

FOG, WATER AND VENGEANCE FROM THE PAST IN VALERIO VARESI'S *RIVER OF SHADOWS*

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Sommario

Nella prima traduzione in inglese del giallo, Il Fiume delle Nebbie (2003) / River of Shadows (2010) nella serie del Commissario Soneri, lo scrittore Valerio Varesi situa il mistero del delitto in un paesaggio agreste e nei villaggi lungo il fiume del Po. La Valle del Po, come descritta nel romanzo e vissuta dal lettore, viene presentata piovosa, coperta di nebbia, bruma e ghiaccio, creando una atmosfera gotica noir, rispecchiata nelle circostanze misteriose che avvolgono due delitti di omicidio. L'articolo esaminerà come Varesi confluisce il paesaggio, i luoghi e gli eventi storici per creare uno sfondo gotico davanti al quale il passato torna a disturbare e interrompere il presente.

Keywords: Valerio Varesi, Gothic, historical memory, landscape, place, crime

The crime novels of the Italian writer Valerio Varesi have received little critical attention. Whilst scholar Angela Barwig (2008) makes brief mention of Varesi's work in her chapter "Murder and mayhem around the Via Emilia", only Elizabeth Scheiber's (2012) chapter "*Prima volevo vivere: memoria e trauma ne Il fiume delle nebbie* di Valerio Varesi" engages with *the River of Shadows* examining the human trauma of the characters in this novel. Scheiber discusses how memory and trauma are located in time and how they structure the narrative of the novel and the relationships between the characters of Anteo and Decimo Tonna and the murderer. These main characters she sees as being victims of traumatic memory unable to escape the events of their past actions in the Second World War (41-42). This traumatic memory and the two murders that occur in the present time of the novel, she

indicates, are symbolically associated with the river Po and the monument erected in remembrance of the Partisans (44-45).

Contrary to Scheiber's focus on human trauma in Varesi's novel, my article aims to demonstrate the importance of the partisan memorial, the River Po and the submerged village of San Quirico as bearers of the trauma of historical memory embodied by the landscape itself. The river and its environment represent a sentient, yet indifferent and inhuman topography, that slowly reveals the repressed memories and hidden crimes associated with its past¹. These places, I will argue, are what Marc Augé has referred to as "non-places" and these are linked not only to the socio-political and historical nature of the village but also to the landscape. Varesi fuses landscape, place and historical events as the backdrop against which the buried past returns and causes a violent disruption of the present². Though the murders in the novel are inherently personal, they can be seen as representative of the lurking darkness of events that took place in the landscape and particular places that dominate Commissario Soneri's investigation³. In my article, I will meld landscape and place whereby landscape is the topography, climate and spirit of the land itself; and place is the human experiences in the landscape made up of buildings, history, memories and culture which construct it as a specific *terroir* lived through human narratives and history (Lukinbeal, 2005:15)⁴.

In *River of Shadows*, the landscape of the Po Valley can be considered a sentient and indifferent presence that directs the lives, memories and history of the inhabitants of the villages. Setting out to represent and explore this history through his offering of a "sense of place", Varesi imbues it with a texture of an 'unremembered' or

¹ The title of Varesi's novel, whether in Italian or in the English translation, already symbolises the connection of the landscape to the plot by alluding to the hidden secrets, the ghosts that are cloaked by the mist, fog and rain.

² Whilst very aware of the loss of cultural equivalence when using a translation, a discussion of the complexities of translating such a crime novel remains outside the scope of this article. The translation of Varesi's crime novels into English has provided access for non-Italian speakers to this interesting voice in current Italian crime fiction.

³ Throughout my article, I will use the title Commissario which has no adequate translation in English.

⁴ See also Cosgrove (1984); Creswell (2015); Higson (1984); Tuan (1977; 1990); Thrift (2008) and Tilley (2006).

silenced historical past. Remembrances are bound by secrecy, silence, politics, power and personal animosities which lead to the perplexing and frustrating nature of the crimes and the resolution that Soneri is finally able to obtain. The Gothic landscape of the Po valley is the true protagonist that governs and controls what happens in the novel, allowing the return of repressed memories and eventually becomes the force that guides Soneri to discovering the murderer and solving the crime.

It is the landscape that plays the central role in *The River of Shadows*; and Angela Barwig has indicated that Varesi's novels are "influenced by their Padanian setting", evoked as "dark and foggy", where the Po river becomes a shadowy, melancholy, rainy and misty presence, and together all these elements "create a dense atmosphere" (2008:115). The spectral nature of the fog, the shadows and darkness evoke a sense of ghostly foreboding and unease, where the mist acts to limit and confuse vision and direction. This brooding ambiance and the rural setting of Varesi's novel, a small village called Torricella on the Po River, provide regional specificity and a strong sense of place. *The River of Shadows* melds the crime novel with historical reality and incorporates what Lucia Rinaldi refers to as the "gloomy, dark atmosphere" of the noir genre with its attendant Gothic features (2009:153). For Gabriella Turnaturi this form of crime narrative is one that deals with a present "often charged with a dark past, but without a future; it is a narrative of chaos and disorder, and not of re-established order" (2013:60). It is the "disruptive return of the past into the present" that challenges and renders chaotic, not only the social order, but the ability to establish bodily identity. Maria Beville considers that this return of the past in much Gothic writing acts to challenge the notions of history, resulting in repressed events coming back to "haunt and terrify the narrative present" (2014:52). In Varesi's novel, history and memories invade the present in a violent haunting, one, I argue, that allows Varesi to reflect on the present 'through past events' and show how the present attempts to conceal and retain the secrecy of the past thereby hampering the investigation (Pezzotti, 2012:11). This silence and obdurate obscuring of knowledge about the past accentuates the Gothic otherness and uncanniness of the landscape that Soneri experiences during his search for a murderer.

Historical memory is central to Varesi's novel, yet, as Ernst van Alphen writes, memory "is a special case of experience" because it does not act as a "voluntary controlled retrieval of the past itself" but instead represents "an experience of the past" (1999:25). Memory, as an act of experience, relies on the feelings, thoughts and consciousness of a person who is a participant in an event, at the same time this memory remains held in the external event through which that person lives⁵. However, memory is not neutral and has been regarded by 'experts' on the past as lacking in sufficient veracity, because it does not offer up the 'real' truth. Where historians tend to draw a boundary between history and memory, these distinctions now seem somewhat unconvincing and, as John Foot suggests, "twentieth century history cannot be written, or understood, without reference to memory" (2009:5). He goes on to indicate that though history should not be reduced to discourse or narration, it should embrace memory studies in order to have a more complete understanding of the past and, thus, the present (6). Memory is both personal and collective and it is the act of memory in Varesi's novel that is invested in and interacts with the landscape's special Gothic 'sense of place'. In the novel, memory is a ghostly interpretation of the past that leads to this past enacting revenge in the present. The murders Soneri attempts to solve have roused the ghosts of the past that lie hidden by the waters of the Po, at the memorial to the partisans and submerged village of San Quirico.

The novel opens to heavy rain and the flooding of the Po River and it is against this backdrop of rain, flood and mist that two seemingly disconnected events occur. First is the death, by apparent suicide, of one Decimo Tonna who falls from a hospital window in the town of Parma. The second is the disappearance of Anteo Tonna and his barge, last seen leaving its berth at Torricella and drifting out into the wild flooding waters of the Po. In Parma, Commissario Soneri is called in to investigate Decimo's death, which he swiftly concludes is not a suicide but murder. On hearing about the missing Anteo Tonna, and learning that the men are brothers, Soneri intuitively feels that the death and the disappearance are somehow linked and expands his investigation to the village of Torricella. As Soneri attempts to make a connection between

⁵ A discussion of the function of memory remains outside of the scope of this article. For this see Bergson (1990), Yates (2014), Bernecker & Michaelian (2017), Ben-Amos & Weissberg (1999), Olney (1998) and Ricoeur (2006).

these two events, he spends more and more time in Torricella, where he finds himself in a community riven by past and present animosities and political alliances. Soneri becomes increasingly aware of many motivations for both the murders and it is through an understanding of the underlying secrets of the village and its hatreds that Soneri is finally able to apprehend the murderer. Though the two murders occur in the present, Soneri will quickly realise that the motivation for these violent killings is to be found in the dark past, whose secrets are firmly anchored in the landscape of the Po valley and events that occurred there during the Second World War.

The body of Decimo Tonna looks to Soneri as though its “bones had been removed” (Varesi, 2010:25) and Soneri has the impression that the case is “murky from the outset” (26). On interviewing the hospital staff, Soneri is told that Decimo was considered a “strange creature” an “oddball” who spent his time talking about illnesses and chatting to the patients, though he himself was not ill (28). The biographical police records on Decimo Tonna reveal that he was a “one-time Fascist activist” who “fled to South America” returning to Parma in 1962, where he was “detained in a mental hospital for five years” (33). When Soneri goes to search Decimo’s apartment he finds it shabby, threadbare hinting at a life lived “barely above subsistence level” (98). There is a sense of desuetude and claustrophobia about this place where what should be familiar feels rather unfamiliar. It is a place where it seems Decimo “sought to conceal his very existence” (102). Hidden in the wardrobe, Soneri finds knickerbockers and black shirts testament to another time and another life that Decimo has chosen to conceal but not to relinquish. His place of residence is “gloomy” and solitary, and he only seems to return there at night. His lack of interaction with his neighbours, his not visiting bars and shopping only in a supermarket contrasts with his existence in the hospital where he is inordinately concerned with illness, mortality and the uncertain future of each unknown person he meets there. Though he speaks to the people in the hospital, he has no relationships with them. The hospital is an impersonal place in which he can hide and Soneri feels that it could be considered his real home (102).

The hospital, the supermarket and Decimo's apartment are all what Marc Augé defines as non-places⁶. Non-places are spaces in which solitary people interact with their environment. It is in these solitary places that, according to Augé, identity is emptied through solitude and only "fleeting images" of the "existence of a past and glimpse of a possible future" remain (1995:87). For Augé, it is the traveller, while for Michel Foucault, in his concept of the heterotopia, it is the ship as well as the mental asylum that act as 'other' or 'non' places. In Varesi's novel both Decimo and Anteo can be seen to occupy non-places, ones which contain them in what Scheiber considers to be a form of personal stasis (2012:41-42). Soneri sees the brothers as living "completely isolated lives, cocooned away from everybody else" (Varesi, 2010:40). The word 'cocoon' indicates that time seems to have stopped for the brothers, where Decimo is held in the strange limbo of the hospital and impersonal apartment, Anteo is equally solitary in his barge moving up and down the river Po. Their shared historical past has driven these two brothers to occupy these non-places in an attempt to hide themselves and their former lives through a type of temporal forgetting. The barge and the hospital are salient examples of non-places as they link the ordinary and the abject in a temporal disjunction that I consider shapes the interplay between the historical past and the present of the narrative thereby defamiliarising the everyday. This idea of defamiliarisation emerges from Freud's (1919) essay on the uncanny where he outlines how what has long been familiar is rendered unfamiliar. For Dylan Trigg, the uncanny is an effect that disturbs and departs from the reality of daily life and allows "entities we once thought dead" to "materialize as being quite undead" (2012:loc.667). In Varesi's novel, the secrets of the dead are hidden in the landscape and places that Commissario Soneri encounters, where ghostly forms of a past that is both present and absent become symbolically located in the partisan memorial and the submerged village of San Quirico.

Trying to understand the implications of the disappearance of Anteo on his barge and the murder of Decimo, Soneri starts probing and questioning the people of Torricella. He is quickly aware of the

⁶ These non-spaces could also be seen to conform to what Michel Foucault termed heterotopias with their breaking or disruption of time and unsettling social and spatial relations or otherness. Foucault linked them to such places as brothels, hospitals, mental asylums, cemeteries and ships amongst others.

resentments, hatreds and divisions stemming from the past that pulse beneath the surface of daily life. Soneri learns that Anteo, just like his brother Decimo, was a collaborator with “Mussolini’s Republic of Salò after being a Fascist official in the lower Cremona district” (Varesi, 2010:40). Soneri’s assistant, Juvara, is quick to point out that both brothers were “two dyed-in-the-wool Fascists, real fanatics” (40). It is this connection between the brothers of a shared historical past that Soneri intuitively feels offers a possible motive for the murder. This idea is met with incredulity by others, such as the village priest, who asks “what does the past have to do with it? More than fifty years have gone by” (119). As Soneri learns about the brothers, he is more and more convinced that it is their past that has resurfaced into the present. Soneri ascertains that the Po valley and Torricella were centres for partisan resistance against the Fascists and Nazis during the Second World War. Many of the elderly men in the village took part in the fighting, yet, a division exists between the remaining partisans. The character Barigazzi and his friends from the boat club are regarded as having “watered everything down” by forming co-operatives and “striking deals with the bosses” by the characters Vaeven and Dinon, partisans who remain staunch Stalinists (147-148). This results in an uneasy tension between these groups, as well as those who oppose the communists, like Decimo and Anteo’s niece, who along with her son, remain Fascists and consider Barigazzi and the others as “shitty communists” (139). Soneri is told that the niece’s husband is “a right-wing councillor” but one considered to have taken off the black shirt, merely to replace it with a tie (158). It is the niece’s bar that will be burnt to the ground in a symbolic act of revenge.

Similarly, the old woman, Maria of the sands, Anteo’s consort, who is considered to be a marked Fascist, refers to Barigazzi and the others as “communist dogs” (107). She goes on to tell Soneri that it was Barigazzi, and his band of Reds, along with the communist co-operative who destroyed her island by modifying the course of the river. She paints an alternate portrait of Barigazzi as a pistol-wielding killer who murdered to steal a boat during the war (108). In her view, the communists are underhand beings who obtained an expensive licence simply to dredge sand so as to change the river and destroy her island, celebrating when she was finally forced to leave it (110). Barigazzi confirms this when asked and with his attitude, still smacking of

revenge, declaims, “those were memorable moments, like when we shaved her head after the war”. When asked about Anteo and Maria’s relationship Barigazzi replies: “Two Fascist bastards, and she the worst of the two” (127). Maria’s further testimony is indicative of the layered nature of the hatred generated by the war where “Fascists did their roundups” and the other side “struck back treacherously” (108). Her description of Anteo as wanting to draw a line under the past, because as “poor old folk” it was time they “tossed all their grudges into the Po”, seems to depict him as less rancorous and spiteful than the communists (109). Yet, this implied forgetting of the past is a strategy of denial and evasion of the evils of Anteo’s previous actions that silences them through a form of un-remembering.

The priest in the village tells Soneri that Anteo was “a member of a corps notorious for its atrocities” and that Anteo had mentioned “burning down a house” (119). The priest is not sure whether this was an act of reprisal or a “punitive expedition” as he adds that there “were many partisans in these parts” (119). It is the oddness of this last statement, with its implied dislike of the partisans rather than the Fascists, that catches the reader’s attention implying, as it does, that the church supported the Fascists because the socialists and communist partisans were regarded as anti-clerical (Behan, 2009:74). As Soneri says to his lover Angela, the “Tonna brothers were the object of virulent hatred by many people [...] the boatman in particular must have been involved in some really nasty business down the valley” (Varesi, 2010:101).

I suggest that it is through an interweaving of these different divisions and tensions in the town that Varesi exposes the many-layered nature of historical memory, or what the historian John Foot has termed “divided memory”. Varesi cleverly reveals how memory is never neutral, but is continually contested, since events are interpreted and remembered in different ways (Foot, 2009:1). Memory is attached to the landscape of the Po Valley and the river, which Scheiber (2012:44) indicates acts as the inspiration and the source of life and death, the river acting to hide and to reveal secrets in the same manner that it directs Soneri’s investigation and the lives of the people who live along its banks. Not only does the river help Anteo escape from the partisans during the war, it is also shaped and used as a force for revenge by the communists during and after the war so that the river becomes the place

where memory is located. In similar manner to Scheiber, I consider that the landscape is more than merely a backdrop in Varesi's novel, rather it forms the fabric of the narrative as an active and mysterious presence (Geherin, 2008:3). Varesi's creative evocation of the landscape arises from the specific soil and genius loci of the Po Valley and it is in the places of the partisan memorial and the ruined and submerged village of San Quirico, where a murder victim is found, and a murderer apprehended.

Soneri, exploring along the banks of the floodplain, spots a "figure rowing a small boat, standing upright" on a river that is "shrouded by a blanket of greyness", the mist swirling around the figure (Varesi, 2010:122). This Charon-like figure, he learns, is probably checking on the "memorial to the partisans", which he is told, "the river damages every time" (159). The river's rise and fall, and the damage it does to the monument, marks a temporal passage of past, present and future. Yet it is the river's lugubrious atmosphere of heavy and gloomy solitude, its air heavy with the promise of mist and its lifeless shadowed water, that dominates and evokes the presence and absence, hidden and revealed mysteries associated with this memorial to the war dead. Scheiber (2012:44), discussing the symbolic nature of this memorial, writes that it represents one of permanent memory, or the need for a stable and unified memory that exerts control over time. While it is an object of permanent memory that embodies tangible traces of the past which should unite a community, the memorial is problematised in Varesi's novel, because only 'orthodox communists' in the village consider they "have the right credentials for the custody of the monument" (Varesi, 2010:159).

In Varesi's novel the partisan memorial represents a deliberate structure, or what Alois Riegl (1982) termed an "intentional monument" that pertains to a certain exclusive memory of the war, in this case that of the communist partisans. The French historian Pierre Nora has noted in relation to memorials that they are a site of symbolic remembrance that represents the heritage of a community, but he goes on to argue that as objects of memory they are divested of origins (1996:xvii). Nora is implying that while monuments do not represent a homogenisation of memory, they can lead to invented traditions and can exclude and alter historical remembrance. The transition from memory to history results in a loss of lived or individual experience and the past

becomes a collective historical construction that leads to an estrangement from the lived past. Individual memory is by comparison always an evolving process because it alters as the person experiences new events and gains new experiences (Trigg, 2012:loc.1252). As Barigazzi says to Soneri:

It is important to distinguish between experience and memory. You can fool yourself that you remember because it seems that everything is always the same, like the river perpetually switching between floods and low water. It's not true. Each time you start over from the beginning. Memories are worth something for two or three generations, then they disappear and others take their place. After fifty years you are back where you started. I chased out the Fascists and now my grandchildren are bringing them back. (Varesi, 2010:85-86)

Unlike the constant cyclicity of the Po, memory and history, Barigazzi implies, are lost over time and the forgetting results in a repeating of the past in the present. Yet, it is the Po and its landscape that underlie Barigazzi's disquisition as he reveals what is strange and what is familiar about this topography which is integral to the passage of time and the movement between the past and the present. The memorial to the partisans represents a confirmation of the continuity of the past and the ideas of memory, sacrifice and death. In Varesi's novel the monument, as part of the narrative history of the landscape, belongs to the river and its moods as Barigazzi indicates, "It too wants to remember its dead, and goes to pay them a visit" (Varesi, 2010:17). Yet, one of the other characters opines that "the time will come when no-one will remember it [the memorial] and the river will carry it all away" (17). Here place and remembrance can be seen as embedded in specific memories which have long since disappeared and died (Trigg, 2012:loc.157).

Barigazzi goes on to tell Soneri that the monument was erected by "the old party" when they were "all still united" (Varesi, 2010:163). The monument has become a form of remembering and forgetting, a memory-truth, which has evolved into a form of political tool (Foot, 2009:2). On the monument, Soneri sees the very brief inscription "to

the partisans of all formations who fought and died here opposing barbarism” (Varesi, 2010:163). This is an inscription of the reality of the past that needs to be “deciphered retrospectively across delayed time”, but one that appears ironic in the light of Barigazzi’s comments about the loss of partisan unity prevailing in the village (Mulvey, 2006:9). The ‘all’ has become the selected few, as consensus about the past or how it is remembered becomes divided amongst the different groups in the village (Foot, 2009:1). The memorial is a place that allows an extinct event to be relived, so that the surrounding landscape is filled with the ghosts of the historical past. It is the body of the monument that acts as the physical site that allows these ghosts to return and continue to live.

Simultaneously, there remains a sense that a silencing of memories has occurred, and that the past, along with the importance of tragic events, is being lost, controlled and altered. This accords with Paul Ricoeur’s concept of manipulated memory and forgetting, which, he indicates, is the “prime danger” that “lies in the [...] authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history” which establishes a “canonical narrative by means of intimidation” (2006:448). Though Ricoeur is referring to a state-imposed narrative, I suggest that Varesi shows that this is also something that occurs within the village where the communists practice a devious form of “forgetting” with which the other villagers are complicit. The result is a form of “semi-passive” forgetting or a “forgetting by avoidance” (448).

In the novel, there exists an intimate relationship between memory and place, where the power of the memorial is made manifest as it freezes an event in both time and place. It is the river that is the arbiter of this history and of memory, and Soneri is told that the river “comes along to take back what is his, and we let him get on with it. He doesn’t keep it long. The Po always restores everything [...] even the dead (Varesi, 2010:56). Personified as masculine, the Po becomes sentient and pitiless in taking living bodies and returning the dead. This restoring of what has been lost or hidden by the waters of the Po is a recurring statement made throughout the novel. Soneri is told that “Little by little, with the onset of the cold, the waters will go down and become clearer. At that point, all will be revealed” (128). This is repeated almost word for word a little later when Barigazzi says “when the waters drop, everything will be revealed” (131) and much later,

Soneri is again told that “normally the river always restores what it has taken” (202). In all of this, as one of the characters comments, “the river gives and the river takes, and around here that’s all there is to it. It gives you what you need to live and then takes your life. The same water that gives you food to eat also leaves you starving” (220).

It is the river with its Gothic misty atmosphere, I suggest, that governs the history of the people who live along it in the present and who fought along it during the Second World War. It retains and erases, acting as a limit between the living and the dead, haunting the narrative and the history depicted with its “undeniably real or material effect” if not with a form of presence (Wolfreys, 2002:XIII). The real or material nature of this presence, I suggest is located in the memorial to the partisans, which, with its white marble, is seen by Soneri as resembling “fleshless bone”, which emanates a sense of mystery that seems to be imparted by the landscape in which it stands (Varesi, 2010:163). The imagery of the monument evokes the dead of the past, their bones long bleached and deprived of flesh, and the white marble of the memorial is now the body that retains the remembrance of their presence. As a physical place, it belongs to the landscape and the whims of the river that drowns and reveals it, so that land and water become receptacles of memory. The memorial is a material and symbolic body located in and imbued with the spirit of place ensuring that the memory of place and the place of memory intertwine and reveal their ability to grasp and embalm time.

The stripped bone of the memorial is symbolically juxtaposed to the white, bloated flesh of the corpse of Anteo Tonna, which has been tied to the memorial. The corpse of the present has a “waxen face” and is swollen with water, its skull split apart so it looks like an “over-ripe watermelon” (167). The river has claimed the sailor who spent his life using its water to escape and hide, the past has caught up with and taken revenge on the present, absence has become presence and, as Soneri notes, it is the mist that “covers more and more mysteries” (160). However, the symbolic nature of the deaths of the brothers Tonna is not lost on Soneri. The old Fascist Anteo, tied to the partisan monument, covered by the water of the Po is a message of purification and completion and an indication of the uncanny power of the past to return and exact retribution. The monument is the place that links the dead of the past to the death in the present, but its silence is neither forgetting

nor forgiveness. In the white marble there exists a fusion of politics, violence, commemoration, sorrow and the unknown ghosts of those killed in the past. Dominating this Gothic landscape filled with mist, death and phantoms from the past, the river destabilises and renders the surrounding world both familiar and strange, challenging the nature of history and memory. The events that took place during the war accentuate the landscape's uncanniness and its sentient yet non-human indifference to human memories and events. Soneri feels invaded by a similar force of "phantoms, intuitions and conjectures" (169) he feels his head filled with "clouds without form" that slowly "blow about" (176) fogging his mind with the same mist that drifts and eddies and cloaks the Po and its landscape in unfathomable mystery.

This mystery is more firmly located in the locus of the drowned village of San Quirico, which becomes the place that holds all the repressed memories of past events that have led to murder. It is also the place that becomes the instrument that finally leads to the revelation of the 'truth' behind the crimes both of the past and the present. Soneri is told about the sunken village of San Quirico, not by the villagers, but a colleague who indicates that the submerged village on the other side of the river from Torricella "re-emerges only when the water is very low" (171). This village disappeared beneath the river during land reclamation that was undertaken, not by the Fascists, but by the coalition government, "done under De Gasperi after the war" (172)⁷. Soneri is told that the original village still appears on Fascist maps of the era, but with the land reclamation act the course of the river was altered and a village of the same name was "moved a couple of kilometres inland" (171). This information has a strange effect on Soneri as he feels a "welling up inside him [...] of a sense of unease which was more like deep rancour" because he realises that the villagers have kept this information hidden from him (171). This concealment is indicative of his position as an outsider and leads to their unwillingness

⁷ Alcide De Gasperi was the prime minister of Italy from 1945-1953. He founded and belonged to the Christian Democracy which was a mainly Catholic and conservative party that initially combined left and right-wing political factions in a centrist form of government. This party opposed communism and after the elections of 1948, the Christian Democratic party broke with both the Socialist and Communist parties. It was under De Gasperi that land reclamations, reforms, low-cost housing and a national health system were introduced and, in places, resulted in the alteration of the landscape.

to assist in him in unravelling the deaths of the Tonna brothers. Soneri did not realise the level of antagonism that he, as a stranger, would experience, and which has led to the silence and dissimulation of the villagers. Soneri does not belong to either the landscape or its spirit of place and is seen as posing a threat to the fragile cohesion of the village, one that is based on a shared history and collective memory fostered by the landscape the villagers inhabit. Soneri has to puzzle out the connections and reach the conclusion that the murders are connected to “something that happened a long time ago” that has to do with the “killing of a partisan” (169).

It is to the ruins of San Quirico that Soneri is now attracted and he ponders about

the walls over which the Po slowly flowed [...]. How many personal stories were buried under the water there? He was not sure why, but he imagined that some of these stories were connect to the case of the Tonna brothers.
(173)

The Gothic nature of these ruins represents the homely place that has become unfamiliar and unhomely through the sentient and destructive presence of the Po. What was a living place is now merely skeletal remains. It is the uncertainty as to what history the submerged ruins might conceal, and how they might relate to the two murders, that leads Soneri to feeling frightened even though his “curiosity” is aroused because “no-one has ever told him” about this drowned village (173). The obfuscation of information concerning the past is as much a part of this place as is the spectral mist and fog exuded by the river that covers and elides events and history alike. San Quirico is a place imbued with the texture of a history that is specific to a topography in which memory is housed, but whose Gothic fragmentation and incompleteness still testify to the events that occurred there (Trigg, 2012:loc.3809). The ruins of the submerged village are defined by an absence in the same manner as the monument, yet these structures act as material witnesses to a spectral past that is dispersed into the temporal narrative of the present. Mikel Dufrenne indicates that a ruin partakes of a “profundity of time” out of which the ruin has arisen and that this is also an “illustration of time” because the ruin is a place that both submits and

surmounts time (1979:163-164). Yet, according to Augé, the ruin can also be seen as detached from the site of place and is no longer strictly “localised in time” (1995:34.) One could say that in Varesi’s novel the ruin becomes a part of the temporal cycle associated with the flow of the river, where the ruins appear and disappear at the discretion of the water. San Quirico has a strange relationship with place because it represents both a presence and an absence, and, I argue, can be considered a non-place that is detached and freed from both the past and the present.

Trigg suggests that, what he terms, a “traumatic ruin” is part of a place that is scarred by the events that have occurred there no matter what might remain of the physical fallout of the events (2012:loc.3832). The ruins of San Quirico can indeed be considered a “traumatic ruin” as the landscape where the village once stood is no longer as it was, rather it has become entirely different, divested of all but a small aspect of its relationship to history (loc.3832). It is a refusal to accept the destruction of place caused by an event associated with the past that forms the motivation for the crimes. The murders are an attempt to ensure that the past should not be forgotten or made void, even if the place in which events occurred has been absorbed into the landscape of the river. Trigg indicates that ruined houses seem to be empty of memory and unlike the monument, which acts as a remembrance of the past, ruins appear to result in non-memory (loc.3832). The submerging of the town has acted to render the memories of a horrifying episode into a non-memory. However, through an individual act of revenge, its anguished ghosts are reawakened.

Soneri goes to the new village of San Quirico, which he considers a “soulless place without a centre” and it is here that he encounters an elderly couple who tell him about what happened to the ruined village of San Quirico even though they have “little inclination to dwell on a grim past” (Varesi, 2010:187). Soneri learns that the village was burnt down by the Fascists in a reprisal raid in which the “the worst thing” that occurred was the burning of the “Ghinelli house” and the rape and death of the women who lived there (191). It becomes apparent that the women’s brother, Spartaco Ghinelli, was a partisan, who was killed in action, along with another partisan who accompanied him. The burning down of Ghinelli’s house and the killing of his family has been a closely guarded memory kept from Soneri by the old partisans in the village of

Torricella. Barigazzi mentions the belief that on “misty nights” when the ruins of San Quirico stick out of the water it is still possible to “hear the voices of the people who lived in those houses [...] they say it is because in San Quirico they never buried their dead. They threw them into the river [...] Water to water” (182). Esther Peeren and Maria del Pilar Blanco indicate that “haunting is attached to a where” and in the narrative it is the landscape of the Po, especially the memorial and the submerged village with their links to the violence of the past, that appear haunted (2013:395). Location has been rendered a place of Gothic otherness, of death and ghostly remembrance, as the dead attempt to disavow their disappearance and return to the world of the living.

Soneri, influenced by the information given him by the elderly couple, uses his imagination where “phantoms, intuitions and conjectures” dance to reconstruct a scene of what might have occurred in the battle between Fascist and Partisan along the Po:

The ambush, shadows facing shadows, the rounds of gunfire shot at random at ghosts made of air and little else, the awareness of the dying that they were falling without knowing the identity of their killers, the flight in any direction for refuge in the same mist which had made the ambush possible, then silence after the gunfire in the damp air which had served to muffle the shots, the attempt to listen for the enemy in every blade of grass that rustled, the stumbling over corpses, and the undergrowth more dense in a world of dancing wisps of mist. (Varesi, 2010:203)

This single long sentence, in the English translation, only makes use of punctuation, so that the sentence moves very much like the mist that so heavily dominates the atmosphere of the conjured scene. The landscape becomes the most Gothic of participants in this dance of death in which identity, mortality and ghosts made of mist are embroiled in a shadow play of fear, misdirection and sightlessness. It is a powerful passage that, whilst it flows, does so in stumbling jerks like the participants in this brief and deadly skirmish. Throughout this imaginative re-enactment, the landscape is an active, sentient participant, but one entirely indifferent to the outcome of the battle or the deaths that occur.

Soneri realises that whoever committed the murders he is investigating was somehow involved in the death of Ghinelli and his small group of partisans. This idea is reinforced when he is told that “there are some people who even say that maybe one of those who was there did not die” (203). Within the place and landscape of the Po, Soneri sees that the murderer has traced his own personal itinerary, as he uses the landscape to symbolically reconstruct the past.

On exploring the new San Quirico, Soneri realises that “someone was living in hiding” in the village and had been helped to move around on the river through the “complicity of a circle of orthodox communists who remained faithful to Stalin” to murder “two old fascists” so that it is as though “it might still have been 1946” (217). Here the dark, purposely ignored time after the liberation of Italy during the Second World War is alluded to, the time of the *resa dei conti*, which John Foot indicates, “saw thousands of summary executions all over Italy (but in particular in the north [...])” (2009:18). He clarifies this further writing that “many of these killings were in revenge for specific acts carried out [...] under the [Fascist] regime” (68). For Foot these killings are intricately bound up with memory, in particular, long memories as to who needed to be killed and by whom (68). However, the *resa dei conti* possessed darker undertones than merely the settling of scores between partisans and Fascists, there were scores to be settled between the different partisan groups.

This settling of scores, I suggest, is only hinted at in Varesi's novel in the divisions that exist between the partisans of the village and in the reasoning behind the murders that occur. Soneri locates the murderer in a cellar, a non-space that resembles, not only Decimo's flat, but also Anteo's barge. The old man, Soneri realises, is none other than the 'dead' Ghinelli, whose rage and hatred remains undiminished as he slowly tells his story to the Commissario. In the battle in which he and a fellow partisan faced the Fascists, both the partisan and two fascists were killed. Ghinelli mutilated the bodies and set up one of the dead Fascists to appear to be himself, whilst he escaped along the river Po. The reprisals of the Fascists, in which the Tonna brothers partook, destroyed his home and family so he had “nothing, nothing left” but the desire for revenge (Varesi, 2010:255). Ghinelli has no remorse for the murders of the Tonnas stating that they chose to ruin the life of others and the “hopes for a more dignified future”, which seemed to be

promised by the Communist Party, since the “Priests never gave it to us” (257). Here the historical and political past is brought into the present, as the divide between the church and the communists that existed during the war is exposed and all the ghosts and the sorrow rooted in the misty landscape of the Po valley are revealed.

Soneri comes to the realisation that it is the river that has been the “one master in the whole business” (226). The river has indifferently swallowed and revealed the monument, the body of Anteo, and the ruins, forcing Soneri to “adapt to its whims as to a sovereign” (226). From the beginning, it has controlled the investigation which seems to have “moved in time to the rhythms of the Po, of water which rose and fell endlessly changing the outline of the riverbank” (177). Throughout the novel, the river landscape seems purposely to hinder with its mists, which have surrounded, confused and befuddled Soneri, who is told “sometimes the mist is your salvation, other times it’s your destruction” because “few people know what happens in the mist” (202). Soneri realises that this deceptive landscape has witnessed a history of deaths which “no-one any longer remembered” and he is struck by the fact that “these memories have been buried by ignorance and a doltish indifference” and he wonders what any of this loss of life really achieved (198-199). Though the murderer is apprehended there is no sense of closure, or of the world being set to rights. Instead, Soneri’s question seems rhetorical and remains unanswered, so that the relevance of the human condition, of memory, forgetting and loss remains a puzzle that challenges the reader.

In my article, I have attempted to demonstrate that it is the riverine landscape with its Gothic atmosphere of fog, mists and shadows that both consumes, distorts and reveals the ghosts of history. The avenging in the present of forgotten ghosts of the dead is achieved through acts of violence symbolically equal to those in the past. These murders give voice to what is not heard: pain, suffering and the personal death of loved ones belonging to the landscape that is impregnated with these ghosts of the historical past. In this novel, Varesi does the opposite of the historian who looks at the grand sweep of events, instead, I have suggested that Varesi attempts to show how personal accounts and memories are important in establishing alternate perceptions of the past, as well as revealing how the complexities of historical events are possessed by place. The narrative, whilst a fictional projection, is one

that renders the past all the more haunting because the casualties of war, as Soneri realises, become “obscure aspects of a history of deaths” that are no “longer remembered” and he knows that the present-day murders will soon be equally as forgotten, as the victims become merely shadows and ghosts (199).

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