialogue (symbolized by the title "*Meditazione*") is systematically debunked by a constant irruption of the particular, the local (prominently represented, even in the title, by the adjective "*milanese*"); and this may be one of the reasons for Gadda's dissatisfaction with the work (which he never published).

¹³ Concerning the performance, Gadda shows admiration for Vittorio Gassman's Hamlet, but criticizes Anna Zareschi, accusing her of portraying the Queen in a far more humane, "maternal" and noble manner than she deserves (Gadda 1991, pp. 543-4). This is significant in the context of his interpretation of the play, as will soon become clear.

of what he regards as a superficial and misguided interpretation of the protagonist's predicament and character, as summarized in the idea of the so called "Hamletic doubt", which he regards as a misnomer; Hamlet, for Gadda, is not engaged in a tentative search for truth because, at the moment of the famous monologue, he knows it with absolute subjective certainty (although he still needs the objective final proof, which will come through the staged "mousetrap" of the actors' performance); nor – on the other hand – is he subject to hesitations of an ethical nature. He is not affected by any degree of moral uncertainty concerning his future behaviour: he knows exactly what needs to be done and is simply (but only momentarily) pausing to reflect on the necessity and momentous consequences of his unavoidable actions. The monologue is an instance of reflection and self-collection, not hesitation. Or we could say that the doubt, if anything, is a merely rhetorical one: what to do? Live the false life dictated by the respect of forms, and therefore resign oneself to not-being; or instead chose truly to exist, to take in hand the command of justice? Hamlet knows that he will not be able to eschew his duty, the more so since it coincides with his only chance to escape an empty life and fulfil his destiny.

Nevertheless the reflective pause is neither futile, nor unjustified; the inevitable action will lead to the negation not only of someone else's life, but also of his own. The choice in favour of affirming truth is therefore, at the same time, salvific and destructive. Far from symbolizing doubt and wavering, Hamlet represents and embraces the absolute clarity of ultimate self-sacrifice. The same argument returns in Gadda repeatedly, before and after the 1952 essay, for instance in the reviews "Il Faust tradotto da Manacorda" (1932; Gadda 1991, p. 759) and "Giuseppe Berto, *Il male oscuro*" (1965; Gadda 1991, p. 1200). Most importantly, it can be found in the preparatory notes for his first (complete) published novel, *La cognizione del dolore*.

There is little doubt that Gonzalo Pirobutirro (the autobiographical protagonist of *La cognizione*) has clear Hamletic traits; a brooding, isolated, melancholic and eccentric figure, he lives in state of paroxysmic antagonism with his social environment, and with what everybody else regards as "normality" (but which he sees instead as a web of lies). Like Hamlet, Gonzalo, too, is in possession of by now incontestable certainties ("sapeva, sapeva", Gadda 1990, p. 730), demanding urgent action, and finds himself at the decisive junction of his life. To attack the "parvenze non valide" (p. 703) is what the truth/justice imperative dominating his mind requires of him, what his soul wants, in order to affirm itself as valid substance, rather than an inconsistent shadow: "Negare, negare: chi sia Signore e Principe nel giardino della propria anima" (*ibidem*; my emphasis). However, such extreme negation coincides with death: "[...] Ma l'andare nella rancura è sterile passo" (*ibidem*). In destroying false appearances one also destroys every possibility of solidarity, love, compassion, and nothing remains. As is the case in Hamlet, here the ethical subject's heroic self-affirmation corresponds to his self-destruction.

In addition *La cognizione* also contains numerous other similarities or convergences with Shakespeare's drama. Manuela Bertone (cit.) provides a list of the most striking ones and also shows that, reduced to their minimal outlines, both *Hamlet* and *La Cognizione* are in fact the same story: one where the protagonist knows that the superficial appearance of order and good will disguises something evil, a profound sickness poisoning the whole of society. The tragedy consists not only in the fact that the two protagonists, unlike the rest of their conformist environments, see with the utmost clarity this state of affairs and feel duty-bound to remedy it, but even more poignantly in their awareness that the only possible remedy will necessarily entail terrible consequences. Among these consequence, there will be not just the destruction of their respective enemies¹⁴, but at the same time the onslaught on what is most sacred in life, represented in both

¹⁴ In the case of Gonzalo, his imaginary enemy is the whole of society itself.

cases by the figure of the mother. The necessary actions of the two heroes will inevitably cause the untying of sacred bonds, which is perhaps even more horrible than self-immolation itself.

For Gonzalo as for Hamlet, ethical action coincides with a gesture whose destructive implications, both objective and subjective, are unspeakably atrocious, as well as irredeemably immoral: it is the killing of the mother. In both cases, she is at the centre of a web of lies preventing both protagonists from fulfilling their potential as human beings, and instead turning life itself into a monstrous comedy. In her kitchen, at the heart of her villa, in the centre of her little kingdom and of the universe, Gonzalo's mother, like a gigantic spider, weaves her net of apparent goodness, bringing the stench of untruth up to her son's very last refuge (his bedroom), depriving him of any remaining space and energy necessary to live in the only way which is possible to him, that is, in a state of disdainful separation from reality. The conflict with the social environment might not after all prevent life altogether for him, if Gonzalo could at least count on the only ally that he needs to set up, in his own villa, an alternative world to the bourgeois farce which everybody else calls life: his mother. But his mother, far from being a companion for him on his difficult voyage, reveals herself more and more clearly as what she's always been: the enemy, the original and deep source of all evil (see Wehling-Giorgi 2014, ch. 3). The present resentment nourishes itself on the memory of remote injustices suffered or imagined, of incomprehensible cruelties on the part of his chief educator, and also on his secret jealousy toward her other son, preferred by the mother and killed during the war. At the same time, however, she is by definition the source of life itself, the sole dispenser of love, the umbilical cord to reality; to negate the mother, therefore, means to destroy the last bridge to "normality", and the last hope of salvation.

So it is for Hamlet, as well; Queen Gertrude, morally complicit in a horrible crime, is also the principal obstacle to the re-establishment of justice, precisely because her son's natural respect prevents him from hurting her. The necessary and desperate gesture affirming the ethical will of both heroes – a negation of everything that is false, and therefore of everything (including, for Hamlet, Ophelia's innocent love¹⁵, or, for Gonzalo, the innocuous and well-meaning propositions of his doctor¹⁶) – inevitably entails the destruction of the very root of life, symbolically represented by the mother. It true that, in Shakespeare's drama, the death of the Queen is accidental; and in Gadda's novel the possibility (contemplated at the stage of planning) of a direct responsibility of the son in the attack against his mother is only vaguely hinted at; nevertheless both mothers are subjected to the outrage and the violence that both sons secretly presaged and wanted¹⁷, as the necessary precondition for the triumph of truth, and their own liberation. The most terrible consequences will follow from such unnatural excess against the person of the mother, but also against life itself as represented by her (an entanglement of contradictions and lies, and nevertheless an organic system of relations, duties and affections): and so it is that Hamlet immediately dies, whereas of Gonzalo there will be no further mention. But we already know,

¹⁵ "Amleto sente il carattere annichilatore della propria azione, sa di dover cadere lui stesso, nell'atto di operare il cauterio estremo del male, della vergogna e della colpa. Ed è questa, forse, la ragione oscura e profonda per cui egli respinge da sé quella [*scil.* Ophelia] che lo ama riamata (che è nel buio del non sentire e del non essere, etico e fisico)" (Gadda 1991, p. 541).

¹⁶ It is interesting that, in both cases, what is at stake is marriage, that is, biological continuity obtained with society's blessing: Doctor Higueroa, summoned by Gonzalo to diagnose his obscure illness, is (not very subtly) intent on curing the patient by marrying him to one of his several nubile daughters.

¹⁷ And resisted, recognizing it as against nature: "O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom; / Let me be cruel, not unnatural: / I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (Hamlet in Act III, scene II; Shakespeare 1975, p. 148). Even the ghost of Hamlet's father had warned his son not to touch his mother in the pursuit of his just revenge: "But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught; leave her to heaven, / and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, / To prick and sting her" (Act I, scene V; *ibidem*, p. 74).

from the dream episode¹⁸ in the third chapter (Gadda 1990, p. 632), that the disappearance of the mother, rather than heralding psychological freedom and financial emancipation, will only bring Gonzalo increased solitude, despair and remorse ("tutto era mio! mio!.... finalmente.... come il rimorso", *ibidem*).

Another central point, in relation to Hamlet and Gonzalo, concerns the relationship between both protagonists and *thought* itself, which entails something conflictual and unhealthy. The Prince of Denmark states that "the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (Act III, scene I; Shakespeare 1975, p. 122); as to the Marquis Pirobutirro, after uttering a phrase in English that could well be an indirect reference to Hamlet ("but I'm ill of thinking"; Gadda 1988, p. 636), Gonzalo launches a tirade against personal pronouns, which he describes as "i pidocchi del pensiero" ("thought's fleas") (*ibidem*). Thinking, it seems, is part of the illness affecting the two heroes, in as much as an excess of it prevents necessary and potentially salvific action¹⁹.

As we have seen, the uncompromising, wholesale rejection of all false appearances, demanded by respect for the truth and for oneself, can only bring death. The act of ultimate cognition - and the gesture of writing *La cognizione*, which itself incorporates and manifests that act - correspond to that rejection and in part express it; to write *La cognizione* means to put black on white the homicidal intentions of Gonzalo-Hamlet. It is an act of total veri-diction (at least in intention), barely veiled under a thin layer of fiction.

This, however, is where the two stories diverge: in Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet's sacrificial act of redress is successful (albeit at a terrible price), as it re-establishes a just order and makes it possible for society to resume its ordinary life and progress. If natural succession to the throne is prevented by the Prince's death, healthy blood will nevertheless be restored to power in the person of Fortinbras, thus removing the incestuous and monstrous sickness affecting the realm. In contrast, in Gadda's tragi-comedy Gonzalo's dreams of purification are thwarted, the mother is attacked but not by him or another agent of justice²⁰, the evil powers are not in the least affected, and in the end life continues on its foul course, without catharsis or redemption.

The destructive but liberating sequence of events that concludes *Hamlet* is necessary for the accomplishment of the intended ethical purpose, and for the completeness of the dramatic plot; this is missing in Gadda's work, which accordingly (at least from the subjective perspective of the author) fails to achieve its aim. To this extent, Gadda's result (*La cognizione del dolore*) can only be regarded as incomplete and imperfect. Neither Gonzalo, nor his author can fully correspond to their Shakespearian model; the choice in favour of the ethical absolute (or for true life, "to be") has not been brought to its logical conclusion. Gonzalo's life is spared, and so is perhaps that of the mother; but at what price? Interestingly, something similar also happens in Gadda's other novel, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana*: having arrived at his own "Hamletic" moment, when justice should be re-established (but, also, when life – this time represented by Assuntina's exuberant vitality – should be imprisoned and mutilated in the name of abstract and

¹⁸ Gonzalo, like Hamlet, is afflicted by bad dreams and ghostly visions: "[...] were it not that / I have bad dreams" (Act II, scene 2; *ibidem*, p. 100).

¹⁹ For a more extensive discussion of this important point, see Bonci 2012 (ch. IV) and Gioanola 2004.

²⁰ In fact, in the novel's concluding pages the last description of the mother, following the savage attack on her person, is marked by respect; the noble and gentle figure of the old lady seems almost redeemed, through the violence of the unjustified offence suffered, from all the accusations that the son had levelled against her in the course of the narrative. The unambiguous clarity of Hamlet's unwavering judgement, therefore, is not sustained in Gadda's work.

uncomprehending principles, and on behalf of a false authority²¹), detective Ingravallo hesitates and, almost, repents. The second novel, too, concludes without resolution²².

To write *La Cognizione*, right after his mother's death, is for Gadda something resembling Hamlet's terrible choice in favour of truth and justice; but as a gesture of generalized denial of conventions, affections, habits and, globally, of the fragile fabric of life (powerfully subsumed in the iconoclastic symbol of the liberatory violence against the mother), the *Cognizione* is a double-edged sword, whose uncompromising intention cannot be fulfilled. And so it is that *La Cognizione* in the end embodies imperfection and contamination: a compromise between the exorbitant demands of (subjective) truthfulness on the one hand, and the needs of life on the other. If the former requires total lucidity and the refusal of any concessions, the latter yearns for the restoring balms proffered by art: invention and beauty; sublimation and transfiguration; dream, illusion, merriment; oblivion.

It is therefore clear that, like Shakespeare in general²³, so *Hamlet* in particular represents for Gadda not only a precedent in terms of expressive and reflective power, subtlety and complexity, but also the enactment of some among the most crucial tensions affecting him personally, both as a man and as a writer. And it is in this essentially autobiographical sense (and not in terms of formal or genre modelling) that *La cognizione del dolore* can legitimately be seen as a re-writing of *Hamlet*. In this light, the crucial essay of 1952 can be regarded as a disguised peroration *pro domo mea*, and an impassionate defence of Hamlet as Gadda's own double and predecessor.

To summarize, what does Gadda see in *Hamlet* (and strive to reproduce in his own work, in his own way)? The principal components can be listed as follows:

- 1) The dramatic allegory of a world that is not what it seems, since a veneer of innocuous and well-meaning normality hides a monstrous reality that fundamentally contradicts all illusions, as well as the legitimate aspirations of noble souls²⁴;
- 2) Within this broader context, the more specific representation of perverted family relations and, inside it, the most crucial and horrible lie, that of maternal love;
- 3) The contrast between life and spirit: life (represented by Ophelia, or by Gonzalo's mother) demands compromise and illusion; but the spirit is uncompromising in its request for justice, and demands blood;
- 4) The theme of ethical duty, fundamentally opposing (in Romantic fashion) the individual to society, and of sacrifice: to redress injustice (which is also the only way to heal a social life that is secretly rotten), the heroic individual must sacrifice everything, including himself;
- 5) The theme of the "illness of thought", that is, of the fundamental clash between idle contemplation and action.

But what works in Shakespeare, doesn't work in Gadda, who must forfeit, simultaneously: the stylistic and ideal homogeneity of tragedy; the identification of the autobiographical protagonist as a true hero; and a cathartic solution to the dramatic tensions. Gonzalo is no Hamlet, and his world is beyond salvation. Inevitably *La cognizione*, which Gadda conceives as a modern tragedy (and

²¹ The novel is set in Rome at the time of Mussolini's dictatorship.

²² Cosetta Veronese has recently provided an extensive account of Shakespearian resonances in *Quer pasticciaccio*; first among these is the parallel between detective Ingravallo and Hamlet, further confirmation of the persistent and almost obsessive nature of this influence on Gadda (Veronese 2013).

²³ Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's influence on *La cognizione del dolore* is not limited to *Hamlet*; *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are also present to Gadda's mind.

²⁴ This was a dominant theme already in *Racconto italiano*.

concludes on a lyrical note), remains imprisoned in the swamp of contradiction and irresolution, both formally and emotionally.

I would propose that *Hamlet* represents for Gadda the lucid awareness of life's intractable complexity, combined with the obstinate pursuit of a (now) impossible ideal of truth and justice; the underlying issue is therefore ethical and socio-ideological, having to do with the very significance and function of literature in society. Writing, for Gadda, only has meaning in as much as it delivers a payload of truth. This is where the antithetical drives dominating his inspiration should combine: be it through lyrical intensity, macaronic contamination, comic enumeration or baroque proliferation, literature is (or should be) the fulfilment of a moral imperative to truthfulness – or, alternatively, it must resign itself to a purely ornamental contribution, which is tantamount to saying to utter futility. The problem is that, for Gadda, this noble task does not ever seem to be successfully accomplished, and what was supposed to be a positive participation in a task of collective improvement turns instead (from his own, subjective perspective at least) into an instance of personal, arbitrary (and ultimately futile and ineffective) revenge²⁵.

Shakespeare, for Gadda, is an inspiration and certainly a master of both style and thought; but he cannot be a model on which to exemplify his own writing. The same, however, can be said of all other significant precedents that the writer, in turn, identifies as valid examples of literary achievement: neither Horace, Manzoni, Folengo, Dossi nor Porta can provide the formula. This is also, perhaps, why the tragic ghost keeps returning, forever unsatisfied; the modern Hamlet cannot die, cannot live, condemned to a destiny even harsher than that of the original one: a ridiculous, meaningless existence of permanent dissatisfaction. It is interesting, however, that Gadda's last known mention of Shakespeare doesn't concern *Hamlet*; it is in the *Sonnets* that the Ingegnere, a few months before his death, is looking for an answer. There is no indication that he found one.

La cognizione del dolore shines in the polarized tension between the (negative) impulse for truth and the always positive drive of art. Art wins gloriously (albeit narrowly, if one keeps count of all the losses) in a work that ranks among the greatest and the most stunningly beautiful of the twentieth century; but not to the extent that it can unshackle, or forever appease, the restless and homicidal ghost of Hamlet.

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²⁵ "Nella mia vita di «umiliato e offeso» la narrazione mi è apparsa, talvolta, lo strumento che mi avrebbe consentito di ristabilire la «mia» verità, il «mio» modo di vedere, cioè: lo strumento della rivendicazione contro gli oltraggi del destino e de' suoi umani proietti: lo strumento, in assoluto, del riscatto e della vendetta" (*Intervista al microfono*, in Gadda 1991, p. 503).

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