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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Parma dreamin'': Malerba's *Il serpente*

Joseph Francese

Department of Romance and Classical Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA
Email: francese@msu.edu

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Abstract

In *Il serpente*, Luigi Malerba's first novel, the writer moves from the objectifying perspective, working-class protagonists, and themes of neorealism to a subjective realism that sets aside the direct dialogue of his first book (*La scoperta dell'alfabeto*, a collection of brief narratives) in favor of the exterior monologue. The narrating voice of *Il serpente* feels compelled to relive the guilt, shame, and humiliation of his youth. He prevaricates habitually because he is anxious as to how he appears, primarily to himself: he is caught between the need to express himself and the fear of being punished for having done so. The changes in narrative strategy, along with the psychological plausibility of the narrative and Malerba's analysis of Italy's 'grey zone', populated by those who did not actively participate in the civil war following the fall of Fascism, make *Il serpente* worthy of our close attention.

Keywords: Luigi Malerba; *Il serpent*; neoavanguardia; compulsion to confess; compulsion to repeat; exterior monologue; grey zone

Introduction

Il serpente (1966) is the first novel published by Luigi Malerba (1927–2008). *Le lettere di Ottavia*, his 'first work of narrative' ('*prima opera narrativa*') (Facebook[1]), is an epistolary novel published anonymously in serial form in 1956 in the journal *Cinema nuovo*. However, it came forth as a discrete, signed work only in 2004. The first edition of *La scoperta dell'alfabeto*, a collection of brief narratives Malerba calls his 'first book' ('*primo libro*') (Guaglianone 1998, 23; Scarponi 2003, 6), is from 1963. The definitive edition was published in 1971 (Mauri 2000, 186).[2]

Il serpente coincides with Malerba's move away from his mentor Cesare Zavattini, a preeminent theorist of neorealism (Malerba 1991). Specifically, Malerba sets aside the subject matter (the working classes), themes (*la cronaca* or topicality), and objectifying vantage point – to use Malerba's term, 'demiurgic posture' (2008, 106) – of neorealism, the artistic tendency that underpins *La scoperta*. In *Il serpente* he begins experimentation with 'exterior monologue', to use his term. Exterior monologue is a form of first-person narration in which the voice speaks aloud, seemingly addressing the reader, thus aiding reader identification with the narrating *I,* but in truth is speaking to himself. Malerba claims such innovation enables him to 'impress … an incontrovertible credibility to his plots, because the same person who carries the action forward takes ownership of and responsibility for it' (Malerba 2008, 106).

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In other words, in the 1960s (with *Il serpente* and *Salto mortale,* 1968), Malerba gradually elaborates the influence of Zavattini, and moves toward a subjective, psychological realism. Exterior monologue, I would clarify, was the development of a device dear to Zavattini, 'doubling' (*lo sdoppiamento*), which enabled him to 'observe himself as if he were (an)other (*un estraneo*)' (Malerba 1991, xiii).

Malerba's maturation as a literary artist in the 1960s coincided with his taking important lessons from his peripheral involvement with the *Gruppo '63*, and from his borrowing the American critic Harold Rosenberg's 'openness' (*atteggiamento aperto*) and 'interest in continual experimentation', that is, the '"tradition of the new"' (Malerba 2008, 24). According to Rosenberg, 'artistic "triumphs"' are 'achieved against the prevailing style or apart from it, rather than within it or through it' (Rosenberg 1960, 15). More importantly, for present purposes, what gives a work its relevance, for Rosenberg, is 'the way the artist organises his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation'; that is, how they identify with their protagonists (29); and, in so doing, create themselves (10).

For Rosenberg, the legitimacy of 'a style in art' is contingent on its ability to make connections to stylistic innovations outside that art (Rosenberg 1960, 16). If we look briefly away from Malerba and literature and towards acting, Uta Hagen contends 'actors do not "lose themselves"' in the roles they play as much as they 'find themselves"' in them (Hagen 1991, 53). Thus, we see how exterior monologue allows Malerba to identify with and become the other within. Inner realities, to borrow Hagen's phrasing, serve Malerba as 'a psychological trigger' for 'a moment of recall' whose point of arrival is 'the creation of a *new* "I"' (Hagen 1991, 60, 64, 60) – his narrating voice(s).

Exterior monologue is Malerba's 'passkey for entering into the minds' of his narrators (Malerba 2008, 244), some similar to him, others ('shady types, thieves, assassins, even a cannibal') quite different (2008, 49). Malerba's first-person narrations allow him to 'immerse himself in the most disparate characters' (2008, 47), to identify with them, but with an ironic posture and only until 'the book is written and delivered to readers' (Zandel 1986). For Malerba's readers, it is an artifice that also enables them to enter 'under the skin and into the souls' of his narrating *I*s (Malerba 2008, 68).

The irony with which Malerba represents the narrator of *Il serpente* is not only the writer's 'attitude toward life' (Capozzi 1991, 139; Zandel 1986; Malerba 2008, 135). More importantly for present purposes, it is 'a form of literary shyness' (Menechella 1992, 135) that allows him to distance himself from the events narrated, and from parallel events in his own life, for him 'not a small pleasure' (Malerba 2008, 243). Ironic distance allows him to speak about himself without speaking about himself, and 'dispense with all autobiographical misinterpretations' (Guaglianone 1998, 31–2).[3]

So, despite similarities between elements of the plot and events in Malerba's life (the narrating voice is approximately Malerba's own age, and, like the author, from Parma), I will not read *Il serpente* in an autobiographical key; nor will I attempt to psychoanalyse Malerba through his texts. Rather, much of what follows is an interrogation of the psychological plausibility of the narrating voice.

Since each of Malerba's books is inspired by, in his own words, 'a fixation, an unease (*disagio*), a malaise (*malessere*) of which I wanted to unburden myself' (Guaglianone 1998, 28), it is legitimate to examine what drives the *I*'s narration. To that end, I will also analyse how Malerba – for Paolo Mauri, heir of a 'non-participatory dismay' (*impartecipe sgomento*), a 'pale desperation' (*pallida disperazione*) (Mauri 2000, 189) – makes a more general disquietude reverberate in the 'unease' of a specific individual.

As mentioned, Malerba speaks through the protagonist of *Il serpente* using exterior monologue, a stylistic experiment that will become a hallmark of his fictions. Through

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this strategy the narrating voice of *Il serpente* brings to the fore an array of repressed traumata, and sources of guilt and shame carried over from his early years. From his meandering monologue readers glean the lasting impact of parental strife and a frustrated sexual awakening. The narrator also carries forward psychological scars inflicted by Fascism's 'racial campaign' and by Italy's wars of aggression in the 1930s. In addition, his adulthood is plagued by guilt for having abstained from participating in the Resistance, the civil war Italian Fascism provoked in the 1940s. His text is a faux confession, occasioned in part by metaphysical concerns for the fate of his soul.

Because the plot follows the voice as he wanders through the recesses of his mind, it is not easily summarised. Further complicating matters, as the voice acknowledges repeatedly, he is an habitual liar, a euphemism for his tendency to continually invent new mental realities. So, finding the boundary between fact and fiction is always difficult; equally problematic is compiling a straightforward timeline of events.

The plot

In brief, when the novel opens, the narrating voice is a boy in Parma. He is sufficiently old to recall the sounds of the Ethiopian campaign filling the background. He lives through a second war, unaware that it is fought in Spain, then a third, which he passes in a very cold place, leading readers to think he may have served on the Eastern Front. When he returns home, he has difficulty adjusting to Parma's rapidly changing society and urban landscape, and he suffers a breakdown. A few years later the *I* moves to Rome where he opens a philatelist shop. Chapters II and III take place in the early 1960s. The voice joins a chorus directed by one of his customers and in the last session attended by the voice, he 'invents' 'mental singing' (*il canto mentale*) (his contribution is inaudible). In the following chapter he 'meets' Miriam, his imaginary love interest. Their affair continues through the months following the death of Pope John XXIII on 3 June 1963 (Malerba 1996, 188[4]). It ends when he imagines having seen her at the shore with another man, three years before the voice met her at the *Filarmonica*. In Chapter VI we meet the voice's only friend, known only as Baldasseroni. The voice convinces himself that Baldasseroni is cuckolding him with the estranged Miriam. In the following chapter the narrator and Miriam reconcile and, to verify the woman's fidelity, he takes her to a clinic where he has the woman's body X-rayed from head to toe. Chapter VIII is a dream sequence that begins with a Fiat 600 Multipla exploding in the centre of Parma when the voice was a lad. The dream then morphs to the voice flying over the main sites and monuments of his home town. The *I* passes chapter IX daydreaming in his shop. Because he believes 'through thought one can perform miracles' (*con il pensiero si fanno miracoli*), 253, he can phantasise another reconciliation with Miriam. Chapter X brings us even further inside the voice's mind, with Baldasseroni providing the point of entry into ruminations on an international organisation, 'The Stamp Collectors' Crime Syndicate' (*La Filatelia Criminale*). Then the voice stops eating and loses track of time. In his delerium, he sees Miriam; they reconcile, again; and he invites her to his shop where he poisons her. In chapter XIII Miriam communicates to the voice from the netherworld, a place where time does not exist. In the following chapter, the voice, overcome by guilt, goes to a police station to confess. He fails in this endeavour because the police cannot corroborate Miriam's existence, much less the events he recounts. So, he and the *Commissario* (police chief) agree that the narrator should commit to paper a memorandum detailing his version of what has transpired. As for the concluding chapter, XV, I will discuss it in some detail later.

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Irony

As mentioned, Malerba advises readers to view the 'anti-hero' of *Il serpente* through the 'eye of the author' and observe the narrating voice 'with critical irony' (Malerba 2008, 244).[5] Irony provides the basis for the creation of 'a fiction within the fiction'. In turn, this enables readers to 'participate in the difficulties of the main character, solicit action, and dismiss waverings and renunciations'. They become involved in the events narrated (Menechella 1992, 136). But, like the author, ironically: at one remove. For this reason, readers of *Il serpente* must question how they receive the text. Despite our empathy for a protagonist in the throes of a nervous breakdown, irony is a form of humour.

John Steiner, following Northrop Frye, argues that a text is comedic when its voice is driven to achieve a desired outcome by overcoming obstacles, rather than by trying to understand his motivations. In fact, the voice of *Il serpente* represses what compels his narration. His monologue does not begin to approach a quest for self-understanding. For Joseph Newirth, humour is 'a means of communicating painful insights within an affectively safer context' (Newirth 2006, 558). Indeed, the travails of the voice confront us with 'issues of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and the limits imposed by biological and social reality' (557), issues which humour can help us ignore. As Susan Isabel Stein reminds us, 'while misery loves company, it absolutely revels in seeing others in even more wretched states than itself' (Stein 2000, 30). Laughter provides 'a discharge of tension which is accompanied by a sense of ... sadistic superiority ("not-me").' 'Whenever we laugh at someone else's distress', she adds, 'whether it is real or simulated, we are momentarily relieved of the cultural obligation to behave as if we identified and empathised with our fellows' (34). In other words, if we laugh while reading, it is because of what W. Ronald D. Fairbairn (1952) calls a 'splitting of the ego', the capacity to believe that the object of humour 'is not me; it could never be me'.

In *Strategie del comico* Malerba writes of how derision helps him reveal the comical essence of things concealed behind their dramatic appearance (Malerba 2018, 103). He believes that laughing behind someone's back allows us to distance ourselves from the object of laughter 'and kill him metaphorically' (34). As Stein, following Sigmund Freud, argues, readers are complicit when they become 'co-despisers' who identify 'with the satirist's point of view and partake of all the satisfaction accompanying the triumph of the humiliator over the humiliated' (Stein 2000, 26).

Malerba's ironic posture enables readers of *Il serpente* to view with emotional detachment the guilt and traumata that overwhelm the protagonist. The splitting of readers' egos makes problematic the 'ironic attitude' of psychoanalysis, which is contingent on the adoption of a 'dual identity': of subjective identification (and participation) alternating with objectifying disidentification and observation (Steiner 2016, 427, 435). It allows us to believe that the 'uneasinesses' and 'malaises' brought to the surface by the text could never afflict us.

Childhood and adolescence

The sources of the voice's traumata resonate in the generational macrocosm of Malerba's youth, that of men, especially those of his own age, who helped populate Primo Levi's 'grey zone' (*zona grigia*) (1986), fighting for neither side during the Resistance. Like the author, the narrating voice was born in Parma the late 1920s. So, like Malerba, it seems, he is not subject to the *Bando Graziani* (the military call-up of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI).[6] The voice spends the most intense years of the war as an evacuee, eluding the fundamental *scelta di vita* (life choice) made by many of his contemporaries.[7] Given the *I*'s metaphysical concerns, it may be the *I* did so because he aligned with the

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Roman Catholic Church's posture of 'reserve' and 'impartiality'.[8] The Vatican's neutrality, I should add, contributed indirectly to the delegitimisation of Mussolini's RSI and provided a sense of continuity for the monarchy, a posture the *I* will project onto Baldasseroni, a stamp collector who 'specialises in royal families' and would favour 'any Crowned Head' over true rarities (Malerba 2016, 216).

The texts' incipit – 'There was a war in Africa' (3) – especially the indefinite article, evokes the plurality of the conflicts that define the narrator's childhood. Italy's Second Ethiopian War (3 October 1935–19 February 1937) overlapped with belligerence in the Spanish Civil War (17 July 1936–1 April 1939), which ended only 14 months before Italy helped ignite the Second World War in June 1940. Assuming the voice is Malerba's age, he saw his country become involved in wars of aggression when he was eight years old, and remain at war for a decade. The last two years of conflict were fought on Italian soil, with some of the bloodiest ground combat in the province of Parma, which was also subjected to heavy bombings.[9]

The *I*'s unresolved internal conflicts are concealed behind the title, which diverts and conditions the reader's attention. *Il serpente*, to borrow Malerba's phrase, 'expresses by negation one of the desires of the protagonist: he wants to fly. In fact, no image is as far from the idea of flying as that of the serpent' (Ongaro 1966, 91). The same can be said of the earthworm, which also appears – more prominently than snakes – in the book.

Snakes figure primarily in the italicised captions (whose importance we shall see later) that follow the chapters. From the few evocations of this image in the text, I propose they are indicative of the voice's deep-seated misogyny. At one point the voice vents his admittedly 'abstruse hypothesis' that they may have been 'friends of humanity' before the Fall (Malerba 2016, 258). The 'clubbings' (*bastonate*) reserved for snakes in the caption following Chapter VI (227) evoke the kiss he gives Miriam on the Janiculum (183).

As for worms, grim memories of Mother return when the voice sees a ditch filled with them in front of his store (213).[10] It reminds him he had spent a week trapped inside a bomb shelter, 'like a couple of worms', with a woman. She was a foreigner who did not speak a language he could understand (215). Consequently, the inability to communicate returned him to a pre-linguistic state. But she was incapable of nourishing him: she had thought to bring only 'a little bag of salt' (215). So their only sustenance, milk, had to be 'lowered down' (*calato*) to them in 'a rubber tube' (214–5). He relives this experience the first time he imagines having loveless sex with Miriam. The two of them will be as naked as 'two worms … in the dark'; that is, inside a windowless room. Their companions (in this instance, faces on postage stamps) are 'all dead' (190).

Prior to Italy's entrance into the war in June 1940, previous military conflicts had left their psychological impression on the voice. When the story opens, he is sufficiently old to remember soldiers marching off to combat, singing the song 'that everyone knows' (157) but whose name – like that of God, the Father (211) – is not uttered (157). When the radio is not playing that song, broadcasts of war reports – for example, of how some of the soldiers, colloquially 'cork helmets' (*caschi di sughero*) (157), were cannibalised by 'African savages' (278) – are incessant (157).

His earliest memories show signs of dissociation: bananas, imported from Africa, '"are extremely dangerous", said my mother to her son' (157). To dampen his costly love of ice cream his mother plays on the lad's fear of the unknown by telling him everything yellow, including the powdered eggs used in the manufacture of inexpensive ice cream, comes from China (158). This brings to the voice's mind the yellow curls, 'styled into banana curls' (*pettinati a banana*) (158), of a well-to-do playmate at elementary school, who every now and again would surprise him with a kick (*un calcio a tradimento*) (158). Thoughts of the chum cause the narrator in turn to recall his own family's relative economic inferiority: 'Standing near him I felt like a pig' (158).

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To compensate, the *I* convinces himself that his was not an unhappy childhood: economic constraints forestalled his going 'to hell' as punishment for his gluttony (158). Indeed, there were numerous youngsters 'poorer and more covered in scabs' (159) than he, and this awareness is a source of joy:

> the ladder keeps going down, no one knows where it ends … my happiness goes forward through the lad covered in scabs and as part of a chain reaction, with me as one of the rings of this chain and I am happy to be one.
>
> (*la scala continua a scendere, non si sa nemmeno dove finisce. … la mia felicità, attraverso il bambino pieno di croste, si propaga a catena e io sono un anello di questa catena e sono felice di esserlo*.) (159)

But guilt stems from the awareness that the relative well-being of city-dwelling, middle-class *parmigiani* such as he is made possible by the exploitation of the *parmensi* (Malerba 2001: 61), the sharecroppers (*mezzadri*) in the surrounding countryside. It surfaces – within what can be read as an oblique denigration of Mussolini – while observing Miriam eat a nougat bar:

> Miriam had the protruding jaw of people who have chewed hardened bread for many generations: many Romans have a protruding jaw, and it is not a sign of strong will, it is the mark left by hunger suffered over many generations. Miriam had been branded by hunger.
> (*Miriam aveva le mascelle sporgenti come quelli che hanno masticato pane duro per molte generazioni, i romani hanno spesso la mascella sporgente, non è un segno di volontà, è il marchio della fame sofferta attraverso le generazioni. Miriam aveva questo marchio della fame*.) (276)

Other past events, compressed in memory, return to the surface. They include his noticing, as an adolescent, that his mother was unkempt, 'too thin' and made a 'miserable impression' (*grama figura*) (158), especially when compared to the ticket seller at the local amusement park at the Barriera Vittorio (today's Piazzale Barbieri).[11] This amusement park was 'famous', among the voice and his companions, only because of a specific ticket seller: 'a gal with a huge chest. A real beauty' (158–9). The only pleasant memories recalled, stimulated by scents,[12] are of the perfume factories in Parma's Strada Garibaldi, where 'sugary winds announced the arrival' of working-class girls, whose legs he spied while they biked home, causing his 'feminine ideals' to 'grow immensely' (159). But these reminiscences are drowned out by news bulletins telling of new waves of soldiers marching off to Italy's latest war of aggression, into which he inserts a delusional image of himself as a young man, heroically heading off with them, toward the extreme cold of the Russian Front (159–60).

After the war, rapid social evolution and technological progress make the voice's life a living hell (159). He seeks respite from the new normal on the city's *Stradone*, only to be overwhelmed: 'I fought with trams, automobiles, with people I met on the street' (160). So, he tempts fate. He prefers risking eternal damnation to suffering Parma's cold winters, and, sometime after the Second World War, like Malerba, moves to Rome, '*la Capitale*',[13] a space of non-recognition, for its temperate climate (161). Compelled to repeat the terror inculcated by German Junkers (245), he would have preferred to fly there, like a bird. However, he must travel on foot, down Strada Garibaldi to the train station (161).

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Parma dreamin'

Parma – the 'other city that I know' (273) as it existed in the past and to which the voice's thoughts periodically return – figures strongly in the narration. When it does, it reveals an important aspect of his personality: the narrating voice's self-image of *pramzàn dal sas / parmigiano del sasso* ("Parmesan of the stone"), someone whose family boasts generational roots within the city's Farnesian walls. This self-identification emerges through references to sites that have been renamed: for example, Piazza Grande (157, 273) (Piazza Garibaldi since 28 May 1893); the Vicolo del Gesso (273), rededicated Via Maestri Ferdinando in the 1930s; and '*Lo Stradone*'.[14] These are all linguistic markers of his membership in the city's so-called 'traditional population'.[15]

The voice's sense, and pride, of place is offended by a newsagent who tells the narrator in a dream of how a Fiat 600 Multipla, a car built 'purposely to ignite in cold weather' (*apposta per partire con il freddo*) (183), exploded in the city centre. The newsagent mistakes him for an 'out-of-towner' (*forestiero*) and instructs the *I* on how true *parmigiani* comport themselves (243), a remark made more hurtful by the probability that the newsagent himself was not native to Parma.[16]

Guilt and shame about his less-than-heroic behaviour during the war, as a descendant of an historic Parmesan family who did not defend his city, is periodically renewed by the image of an 'undaunted' (*imperterrito*) Garibaldi (253). Any number of significant youthful memories take place in Parma's Strada Garibaldi and Piazza Grande/Garibaldi with its 'bronze monument there in the middle' to 'The Hero of the Two Worlds' (273), as Garibaldi is commonly called. In Rome, critical events take place on the Janiculum, in the shadow of another statue of 'Garibaldi, the Hero of our Risorgimento' (182). To quote only one incident, the narrator observes a couple kissing just underneath the statue, in a '600 Multipla just like mine, the same sea-green colour' (253). Other important interactions take place on Rome's Ponte Garibaldi (237, 280), down the street from the *I*'s shop in Via Arenula (164), past the 'monument to [Benedetto] Cairoli, who was also a Hero' (237).

These gallant images of Garibaldi come in stark contrast to memories of himself alone beneath the ground: 'That was how I learned to keep myself company' (294–5). This recollection of himself sheltering while the city with which the *I* identifies is violated by foreign invaders reminds him of Baldasseroni, who serves the voice as a receptacle of psychological negativity. The voice takes exception to his friend's 'abnormal interest in what is beneath the ground' (219), and his British automobile (made by Hillman [216], manufacturer of staff cars and utility vehicles for the English Army during the Second World War).

Parma, the city of the voice's youth, comes forth 'deformed in dreams or by the distance of fantasy, therefore not realistic even if the places are called by their names and correspond to real places' (Malerba 2008, 51). From all this, following Bertram Karon (1963), we can glean 'a pattern of pressures', that is, 'a series of subtle and unsubtle rejections'. As we shall see, these rejections negatively impact the voice's sense of self-worth. Consequently, he organises his life 'around the need to defend himself' (Karon 1963, 29). To do so, he transforms the traumata of childhood and adolescence, and his passive observation of three wars, into an 'emblem' (Malerba 2001, 60), a symbolic evocation of his youth.

Time

The narration is in what Rebecca West has called 'a diaristic mode', which, she writes, usually implies 'a preoccupation with temporality' (West 1985, 203). However, in *Il serpente*,

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action and discourse are simultaneous. The end of the narration coincides with its beginning: 'write this memorandum', the *Commissario* tells him in the penultimate chapter, 'and here I am, pen in hand' (306).[17]

The voice's lack of temporal moorings comes clearly into view in chapter II, when he first meets 'the Master' (*il Maestro*) (167), Furio Stella. This encounter is told in a present tense that quickly recedes into the preterite: '*Un giorno entra nel mio negozio … Nel mio negozio era venuto … prima di uscire mi disse*' (164).

The voice suffers insomnia (163), and his physician tells him he needs rest (166). Soon after, the voice attends his first choral rehearsal (166) and discovers that singing 'is also a form of self expression'. This realisation changes his life forever (163). Readers are led to believe he is 33 years old, the same age as 'the Son of the Architect' when the latter died on the cross. Subsequently, as we have seen, he discovers 'mental singing' (163), a retreat into the confines of his mind.

Because the narrating voice's refusal of intersubjectivity is also a rebellion against '*il Maestro*' (indeed, 'mental singing' supersedes the traditional singing taught by Furio Stella), it provides the voice with 'immense satisfactions' (171). However, defiance does not lead to a belated resolution of an Oedipus complex, but to an attempt at suicide: 'I moved toward the window and was on the verge of launching myself into the air and taking flight' (172).

At no time does the voice specify dates. By contrast, topographical references are precise. This is the case because he lives in an 'eternal present' cast into relief by the radical subjectivity of his first-person narrative. Reality is funnelled through the prism of a narrating subject who, to borrow Genette's (1972) terminology, coincides perfectly with the character whose point of view orients the narrative (186).

The psychological plausibility of the narrative and the shift in narrative perspective and strategy are further reasons, along with Malerba's sounding of Italy's 'grey zone', why *Il serpente* is worthy of our attention. The action, a narrativised life, comes forth filtered through the psychology of a voice who is truly a prisoner of his own mind. His monologue is without temporal or dialogic points of orientation.[18]

The precise nature of the experimentation of the exterior monologue of the chapters is better clarified, perhaps, if contrasted to the captions that follow all but the final chapter. The captions are examples of interior monologue. Interior monologue, as Pasolini defines it, is 'a discourse relived by the writer through a character who, ideally, is at least of the same socio-economic background and a member of the same generation' (Pasolini 1965, 1473). Parenthetically, given the differences between the protagonists of the central chapters of *La scoperta* and the voice of the opening and concluding chapters of that work, this sort of experimentation was not feasible in Malerba's 'first book'.

In any case, in the captions the voice of *Il serpente* is thinking to himself; he is not thinking aloud. The captions represent the inchoate thought processes that condition the exterior monologues that form the chapters. Inserted as they are after the chapters, the captions take readers a further step inside the mind of the voice. As mentioned, the chapters are written on the suggestion of the *Commissario*. Although in them the narrator is still speaking to his primary audience – himself – there is the semblance of a dialogue in absentia with a reader. In sum, if 'singing is like speaking' and 'mental singing is like thinking' (171), then the chapters may be (loosely) compared to singing aloud, in this case not for an audience. Similarly, the italicised text, the captions, may be likened to 'mental singing'.

Lies and other delusions

The narrator speaks only to himself, yet his monologue is replete with statements he will later say are falsehoods. In so doing, he confronts readers with the paradox of a self-

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portrait from which the self is erased. Much like the Cretan Epimenedes, he prevents readers – and himself – from knowing who he really is or what he thinks. He tells, then "untells", undermining his representations of reality (see Muzzioli 1989, 525).[19]

Following Benjamin Kilborne, I contend that such mendacity reveals an 'appearance anxiety' (Kilborne 2002, 5) motivated by guilt and shame. The ensuing internal conflict causes the *I* to attempt to manage how he feels about himself by controlling how he and his world appear to the object of discourse: himself. By proclaiming himself a liar, he exposes himself in a way that allows him to keep a modicum of control over how he sees himself (Kilborne 2002, 125).

If lying diverts attention from all the voice would conceal, the shore is the one place he cannot help but reveal himself to all, and naked 'as a worm' (Malerba 2016, 202). A day at the beach sparks a repetition of the behaviour of his jealous father (237–8). The *I* convinces himself he was cuckolded by Miriam, the woman he loves to hate, years before they met.

Further on he will be compelled, again, to relive parental strife, imagining Miriam in another secret tryst, this time with Baldasseroni:

> It would often occur … that when I tried to play the role of the man, I imagined Miriam was the girl or the wife. On the other hand, when I was the wife or the girl, I imagined Baldasseroni in the role of the man. The confusion was due to the fact that sometimes I did the killing, other times I was killed, once Miriam died, another time Baldasseroni, once I was facing Miriam with a revolver in my hand, another time I was facing Baldasseroni. A massacre, a slaughter, and I was always in the thick of it …
>
> (*Spesso succedeva … che quando io entravo a fare la parte di un uomo, la ragazza o la moglie me la figuravo come Miriam. Quando invece ero io la moglie o la ragazza, l'uomo me lo figuravo come Baldasseroni. La confusione nasceva dal fatto che una volta ammazzavo e una volta ero ammazzato, una volta moriva Miriam e una volta Baldasseroni, una volta mi trovavo di fronte a Miriam con la rivoltella in mano e un'altra di fronte a Baldasseroni. Una carneficina, un macello, e io ero sempre lì in mezzo …*) (285)

Doubting Miriam's fidelity, he takes her for a drive through the centre of Rome (in, significantly, his Fiat 600 Multipla, an odd choice, given that this prototype for today's SUV was a relatively large vehicle, and, as we have seen, was designed for climates less clement than Rome's). As they motor about, he points out the Cimitero monumentale del Verano, a site he will consider for her ashes in the final chapter (229–30). A broad loop around the city brings them back to Porta Pia and the Monument to the Bersaglieri (230), then to their destination, an X-ray clinic he believes capable of exposing perfidy. The clinic is in a street whose name he refuses to specify. Nonetheless, it can be identified as Via di Priscilla, so named for the nearby catacomb, a subterranean cemetery (230), yet another portent. There, the appropriately named physician Dr Occhiodoro provides a view of Miriam's skeleton.

Subsequently, the narrating voice's dreams dredge up unpleasant childhood memories whose specifics are left vague: the explosion of a 600 Multipla, the mysterious 'affair of the ring' (241, 243), and images of himself nosediving and climbing 'like the Stukas during the war' (245).

In chapter IX, the *I* spends months looking out into the street. The September equinox – with its falling leaves, migrating birds, and shortened days – blends seamlessly into December, which is marked by the fall of the Leone I government (4 December 1963). The narrator sits in his shop, 'in a daze (*imbambolato*), contemplating his mortality

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(250), musing about a 'beloved place' from his past where he could 'live forever' (256), and mulling over the 'incomprehensible designs of the Architect' (253). The caption that immediately follows the ninth chapter evokes an 'enchanted', lost Eden of peace and quiet (258).

The voice's narration is an exterior monologue and not a dialogue (his text is not shared with the *Commissario*). I stress this because the past can be recalled, but it is not analysed nor elaborated, because monologues do not allow for intersubjective verification. Moreover, the lack of an interlocutor denies the narrating voice access to the basis of the social bond: he cannot not see himself being seen. Therefore, there can be no catharsis or abreaction that would make possible deeper self-comprehension.

Chapter X is a rant sparked by the 'probability' that Miriam is related to a woman with ties to a criminal Zionist organisation (259). It closes with a caption in which the voice considers the merits and demerits of yellow. Yellow is the colour not only of bananas, but of 'sulphur, fever, … jaundice', of the 'Holy Office', the administrative entity charged by the Holy Inquisition, he claims, with interrogating unfaithful women (205–08), and of the Chinese (269). Yellow, the colour of the water below Ponte Sisto, the point where he contemplates suicide (281, 291), is synonymous with death and eternal condemnation. 'If you associate yellow and black', as does l'Architetto, he states, 'the result is Hell' (269).

The Architect

The Architect[20] is a father ideal, the male component of the ego ideal. He is the sum of the introjected, positive identifications with parental goals and values the child wants to emulate. In addition, the Architect serves as model for the person the voice wants to be. For example, the Architect provides an abundance of fatherly advice in chapter V. In the caption following chapter VIII he imparts an important lesson on conformism, which may be of a piece with the *I*'s guilt for having abstained from combat during the Resistance:

> *Don't even think about it … just keep going, don't worry, the Architect will take care of things. Play along if you don't want to be criticised, keep apace with the others, and, when all is said and done, the Architect will make things right.*
>
> *Non darti pensiero …, continua per la tua strada senza preoccupazioni, tanto ci pensa l'Architetto. … Stai al gioco se non vuoi essere giudicato male, muoviti anche tu insieme agli altri, tanto alla fine ci pensa l'Architetto a rimettere tutto a posto.* (247; italics in original)

Evocation of the Architect in the caption following the first chapter provides a glimpse of a complex at whose root are memories of an emotionally and/or physically distant father. The voice tells himself he must not ask grand metaphysical questions, but always submit to a higher authority, while learning to be asocial: he is to trust no one, and always labour in secret. Most importantly, he must never seek the help of the Architect 'because the Architect is extremely busy' (162).

Miriam

Miriam is between 20 and 24 years old (Malerba 2016, 302) when the action culminates, in the period following the death of John XXIII. So, she was born between 1939 and 1943, the years in which Italy and Germany attacked the rest of Europe. She is also the object onto which the voice projects his traumata and guilt. The plot culminates when he fantasises about killing her with cyanide, then performing a 'savage act like those performed by

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African savages' (*fu una cosa da selvaggi come quelle dei selvaggi africani*) (278), the return of another repressed memory. When the voice was a boy, periodicals, especially Telesio Interlandi's *La difesa della razza*, instilled images in the popular imagination of Africans cannibalising the '*caschi di sughero*'.

Only the voice has heard of or seen Miriam. He cannot describe her; nor does he know where she lives. When the 'girl' (190) refuses to tell him her name, he 'invents' a name for her, for his own personal use (178).[21]

If names are significant (if, as Dante states in the *Vita nuova*, '*Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*') then this may explain why the voice refers to his wife only as 'the old woman'. He imagines her close to his mother's age, even though his wife is only one year older than he (166), as was the girl in middle-school (*compagna di scuola*) (221) with whom he was left 'to play at being shipwrecked' (189). He will admit to having lied about ever being married (221). Nonetheless, he will claim he 'has always had luck with the ladies'. At the same time, he can recall – by name – only three previous love affairs, all with women with whom 'things went badly' (163). Thus, Miriam takes shape as the object of a deep-seated misogyny going back to Mother. He refuses to name Parma (244), and he cannot bring himself to utter the name of God, as we have seen. By contrast, deep-seated loathing causes him to name Miriam, explicitly and despite himself, before and after her death (252, 260, 313, 319), just as he names his neighbours' pets, which he also despises (248, 265).

Furthermore, I propose Miriam is not just 'any name' (243), as the voice claims. It is taken from Exodus. The Miriam of Scripture is the elder sister and saviour of Moses (Numbers 26:59; Exodus 1:22–2:10). The voice's Miriam is one of his 'ideals to be defended' (173) because he would vindicate, through her, past frustrations (sexual and otherwise). The voice's Miriam would 'deliver' him, as her biblical namesake helped lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Micah 6:4). However, the voice's Miriam is the object of deep ambivalence. He wants to love her, but like the prophetess (Exodus: 15:20; BT Megillah 14: a), his Miriam is of an ethnicity targeted during the voice's youth by periodicals such as Interlandi's *Il Quadrivio*.

His first 'date' with Miriam takes place after his invention of *il canto mentale*: he stalks her for approximately half an hour. Wooing her, he reasons, is contingent on his ability to communicate 'the concept of the siege and conquest' because 'some love stories are born … while bombs are falling during bombardments' (177). She confronts, then joins him in Via Giulia – named for its commissioner, the 'warrior pope' Julius II. There he is overtaken by the desire to be 'a Prince of the Roman Church'. He begins making 'exclamations in Latin that sound a bit like curses (*O salutaris hostia*![22])' and gesticulating wildly. Then he goes into convulsions (178).

Determined that Miriam should not flee from him, as did his '*compagna di scuola*' (189), he adapts for her the *Dies Irae*, a medieval Latin poem about the Day of Judgement. He changes *tuba*, God's trumpets, to *Miriam,* and *regionum*, the tombs of the earth, into *ragionum* (a 'macaronic' latinisation of *ragione*). Thus, the voice's fantastic incarnation of his traumata – Miriam – drowns out human reason (*ragionum*). His 'declaration of love' brings to its end 'the first chapter' of the incipient love affair (179).

That evening he imagines driving her up the Janiculum (179). Although he is 'repulsed' by 'external measures to stun (*stordire*) a woman' (182–3), he cannot refrain from giving his 'antagonist' (191) a kiss that leaves her 'limp on the seat of his car as if he had cudgelled her' (183). After she recovers, Miriam gives voice to the *I*'s aversion for the working classes: she justifies her departure saying, 'I must be back home before the *burini* (bumpkins) leave for work'.[23] The "couple's" first "date" ends on Good Friday (*il secondo mattutino delle tenebre*), the day of Christ's crucifixion (182). She jumps into a cab, leaving him alone to contemplate suicide, this time from atop 'a low wall … from which I could have taken

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flight' (185). From that vantage point he looks first at St Peter's, formerly the residence of Pius IX, then at Villa Doria Pamphili (184), a site Garibaldi was not able to defend in 1850. It is also the nesting place of the owls that keep the *I* awake at night (184–5, 221). The *I* descends from the wall when the rumble of an aeroplane overhead fills him with feelings of inadequacy: 'how could I ever be like that fantastic machine?' The roar soon fades, leaving in its wake something 'magical', reminiscent of a street just after the Pope, the Holy Father, has walked down it (185).

To intimidate his imaginary wife, the voice buys a revolver with a 'long barrel' (172). He settles on this specific model, I propose, because it evokes memories of hunting as a child. It is of the same small calibre as the rifle, good for small game, with which he seems to be familiar. Its barrel (which resembles the tube that provided him with Mother's milk in the bomb shelter) 'carries the shot, just as breath carries the voice' (172). That is, it operates, following his logic, on the same principle as Germany's propeller-driven Junkers. Like the plane, the gun's bullets must overcome air resistance. In addition, he explains, both have been superseded by the technologically superior machineguns used during the war and by jet planes, both of which move forward by pushing against themselves: 'we have much to learn from aeroplanes', he tells the *Commissario* (209). What there is to be learned from jet planes is how to 'overcome the force of gravity' (300), utilising, I infer, his 'mental singing' and wireless technology as examples.

The dearly departed

In chapter XI the narrator sits at an outdoor café 'nailed to his chair' (270). 'Have the seasons changed, or has time travelled backwards?' he asks himself (270). Unlike Baldasseroni, 'a hunter of snails' (217), but like 'the Hunter' (*il Cacciatore*) – I suggest this is a reference to the father figure who taught the voice about firearms – 'who studied the tracks left by game' (272), the voice sits in wait for Miriam. He then brings her back to his shop where he kills her, making good, vicariously, on his threats to 'the old woman' (168, 172).

But poisoning Miriam – a projection of all that haunts him – does not cure him. He merely succeeds in transforming himself into a spectator at his own death ('One of these days you will see your name in the newspaper, I would tell myself' [282]), thus deluding himself about his own immortality. Now she can tell him about the afterlife, a dark place where 'time does not exist' (295). And she can answer, negatively, the question he raises in the caption following chapter IX: is there a place where fear does not exist? (258). She speaks to him from a place that – like 'that city I do not want to mention by name' (244), Parma – is enveloped in 'dense' and 'yellow' fog (239). She is terrified by what may await her in the abyss she is forced to approach (293).

In the hereafter, Miriam suffers extreme cold (293). Similarly frigid temperatures greeted the men, slightly older than the voice, who were sent to the Russian Front,[24] and the voice himself when he took refuge in the Apennines south of Parma. Miriam informs him that where she is, beyond the grave, 'it is freezing cold'. In response, he exclaims '*Osterreich*' (293), a reference to Hitler's annexation of Austria on 12 March 1938.[25] If the voice would do something to help her stay warm, Miriam tells him, he might begin to elaborate his shame and guilt: 'It would be a way of getting yourself forgiven for what you did' (294). To that end, he seeks out the *Commissario* (in whom the voice sees the 'fatherly' Architect), and 'confesses' (299).

As we have seen, the narrating voice has a 'great admiration for aeroplanes' (209). Jets, unlike propeller planes, go faster in low air pressure. Indeed, he tells Miriam, rockets 'go extremely fast' in the ethereal, 'where there is no air at all' (209). In this same vein, during his 'confession' he tells a sceptical *Commissario* he would like to learn to fly, just as words

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(and the death rays rumoured in the 1930s to have made Fascism militarily invincible) learned to travel on 'the waves of Marconi' (245).[26]

But the insurmountable contradiction is his realisation that thoughts, when expressed, gain ballast. They are 'made flesh', so to speak, and therefore 'tend to go down' (301), as did his voice when he sang aloud (168). Indeed, when he 'confesses', material reality prevails over mental reality. Had the *I* eaten Miriam's poisoned flesh, the *Commissario* points out, 'you would not be here now telling me all this, you would be dead, too' (303). This awareness sends the voice into his concluding tailspin, if I may extend the metaphor.

To explain, in the italicised text following his visit to the *commissariato*, the narrating voice is forced to note the fragility of his exterior monologue. *Carta canta* ('paper sings', as an old Italian proverb has it), after all, and words committed to paper by the 'old, black Olivetti' of the Commissario 'remain on the page, nailed there with no hope of escape'. When his words can no longer fly away (310), the voice's illusions and delusions collide and shatter.

What the *I* has repressed motivates his compulsion to confess. His urge to express, along with internalised prohibitions against such expression, clash while reinforcing each other. This conflict creates a vicious cycle: his need to make explicit seeks gratification in punishment. But his fear of castigation motivates the mendacity that allows the voice to continue to elude punishment.

The Verano cemetery

The final chapter is an epilogue whose title is a run-on sentence, representative of the narrator's addled state of mind: 'I refuse to discuss about this topic by now it is a closed topic enough the story is over' (*Mi rifiuto di discutere su questo argomento ormai è un argomento chiuso adesso basta la storia è finita*). It is divided into three sections: first, a meander through Rome's Campo del Verano; a drive outside the city in his Fiat 600 Multipla; a final monologue from within a psychiatric hospital.

He finds himself in the Pincetto Nuovo, a section of the cemetery near to the pedestrian entrance, just off the Via Tiburtina and to the left of the Basilica di San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura. Seeking a proper spot to inter Miriam's remains, he ascends the Serpentine Road (*Viale a Serpa*). He reaches the *belvedere*, whence he observes to the east a countryside (that has since been urbanised): 'This is how I imagine Paradise' (311). After a while his legs begin to ache, and his head is 'in flames like the Reichstag back in Hitler's times' (313), a reference to the arson attack of 27 February 1933, when the voice was a boy (six years old, to be precise, if, as I have hypothesised, the voice is the same age as the writer).

Then *I* proceeds to the section of the Verano called 'Sangue sparso' (Spilt Blood),[27] but he cannot bring himself to leave his packet in this 'desolation', this 'lager' (313). So, he heads off to another area of the cemetery where he considers purchasing a burial plot. Since the price is beyond his means, he drives beyond the city limits, where the impossibility of locating a proper burial site 'begins all over again each time in small towns' (316). He then tries to gain altitude, speeding his 600 Multipla up towards the peak of Monte Soratte. But soon both he and his car are overtaken by 'a great tiredness' (317).

In the concluding section, he identifies with suffering humanity the world over, 'because of things that have already happened' (317). He longs to lie in darkness and silence (he imagines requesting a transfer to the Pincetto Vecchio, another section of the Verano, 'far from the buzzers' (*campanelli*) [318]), as immobile as a mummy, and in solitude. But the 'departed' (*i trapassati*), place him 'under siege' (318). Their appearance before him, 'one after another', brings to mind the *Anschluss*, prelude to the Second World War: 'Osterreich, I say to myself, these departed are quite terrible' (318). He cannot rest: 'To stay calm, you must keep everything under control, the world over'. But he lacks

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the powers of the Architect. So, he believes his only viable option is a return to the stasis of Thanatos, to the 'perfection' of immobility, to 'the natural order of things' (319). With this wish his monologue ends.

Guilt

Malerba considers writing 'analytic therapy' (Malerba 2008, 9), as 'a way of clarifying, if not resolving, my issues with the world. Of giving a sense to reality' (28). In sum, writing is, firstly, an exterior monologue, and, secondly, a means of exchange, a prompt for dialogue with his readers.

As for the narrating voice of *Il serpente*, the first 13 chapters of the text are an exterior monologue in which he commits thoughts to paper on the prompting of the *Commissario*, as mentioned above. For the *I*, writing is not 'analytic therapy', an exercise in self-analysis, in making the unconscious conscious. At no point does he attempt deeper comprehension of the psychic process or consideration of the possibility that unconscious truths may exist beyond his immediate grasp.[28] At no point does he consider, even while hospitalised, the possible benefits of dialogue within the psychoanalytic setting.

Rather, the text is pure expression. It is an expression of guilt, which, in Theodor Reik's definition, is learned and internalised social anxiety. The voice presents himself spontaneously in the *commissariato* because – as Kyle Arnold, following Reik, argues – 'human beings have a fundamental need for certain social interactions and are developmentally formed by these interactions', especially by the deeply rooted need to express ourselves (Arnold 2006, 739).

According to Reik, guilt comprises both extra-psychic anxiety for the loss of love (humiliation) and intra-psychic shame or embarrassment (Arnold 2006, 775). Both are inseparable from interpersonal relationships. These anxieties, when internalised from early social interactions, provide the motivational impetus for repression (775) and, consequently, neuroses. Repression augments the need to express. The more expressions are muted, the greater the need to express becomes. 'Secret knowledge', as Reik phrases it, 'clamours to be revealed' (quoted in Arnold 2006, 747). The greater the repression and the need for punishment, the more pathological the confession (Arnold 2006, 749).

As stated, one of the merits of *Il serpente* is its psychological plausibility. Following Speziale-Bagliacca, I contend that the voice's guilt is a defence against his impotence as a child to defend himself against bad objects (his parents) which he attempts to control by internalising them. Thus, the bad objects keep their dominance over his internal world, which is tantamount, according to Speziale-Bagliacca, 'to saying that the need for bad parents is paid for in the coin of guilt' (Speziale-Bagliacca 1997, 43).

If the text were a true confession, it would be an element of a cleansing rite of self-humiliation, a contrite expression and assumption of responsibility that raises expectations for future behaviour. A confession, for Roman Catholics, is a promise to 'sin no more'. The 'goal of any confession', according to Reik, is 'forgiveness, that is, the "reconquest" of the object' (Arnold 2006, 751). It is a show of weakness that is also a plea for forgiveness: '"this is how I am" so "you must forgive me! Punish me, but love me again!"' (751).

By contrast, the voice's monologue is private: he speaks – and lies – to himself. It lacks the necessary two-person, social, complement of a confession (Arnold 2006, 741). The text is a composite of remembered secrets and the *I*'s remorse and self-punishment for expressing them: 'the basic structure of neurotic symptoms' (739).

Conclusion

The stylistic experiments of *Il serpente*, their representation of the *I*'s thought processes, reflect a deep inner reality that marks a break with the objectifying perspective of

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neorealism, as does Malerba's choice of protagonist, a member not of the working classes (as in his *La scoperta dell'alfabeto*), but of the middle class. The *I*'s inner substance resonates in a much broader macrocosm. That macrocosm is comprised of Italians who occupy Levi's 'grey zone'. I am referring to the Italians who passively observed (because they were not affected) the racial campaign and the atrocities committed during the colonial wars in Africa, and to the Italians who did not fight to 'redeem' Italy of their country's invention of Fascism and its exportation throughout Europe. Lastly, the 'grey zone' extends to include the Italians who lived with illusions perpetuated after the Second World War: that Italian Fascism was somehow 'softer' than Nazism and that the vast majority of Italians were '*brava gente*': good folks at heart, intimately not fascist, coerced into going along.

Il serpente packages these illusions within the narrating voice, who anxiously waits for them, and himself, to be 'nailed inside a coffin' and to be 'carried away' (Malerba 2016, 219).

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Notes on contributor. Joseph Francese is Emeritus Professor of Italian and University Distinguished Faculty at Michigan State University. He has published widely on topics in modern and contemporary, and Renaissance Italian literature. His most recent book is *The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula:* Il Bruzio *and Mariuzza Sbriffiti* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021).

Notes

1 All references to 'Facebook' are to Malerba's online autobiography: https://www.facebook.com/Luigi-Malerba-135956803147164/ (accessed 30 September 2020).

2 The definitive edition of *La scoperta* and a much more cohesive text than the earlier version. 'Una pulce al Grand-Hôtel', the concluding story in 1963, is deleted from the 1971 edition, which contains six new stories, and changes the order of the narratives as published in 1963. See Muzzioli (1999, vii) and Guglielmi 2016.

3 In *Il serpente*, as often holds true in debut works, Malerba elaborates personal experiences through a veil. By contrast, in *Ottavia* and *La scoperta* he observes persons who are not like himself. Ottavia, like the author, is a recently urbanised provincial, but, unlike Malerba, an ingenuous, not highly educated or especially well-read woman. He uses her to satirise the industry in which he worked, the cinema, because, he claims, he preferred to hide 'discreetly behind this ingenuous and fragile anonymity in order to lend credence to the narrative fiction' ('*avevo preferito nascondermi discretamente dietro questo ingenuo e fragile anonimato per meglio accreditare la finzione narrativa*') (Malerba 2004, 12). The vantage point of *La scoperta* – a collection of tales of the '*inesausto snobismo*' of his family's *mezzadri*, '*contadini dell'Appennino parmense*' (Scarponi 2003, 6) – will be supplanted in *Il serpente* by the ironic posture discussed herein.

4 All citations of *Il serpente* are from Malerba 2016.

5 See also Cannon, 1989, 231 and Malerba 1986a, 7.

6 The *Bando Graziani* was a series of obligatory draft calls for all men, including heads of households, living in the territory under the control of the puppet Salò government. The first was issued 9 November 1943 by the Minister of Defence of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, Rodolfo Graziani, and called to arms men born in 1923, 1924 and 1925. Those who failed to respond were to be tried by a military tribunal. Subsequent *bandi* extended the draft to all men born between 1916 and 1926. On 18 February 1944, a decree signed by Mussolini established death by firing squad for all draft evaders and deserters. Malerba was born 11 November 1927. Hence, he was not subject to the *bandi*.

7 Here, it seems, Malerba is drawing on his personal experience. He and his family remained in Parma until he had taken his *esame di maturità*. After the first Allied bombing (April 1944), they moved to their summer home, a '*bella casa ... situata nella frazione di Selva del Boccheto*' in Berceto, where they remained until 1946. They returned to

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Parma '*in tempo per assistere alle manifestazioni dei partigiani che erano scesi dalle montagne per festeggiare la Liberazione*' ('in time to witness the demonstrations of the partisans who had come down from the mountains to celebrate the Liberation') (Facebook).

8 This posture seems to resonate in Malerba's experience: in a 2008 interview, he speaks of the enduring value of the 'hardline, moralistic Catholic tradition' (*tradizione cattolica, moralista, rigorista*) of his family. 'Eventually I understood the essence of this upbringing, which provides a framework for life. And it is not wrong' (*Alla fine ho capito la sostanza di questa educazione, che è un modo di inquadrarsi nella vita. E non è sbagliato*). During the Second World War, his father 'submitted to the authority of the Church' (*si sottometteva all'autorità della Chiesa*) (Malerba 2008, 188–9).

9 The city of Parma was liberated on 25 April 1945, the same day as Milan, with ground combat continuing in the surrounding countryside until the last day of that month.

10 Significantly, he does not use the term '*fosso*', but instead '*fossa*', whose secondary meaning is tomb.

11 Parma's Barriera Vittorio Emanuele was built in 1866, and was renamed in 1882 for Nino Bixio. On 17 July 1951 it was renamed Piazzale Tommaso Barbieri.

12 See Reid 2015, according to whom 'Scent-evoked nostalgia is associated with higher levels of positive affect, self-esteem, self-continuity, optimism, social connectedness and meaning in life' (157).

13 In January 1950, two months after his twenty-third birthday, Malerba left Parma for Rome (Ronchini 2008, 362 and Malerba 2008, 161) where 'a year-long post in the press office of the Jubilee Year committee' (*un impiego per un anno nell'ufficio stampa dell'Anno Santo*) awaited him (Facebook).

14 Indeed, locals – those who self-identify as *pramzàn dal sas* – continued to refer to this street as 'Lo Stradone' long after 1900, when it was officially designated Viale Umberto I di Savoia. In 1951, more or less when the *I* moves to 'la Capitale', it was re-dedicated Stradone dei Martiri della libertà. Barriera d'Azeglio and Barriera Solferino (246) were renamed Piazzale Santa Croce and Piazzale Venticinque Aprile, respectively, after the First World War.

15 Unlike other protagonists of Malerba's fictions, for example, Demetrio in *Il pianeta azzurro* and the narrating voices of *Fantasmi romani* (see Francese 2021, 51), all of whom are Romans, and use the variant '*sternutire*', more common among those who speak a Southern Italian dialect, the voice of *Il serpente* uses '*starnutire*' (304).

16 According to the newsagent, '*Siamo tutti dei bagoloni da queste parti*': '*bagolone*' (*chiacchierone, spacciafrottole, fanfarone*), is a lexeme derived from the dialects of Lombardy and the Veneto: see https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ricerca/bagolone and https://www.gdli.it/sala-lettura/vol/1?seq=955 (accessed 30 January 2022).

17 Time, according to Malerba, 'is nothing more than a convenient device invented by humanity to prevent everything from happening contemporaneously. A writer can do without this convenient expedient' (*è soltanto un comodo espediente inventato dall'uomo per impedire che le cose accadano tutte insieme. Uno scrittore può anche fare a meno di questo comodo espediente*) (1986a: 11).

18 For Muzzioli, the narration is characterised by the '*formula ricorrente "mi dicevo*"'; it is a '*dialogo* in interiore homine' between the *I* and the author of the glosses in italics (1999, xviii, xv). Rudman (2008) suggests the *corsivi* following the chapters be read as a sort of story-within-a-story dealing with the human condition (142, 144). She does not exclude that the object of the *corsivi*, given that their voice uses the informal '*tu*' (138), is the voice speaking to himself.

19 In this the *I* resembles Malerba, who often ends non-fictional interventions by raising the possibility that the opposite of his thesis is true. This strategy is adopted by Malerba in many of his non-fiction interventions (for example, 1986a, 7). At least one of his texts '*di carattere saggistico*' concludes with two contradictory lapsus that free the author from responsibility for assertions expounded in his text (Malerba 1986b, 60). Elsewhere Malerba contends that 'such negation' (*la negazione*) by the voice of *Il serpente* 'does not completely destroy his narrative' (*non distrugge completamente il suo racconto*) because 'when something is imagined it becomes part of one's reality' (*quando una cosa si è immaginata è come averla vissuta realmente*). He then contends imagination creates 'a secondary reality in which the reader believed and continues believing' (*una seconda realtà nella quale il lettore ha creduto e continua a credere*) (Malerba 1986a, 13), a claim resonant of the postmodern literary period, and one, I would argue, that goes far beyond the sort of reader collaboration Malerba considers an effect of his use of irony.

20 In Glynn's reading (2006), the Architect is a sort of God, (619), as is the *Commissario* (624). Thus, in her reading, the protagonist's surrender to the police inspector is equivalent to the submission of Lacan's the Law-of-the-Father. In *Il pianeta azzurro* (see Francese 2021), the narrator's trips to the *commissariato* are similarly unsuccessful: he is not allowed to accuse himself.

21 Heyer-Caput (1995) considers the arbitrary choice of a name 'a gesture of extreme nominalism' (*un gesto di nominalismo estremo*) which 'gives sense to reality and bestows on the subject an otherwise unknown intellectual and ethical freedom' (*conferisce senso alla realtà e dota il soggetto di una libertà intellettuale ed etica altrimenti sconosciuta*) that 'has the absurd result of nullifying that which he created' (*arriv[are] fino all'assurdo di nullificare ciò che ha creato*) (94–5).

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22 'Oh, Saving Sacrifice' (*O Salutaris Hostia*) is a section of a Eucharistic hymn written by Thomas Aquinas for the Feast of Corpus Christi.
23 Originally a disparaging term used by Romans in reference to peasants who came from the Romagna region (the source of the Tiber is in the Romagna) to farm the land on the outskirts of the city. Today it is commonly used to signify '*villano, rozzo, zoticone*' (https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/burino1/) (accessed 31 January 2022).
24 The narrating *I* differs sharply from, for example, Malerba's '*compagno di classe, Pontirol*', 'who died in the Apennines with other partisans during a round-up' (*caduto sull'Appennino con altri partigiani durante un rastrellamento*). As for Malerba, he completed his studies at Parma's *Ginnasio-Liceo Classico Giandomenico Romagnosi* '*con l'esame di maturità nel 1944* [the five-year programme was reduced to two] *dopo il primo bombardamento della città da parte degli Alleati*' (after the first Allied bombing of the city). He spent the remainder of the war with his family at their home in Berceto. In 1946 they returned to Parma, where Malerba enrolled in the *Facoltà di Giurisprudenza* (Facebook).
25 With the *Anschluss* Austria became a province of the Third Reich, and for the following four years was referred to as Ostmark.
26 According to Marc Raboy, Guglielmo Marconi occupied an enormously exaggerated position in the Italian popular imagination (2016, 6). As Raboy writes: by 1937, the year of Marconi's death, 'anything Marconi said or did was newsworthy, and had been for more than forty years. Stock prices rose or sank according to his pronouncements. If Marconi said he thought it might rain, there was likely to be a run on umbrellas' (7). Marconi, of course, was famous for his invention of wireless communication, and it was rumoured widely that he had invented a 'death ray' (7, 540). In November 1930 press reports claimed Marconi 'had "carbonized" a group of sheep with a burst of wireless energy' (581). In 1935, as Italy was preparing to invade Ethiopia, to borrow again Raboy's phrasing, 'newspapers around the world began carrying reports that Marconi had invented a "fantastic new weapon". Mussolini, himself, it was said, had attended experiments where Marconi caused internal combustion engines to cease functioning. There were further rumours of Marconi stopping aircraft in full flight, halting armies in their tracks, and having created a "death ray"' (582).
27 At this point in his narration, the narrating voice is probably near *L'Arciconfraternita del Preziosissimo Sangue di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*, across the Viale Principale from the *Ossario comune* (in the *Altoripiano Vecchio Reparto*). Rome's *Arciconfraternita del Preziosissimo Sangue di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo* is commonly known as 'Sangue sparso'.
28 In any case, as Horney (1942) demonstrates, both results are often beyond the scope of self-analysis (296–7).

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Italian summary

Nel suo primo romanzo, *Il serpente*, Luigi Malerba si distanzia dalla prospettiva oggettivante, dai protagonisti lavoratori e dagli argomenti del neorealismo per approdare ad un realismo soggettivo che accantona i dialoghi diretti caratteristici del suo primo libro (*La scoperta dell'alfabeto*, una raccolta di narrative brevi) a favore del monologo esteriore. Insorge nella voce narrante de *Il serpente* l'impulso a ripetere le colpe, vergogne ed umiliazioni della sua infanzia e gioventù. Ansioso di come appare, principalmente a sé stesso, mente abitualmente: si trova, infatti, stretto fra l'esigenza di esprimersi e la paura di essere punito per essersi espresso. *Il serpente* — se pensiamo alle modifiche qui apportate da Malerba alla propria strategia narrativa, nonché alla plausibilità psicologica della narrazione e allo scandagliamento della 'zona grigia' popolata da chi non partecipò nella guerra civile scatenata dal crollo del Fascismo — merita una nostra ulteriore e attenta lettura.

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