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OF SPIDERS AND SNAKES

Amitav Ghosh and Claudia Durastanti revisit Ernesto De Martino[1]

ABSTRACT: In concert with the recent revival of De Martino's work, both in Italy and abroad, this article returns to his study of Lucanian magic rituals and his views about cultural apocalypses in order to highlight the relevance of his socio-anthropological reflections for the "wicked" problems posed in the twenty-first century by climate change. To this purpose, I will analyze two recent environmental novels, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) and Claudia Durastanti's *Missitalia* (2024), that directly or indirectly reference De Martino's theories. My intention is to perform a translational gesture that retroactively intervenes in and enhances De Martino's original texts.

KEYWORDS: cultural anthropology; environmental literature; magic; supernatural; tarantism

Ghosh and the Call for Environmental Literature

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), the Indian author Amitav Ghosh deplores the fact that literary works, including his own, have, for the most part, been shown to be inadequate to the task of narrating the Anthropocene. He writes: "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2016, 9). In particular, he criticizes the modern novel – a literary form born out of the nineteenth-century bourgeois need to celebrate the everyday and its regularity – for excluding the inexplicable and the improbable. According to bourgeois realism, nature, if properly dealt with, could be domesticized (i.e., would become moderate and orderly) while catastrophism would be kept on the margins as a superseded attitude of the past. "Here is the irony of the realistic novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (Ghosh 2016, 23).

In his recent novel, *Gun Island* (2019), Ghosh takes on the challenge of writing realistic fiction that fits the sense of reality we experience in our climate change era while also "creat[ing] space for apocalyptic thinking – [a space] which may at least delay, if not avert the catastrophes ahead" (Mishra 2016). *Gun Island* weaves together the urgent questions of climate change and human and animal migration with traditional Hindu folklore and Western legends from the seventeenth century. Its present-day, fast-paced

[1] I am grateful to the participants in the seminar on "Imagining Climate Change", a year-long project held at the Kahn Liberal Arts Institute at Smith College where the first thinking for this article began.

narrative imagines transoceanic adventures and mobilities (Calcutta and the Sundarbans, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Venice) punctuated by incursions of the momentous and the catastrophic into its characters' lives. Surprisingly, the name of the twentieth-century Neapolitan anthropologist, Ernesto De Martino, pops up in an intellectual debate staged in the Maidan Park in the center of Calcutta. The discussion takes place between the two main protagonists, Cinta, a Venetian historian of the Renaissance period, and Deen, an Indian book antiquarian and scholar of Bengali legends. Cinta introduces De Martino to Deen as "one of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth century" (Ghosh 2019, 38) and cites De Martino's "brilliant study" on tarantism to buttress her views that it is impossible to distinguish between natural and supernatural:

> [De Martino's] argument was that we cannot start with the label of the 'supernatural,' as rationalists invariably do. They assume that unexplained forms of causation cannot in principle exist. Yet, as De Martino shows, there are many well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called 'natural' causes. (Ghosh 2019, 38)

Deen, on the other hand, "pride[s] [him]self on being a rational, secular, scientifically-minded person," someone who doesn't believe in the supernatural or any "superstitious mumbo-jumbo" (Ghosh 2019, 36). This key scene from the beginning of the novel serves to introduce the strong presence of magic, folklore, and legends along with natural disasters and the extraordinary behaviour of animals (snakes, spiders, dolphins, worms, whales, birds). As the novel proceeds, Cinta and Deen become entangled into a crescendo of omens and miracles beyond established scientific understanding, and Deen must reconsider his scepticism.

What, then, attracts Amitav Ghosh (1956-), a globally known Indian author of novels and essays for the most part centered around the Indian subcontinent and the Far East, to revisit the intellectual inheritance of Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965) – the founding figure of Italian anthropology and ethno-psychiatry whose work, until recently, was little known outside the Italian academy?[2] Although they are both anthropologists by training (Ghosh holds a Phil. D. in social anthropology from Oxford), the two authors come from very different backgrounds. In his studies of the history of the relations between witchcraft and Catholicism in the South of Italy, De Martino was highly influenced by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. He was thus led to interpret tarantism within the framework of the historical conflict between the hegemonic order (State, Church,

[2] In his 2005 foreword to the first English translation of *La terra del rimorso* (*The Land of Remorse*), the critic Vincent Crapanzano wrote: "Ernesto De Martino plays the same eponymous role for Italian anthropology that Franz Boas does for the United States, Marcel Mauss for France, and Bronislaw Malinowski for England but unlike Boas, Mauss, and Malinowski, De Martino is little known outside his native country" (Crapanzano in De Martino 2005, vii). Since 2005, a good number of French and English translations have come out as well as new critical editions in Italian of De Martino's previously published works. See Zinn in De Martino 2023, xi-xii and Gutherz 2017, footnote 9, p. 61.

bourgeoisie) and the subaltern, the class to which the *tarantate* belonged.[3] Ghosh, on the other hand, is a postcolonial writer – the subaltern speaking back to the West. He was brought up in the Hindu tradition, educated in India and the UK, and is now a cosmopolitan traveller who lives between Asia, Europe, and the US. In spite of their evident differences, what unites De Martino and Ghosh is their interest in magic studied through its political and psychological intersections within modern societies. For them, magic isn't simply a marginal, outdated cultural relic; instead, it is a key for understanding the anxieties of our times. As Ghosh's character, Cinta, comments, even if he himself didn't believe in spirits and demons, De Martino had the merit of approaching the study of magic practices "with an open mind" (Ghosh 2019, 38)

De Martino's Trajectory: From Tarantism to Apocalypses

By "magic" De Martino meant occurrences of witchcraft and shamanism attesting to the sudden irruption of the irrational into the behaviour of individuals. He was in particular interested in what he called "low ceremonial magic." As the critic Crapanzano explains, "The expression 'low ceremonial magic' refers to traditional magic ideologies and practices related to the 'evil eye,' charms, spells, amulets, potions and various rituals for love, illness, child rearing, the weather" (Crapanzano in De Martino 2005, footnote 11, 10).

De Martino interpreted such phenomena as highly significative symptoms of a crisis of presence, one which still affected, with particular violence, contemporary Southern women. His early books, *Sud e magia* (1959) (*Magic. A Theory from the South*) and *La terra del rimorso* (1961) (*The Land of Remorse*), constitute the first in-depth study of tarantism ever conducted; he interviewed Lucanian women and men who had supposedly been bitten or possessed by the mythical spider and analyzed tarantula symbolism as well as the musical and choreographic exorcism used to heal the tarantate.[4] Rather than dismissing the ritual as a folkloric remnant of paganism, he interpreted it in an ethno-psychological perspective as "a means for reliving and healing individual crises threatening to explode without control. It served as a channel of expression and resolution according to a historically proven and socially acknowledged model" (Lüdtke 2009, 65).

[3] See "Prefazione" in De Martino's *Sud e Magia* p. 5-8. ("Preface" in *Magic* xi-xvi).

[4] I use the Italian feminine form, *tarantate*, to stress that most of the Lucanian *tarantate* interviewed by De Martino and his teams were women, although there were also a few men. As for the spider, few of the interviewees had actually suffered from a real spider bite. De Martino also argues that the tarantula involved in tarantism is a mythical spider; in fact, historically, the spider involved in the incidents was likely to have been not the tarantula (*Lycosa tarantula*) but a related species, the *Latrodectus*, commonly known as the black widow (*The Land of Remorse* 33-5).

Building on Martin Heidegger's philosophical concept of existence as *Dasein* ("being there" or "being-in-the-world"),[5] De Martino views the crisis of presence experienced by the tarantate as a sense of loss, of "not being," a condition in which the individual is frightened by the double terror of "losing the world" and "being lost in the world."[6] As the historian Carlo Ginzburg writes: "the bold theoretical argument advanced in Il mondo magico [is] that reality, and our presence in it, are the outcome of a long historical process, in which magic played a crucial role" (Ginzburg 2017, 80). Experiencing a sense of the self as unreal and unrelated to the present circumstances, individuals feel disconnected and alienated from a reality perceived as collapsing around them. In such moments of crisis, low ceremonial magic powerfully contributes in rescuing the fragile, threatened presence of the individual in the world and gives protection against the risk of "being-acted-upon."[7] Once the figure of evil (the demon or the spider or the sender of the evil eye or the originator of a malicious spell) is singled out by the shaman, the ritual allows for the crisis to be resolved by eliminating its negative charge through symbolic language. As Dorothy Louise Zinn writes: "Despite its negative resonances, the crisis is nevertheless a signal of the presence's capacity for reactivity and should be understood in a broader framework as part of the process leading to (therapeutic) action that can restore presence" (Zinn in De Martino 2023, 326).

A second bold theoretical argument advanced by De Martino is to give tarantism and witchcraft a political meaning. Combining Heidegger's philosophy with a Gramscian reading of history, De Martino lays out his view of magic as a technique for combating precarity, a key feature of the complex dynamics between dominant and subaltern cultures in the South of Italy. Rather than a symptom of moral degradation, the ritual is viewed as a social instrument apt to control "the negative" (i.e., the misery of their material living conditions) and protect the individual from the risks she is exposed to. For subalterns excluded from history, occurrences of magic denounce their condition of dependence on dominant classes, yet those occurrences also offer a way out by

[5] There are, however, important differences between Heidegger and De Martino. As Dorothy Louise Zinn points out: "Whereas Heidegger implies the existence of a 'pure' Nature of things that are deworlded, in De Martino's conception there is no such precultural Nature, but the presence in crisis loses its world, [a world] inevitably and in toto culturally conditioned" (Zinn in De Martino 2023, 326).
[6] De Martino, *La fine del mondo* 360; *The End of the World* 194. For De Martino's reading of Heidegger's philosophy, see *La fine del mondo* 520-32; *The End of the World*, 306-16.
[7] "Being in the world – maintaining oneself as an individual presence in society and history – means *acting* [*agire*] as a power of decision and choice according to values; it means always performing anew the never-definitive detachment from the immediacy of mere natural vitality and raising to cultural life" (De Martino 2015, 97). For a discussion of "being-acted-upon," see De Martino 2024, 86-91 and 97-102; De Martino 2001, 97-101 and 109-14.

reinserting into history subjects that both the bourgeoisie and pre-twentieth century anthropologists had traditionally viewed as ahistorical.8

De Martino's reflections on magic and the shipwreck of the world for the menaced individual paved the way, a few years later, for his new meditations about the end of the world and the endangered human species. His scrutiny of the crisis of presence moves thus from individuals in small rural communities to the *Zeitgeist* of an entire culture, Western modernity. The new book was left unfinished and published posthumously only in 1977 as *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali,* although the central argument of the project was presented in an article which came out in 1964, a year before De Martino's untimely death.[9] The fact that the book has been translated by Dorothy Louise Zinn in English for the first time only in 2023 is evidence of the renewed interest scholars from different backgrounds have recently shown in De Martino's cultural enterprise. In the section of that book entitled *L'apocalisse dell'Occidente* ("Western Apocalypse"), De Martino draws parallels between the Italian South threatened by modernity and the existential angst described by modern authors such as Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Alberto Moravia. He views their works as exemplary texts that explore what he calls "the apocalyptic sensitivity of our epoch" (De Martino 1964, 124). Whereas previous views of the apocalypse had envisioned the eventual redemption (eschaton) and reintegration of individuals into a post-apocalyptic scenario (for instance, the Christian Last Judgement Day), according to De Martino, the modernist bourgeois apocalypse is characterized by the absence of eschaton, since the end of the world isn't perceived any longer as the prelude to a future new order.

Writing in the early sixties during the Cold War, De Martino was living under the nuclear bomb threat. Today, sixty years later, La fine del mondo lends itself to a new reading in light of a different apocalyptic scenario, the climate crisis. Following De Martino's interest in the literature of his time, it is therefore only appropriate for us, his twenty-first-century readers, to examine our own apocalyptic sensibility through the pages of Gun Island, a novel that moves away from the bourgeois interiors and the urban Western environments of existentialist and Modernist literature, staging instead the ecological disasters and migrations that are happening today on a global scale.

[8] The critic Marcello Massenzio views such dialectic tension between estrangement and the possibility of recovering as one of the main threads that runs through De Martino's apocalypses (Massenzio 2017, 354).

[9] The article, "Apocalissi culturali e apocalissi psicopatologiche," is now included in the 2019 Einaudi edition of *La fine del mondo* (De Martino 2019, 547-579), but not in the 2023 English translation *The End of the World* published by The University of Chicago Press.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019): The Magic of Spiders and Snakes

While De Martino limited his study of magic to the South of Italy, Ghosh is a postcolonial author who revisits De Martino's theories within the framework of the diverse cultures of the Global South. From that perspective, the debate already mentioned between Cinta and Deen takes on a new twist. After scorning Cinta's interest in seeing a jatra performance of the popular legend of Manasa Devi,[10] Deen remarks sarcastically, "I suppose … that this is the India you had expected to see … It's exotic, isn't it? Especially if you think of India as a land of snake-charmers, as many foreigners do" (Ghosh 2019, 34); Deen then adds, "I suppose in your eyes no Indian can be modern or rational? We're all supposed to believe in goddesses and witches and demons?" (Ghosh 2019, 37). In such remarks, Orientalism and class add other intersectional layers to the distinction between natural vs. supernatural that he and Cinta are discussing. Orientalism displaces and excludes any such real thing as the Orient; it fabricates instead an exotic representation of the Orient that is essentialized as static and underdeveloped, thus serving to maintain the West in position of power. Class, on the other hand, drives the distinction between high and low culture: Deen thinks that old legends make worthy subjects of doctoral dissertations but disregards jatra performances of those same legends, seeing them as "simple-minded parodies of classical texts" (Ghosh 2019, 33). In his snobbish view, demons and magic are good only for the uneducated subaltern.

In an ironical reversal, therefore, Deen, a postcolonial Indian subject, comes to represent the positionality of Western bourgeoisie (rationalism and elitism), while Cinta, a representative of Western knowledge, stands up in defense of Indian superstitious folk beliefs. She argues: "So to say that that you don't believe in the 'supernatural' is a contradiction in terms – because it means that you also don't believe in the 'natural.' Neither can exist without the other" (Ghosh 2019, 37). By referring to De Martino's study on tarantism, she shows Deen how a modern Indian, or, for that matter, a modern Italian, can still believe in magic as part of their existence in spite of the fact that they live in a world dominated by rationalism and science. Magic is just a means of asserting a reality which has always existed, despite its supposed erasure by the West in the process of becoming modern. For De Martino, Cinta, and Ghosh, spiders and snakes have retained all of their symbolic power and can still communicate to us through the myths they belong to. Commenting on the tarantism ritual, De Martino writes:

> The symbol of the taranta lends a figure to the formless, rhythm and melody to menacing silence, and colour to the colourless … The symbol offers a perspective for imagining, hearing and watching what we lack imagination for and are deaf and blind to, and which nevertheless peremptorily asks to be imagined, heard and seen. (De Martino 2005, 36)

[10] Jatra performances are a form of popular folk theatre. Originally from rural Bengal, they usually take place in open-air arenas or under tents.

In Ghosh's view, environmental disaster literature is demanding that we tap into our mythical-ritual horizon in order to make sense of "well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called 'natural' causes" (Ghosh 2019, 38). Facing natural catastrophes of planetary magnitude, we must stimulate our imagination to imagine the invisible, what exceeds the narrow confinement of realistic expectations.

Another interesting reversal that takes place in *Gun Island* is the way that the Indian legend is interpreted. Initially, Deen reads it from the human protagonist's point of view; the merchant is regarded as a victim relentlessly persecuted by a merciless deity who, thanks to her mighty powers, unleashes cyclones, droughts, spiders, snakes, and pirates against him and his family. Yet, in his daydreaming while sitting on a bench in the Venetian Ghetto, Deen has an epiphany: "I seemed to slip through an opening, or a membrane" (166) and for the first time he considers the legend from Manasa Devi's point of view. Rather than "a story of an almost incomprehensible divine vindictiveness" (*ibid.*), the legend appears now to him as a cautionary tale of proto-capitalist human greed. Ghosh writes: "Driven, as was the Merchant, by the quest for profit – [he] would recognize no restraint in relation to living things" (167). In this symbolic conflict between profit and the world, Manasa Devi takes on the figure of "a negotiator, a translator – or better still, as the Italians say, a *portavoce* (voice-carrier)" – a figure engaged in a constant work of mediation between the animal and the human world. Deen remembers how "the Manasa Devi of the legend was by no means a 'goddess' in [the traditional] sense; snakes were not so much her subjects as her constituents; to get them to do her bidding, she had to plead, cajole, persuade" (*ibid*).

This poetic and delicate image of Manasa Devi as persuasive mediator might surprise us, yet it is more evidence of how indispensable our myths are for mediating between species and showing us their interconnectedness. It also serves to remind us that, even in today's most secular societies, the divine or magic can exert an important role in making the self more porous in relation to its environment and fostering environmental awareness. The Manasa Devi legend or the Lucanian ritual of tarantism represent symbolical responses to our fragility in an eco-system where it isn't possible any longer to believe, as the Moderns did, that the bites of spiders and snakes can be simply dealt with by antidotes to poison or similar scientific developments. Instead, through their exceptional behaviour caused by climate change, animals reclaim their long unrecognized connection with humans. When Deen finds an extremely uncommon and venomous spider in her apartment, Cinta tells Deen: "[The spider] is here because of *our* history; because of things human beings have done. It is linked to you already – you have a prior connection with that spider, whether you like it or not" (235).

Over the course of the novel Deen becomes increasingly unsettled by a succession of omens and inexplicable events that happen to him. He comments: "It's a strange feeling, as though I'm not in control of what I'm doing. It is as if I were fading away, losing my will, my freedom" (234). He seems in fact to display the symptoms of the demonic possessions observed by De Martino in Lucania. Like Deen, the *tarantate* complain of

loss of agency, of being-acted-upon ("*essere-agite-da*") in a world that threatens to submerge them. Subsequently, in *The End of the World*, crisis is analysed as a permanent anthropological risk experienced by the Moderns (the fear of losing their Ego in "the sea of objectivity").[11] Deen's possession, however, is of a different kind. In a *Gun Island* scene which echoes most closely De Martino's thought, Ghosh, through Cinta's words, adds his own "swerve" to De Martino's theories. Cinta believes that she and Deen live in a world where it is not possible any longer to be possessed in the old sense. In pre-modern times, in order to survive, humans needed to constantly assert their presence in a world that opposed physical resistance and threatened to overwhelm them. Hence their crisis of presence. Today, however, Cinta continues, we live detached from material reality, ours is a world of impersonal systems and cell phones. "In our circumstances, she says, no one needs to assert their presence in order to get by day to day. And since it is not needed, the sense of presence slowly fades, or is lost or forgotten – it is easier to let the systems take over … The world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession" (236). Our demons are greed, *hubris* against nature, and our deranged belief that, like the Gun Merchant, we can continue destroying the earth with impunity in the pursuit of our accelerated consumerism. Whereas, for De Martino's subjects, loss of presence generated anxiety, for Ghosh's contemporaries that same loss induces a sought-after state of oblivion. Our response to climate change offers a telling example of that passivity. We are possessed whenever we willingly divert our eyes from the monstrous events happening on our planet and surrender instead to the sense of reality imposed by whatever has power over us (capital, technology, globalization). We belong to a "global citizenry of desire" (Ghosh 2021, 726) where common desires aren't the expression of our will; they are instead fabricated by the visual imagery of media, via smartphones and the internet.

The scene ends with Cinta remarking: "Whatever is happening to you [Deen] is not 'possession.' Rather I would say that it is a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening. You are lucky, Dino – some unknown force has given you a great gift" (Ghosh 2019, 237). With a remarkable twist, Ghosh manages to historicize De Martino's concept of crisis and adjust its modality to fit our times; possession and awakening no longer represent the two opposite poles of a pre-established dichotomy, they instead change their meaning according to the historical moment in which we analyse them. Ghosh believes that, in our contemporary age of apocalyptic climate change, possession has already happened and the only *eschaton* left to us is the hope of regaining consciousness and our sense of responsibility towards the earth. Openness to the supernatural constitutes an important part of that awakening. In the novel, portents and animals play a role as significant as Cinta. In her attentive listening to both Deen and supranatural voices, Cinta could be seen as a modern secular Manasa Devi, the facilitator of individual communications

[11] "Il mare dell'oggettività" ("The Sea of Objectivity") is a title of a 1960 essay by Italo Calvino (Calvino 1995, 52-60).

between animal creatures and humans. Animals also display agency by partaking of public spectacles of magic. The last pages of the novel take place in the Mediterranean, where we witness an escalation of portentous gatherings of animals in large numbers (dolphins, whales, maritime bioluminescence, and birds) (306-307). Miracles happen when Deen, Cinta, and Piya, together with humanitarian activists, approach the Blue Boat which carries asylum-seekers, thus marking the protagonists' "awakening" to the interconnected causes of the Mediterranean migrants and climate change.

Claudia Durastanti's *Missitalia* (2024): The Magic of Spiders and Oil

Magic and a sense of loss also dominate the lives of the "*temerarie,*" (literally, "the fearless women") who are the protagonists of Claudia Durastanti's latest novel, *Missitalia*.[12] Hers is a novel which denounces the North's historical exploitation of the people and natural resources of the South of Italy and predicts an apocalyptic future. Women are the ones who bear the brunt of that exploitation, yet they are also alone in daring to rebel. They are in turn revolutionaries and witches, international spies and bacchants, space pioneers and *tarantate*. Like De Martino and Ghosh, Durastanti was trained as an anthropologist (she holds a doctoral degree in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Rome La Sapienza) and, like Ghosh, she is a diasporic writer. Having grown up in an Italian family in Brooklyn, at the age of six after her parents divorced, she returned to live in her mother's native village in Basilicata. She now shuttles between Rome, London, and New York, and in addition to writing fiction, she is also a well-known translator and editor at the feminist press "La Tartaruga".

Missitalia consists in three separate fictional stories, each focusing on a different historical moment (a commune of women brigands at the end of the nineteenth century, a young anthropologist doing field work in the post-WWII years, and a woman dying of exposure to toxic pollution in a futuristic mid-twenty-first century). All three female protagonists (Amalia, Ada, and A.), however, gravitate around a single area, the Val d'Agri in the region of Basilicata, a place that is depicted as a *finis terrae* of civilization still inhabited by magic.

Characterized by a deserted, barren countryside, Val d'Agri was long considered to be one of the most backwards regions of Europe, until suddenly, in the fifties, it attracted the attention of Northern capitalists in search of oil. What ensued was "una gigantesca caccia al catrame" ("a massive tar hunt") (Durastanti 2024, 189); following their discoveries, in the eighties, national and multinational oil companies started drilling in what turned out to be the biggest oil field in all of Europe. In the novel's background is the ongoing, twenty-first century modernization of the real Basilicata, a history whose latest developments remain outside of the novel yet are part of the cultural context of

[12] All translations from Durastanti's novel are mine.

Italian readers. Since the eighties, Val d'Agri (an area of 660 square km) has become the epicenter of Italian oil production and a site of great national interest.[13] In their 2019 documentary, the contemporary filmmakers Mimmo Nardozza and Salvatore Laurenzana denounce the industrial pollution of Val d'Agri, a place they rename "Mal d'Agri," (literally, "Agri Sickness").

This double-faced development, which puts the region in first place for oil production as well as pollution, is only the latest chapter of a story that must be analysed within a broader national history, a history where the wealthy Italian North has traditionally exploited the economically disadvantaged South. The vexed relationship between these two parts of Italy, often referred to as "la questione meridionale" ("The Southern Question"), has shaped Italy's politics and history since the country's unification in 1861, and the gap has only deepened after WWII, when the accelerated modernization of the South began to follow hegemonic models derived from Eurocentric and North Atlantic models. The last thirty-forty years have witnessed an outburst of studies that, in the words of the sociologist Franco Cassano, invite us to "riguardare" (or "reconsider") the South – in the double meaning that the verb has in Italian, "thinking anew," i.e., looking again at the South (from a different perspective which is not the one of the North) as well as "having consideration for, taking good care of something," i.e., to restore agency and dignity to the heritage and legacies of Southern civilizations and cultures. Cassano urges us "not to think of the South in the light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in the light of the South" (Cassano 2012, 1).

In order to highlight Durastanti's retroactive dialogue with De Martino's work, I will focus on the middle panel of Durastanti's fictional tryptic. This section is centered around the figure of Ada, a twenty-year-old student of anthropology who participates in two expeditions in Lucania, first in 1954 and then again in 1956. In the former, she is the director's assistant in an interdisciplinary and international research team, made up of a documentarist, a psychiatrist, an ethno-musicologist, and a social worker; they are all under the leadership of a professor who is known in the novel simply as the Anthropologist (with a capital "A"). The character of the Anthropologist is clearly inspired by Ernesto De Martino, the first academic in the immediate postwar period to conduct field studies on the ancient cultures of the Italian South. De Martino was genuinely interested in bettering the conditions of *cafoni*, (roughly, "hillbillies"), as the rural subalterns in the South were called at the time.[14] Together with other contemporary intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Carlo Levi, De Martino's contribution to

[13] Val d'Agri's wells and refineries are owned for the most part by the national company E.N.I. (60%) while the multinationals Shell and Total own the remaining share. Basilicata's annual oil production corresponds to only 6% of Italian national consumption, yet the region supplies 80% of the oil extracted in Italy (both on- and offshore) and 30% of the gas extracted in Italy. See Bubbico 2020. Given this scenario, as to be expected, since the nineties, Val d'Agri has been in the news for a series of ecological disasters linked to oil spills and air pollution.

[14] See Ignazio Silone's 1933 novel, *Fontamara*.

Southern Studies was fundamental in revealing how the enormous differences between Southern and Northern Italy required not only economical engagement but also initiatives that would promote a rebirth of the South on a cultural level.

In her second expedition to Lucania, in 1956, Ada temporarily moves to the small village of Castelluccio d'Agri in order to do research work for her dissertation and interview local women. Among the local people she meets in the two expeditions are two old widows who, on demand, perform an epileptic-like trance induced by tambourine music (Durastanti 2024, 243-45); a female sexton who reads the future in the dregs of the first gas pumps which open in the village (276); and the unruly young women ("*le scapestrate*") (284) who have returned to live in Castelluccio after unsuccessfully migrating to the North. All three encounters tell the story of powerless women who have learned to constantly transform their lives and use magic rituals as a way of resisting their poverty. In her dissertation, Ada refuses to view them as victims. She adds: "il mio modo di reagire alla penuria di risorse delle donne è stato di trasformarle in guerriere temerarie … Non sopportavo di saperle deboli, vittime di forze che non sapevano controllare" ["my way of rebelling to the lack of resources experienced by the women was to transform them into fearless warriors … I refused to accept that they should be shown as weak, victims of forces beyond their control"] (278). "*Temerarie*" is a key word throughout the novel, connecting all its female protagonists. The ambiguity of this quality, boldness, is attested to by the single sentence adorning the back cover of the book: "Era temeraria, che splendida bugia" ("She was fearless. What a splendid lie"). Magic rituals become central to the *temerarie*'s lives as a tactic for perpetrating that "lie" and combating female precarity in spite of their condition of marginality within marginality (i.e., women within the patriarchal society of the Italian South).

As in the case of Ghosh's *Gun Island*, *Missitalia* presents a complex of intersectional forces that cuts across the encounter between anthropologists and Lucanian magic as well across the relationship between anthropology, capital, and extractivism. Although De Martino's ethnography has been groundbreaking, both in questioning the positionality of subjects and objects and in focusing his research almost exclusively on peasant women, he nevertheless remained an intellectual of the twentieth century, an intellectual who, in the encounter with the Other, showed little consideration for "the effect on his research of a team of professional scholars descending on a small peasant community" (Crapanzano in De Martino 2005, x). In Durastanti's novel, Ada's attitude is more finely tuned to the complexity of that encounter. When two widowed sisters exhibit themselves in front of the researchers' team, Ada has the impression of having witnessed a ritual which successfully brought magic into the room through the repetition of detailed formulas and choreography. However, the sisters also immediately demonstrate a strong practical sense, having realized that they can take economic advantage of "performing" witchcraft for the anthropologists (literally, "playing the peasant," as one of the two tells Ada). ("Che è successo? E lei mi ha risposto: Niente, ho fatto la contadina") ("What happened? And she replies: Nothing, I played the peasant")

(Durastanti 2024, 243). Ada, on the other hand, is aware that she would never be able to write a scientific report on those episodes of possession and distinguish between natural and supernatural manifestations. Like Deen in Ghosh's novel, she begins to doubt the validity of an anthropological approach to magic.

In her fieldwork, Ada alternates between two opposite attitudes. At times, she believes that she is best situated to understand her informants precisely because of transversal gender intersectionalities (she herself is a young woman from the South, although educated, middle- class, and residing in metropolitan Rome). At other times, she expresses her fundamental critique of anthropology and her cynical self-consciousness; for example, reflecting, years later, on her team's achievements, she writes: "finge[vamo] di avere la competenza necessaria per craccare il codice della povertà meridionale. Eravamo estrattori di dati e, senza volerlo, anche noi abbiamo contribuito a creare un Sud in Miniatura, un parco divertimenti della crisi" ["we pretended to have the necessary competence to crack the code of Southern poverty. We were extracting data and, inadvertently, we too have contributed to create a miniature South, an amusement park to showcase the Southern crisis"] (Durastanti 2024, 199). Extracting data or poaching, as she calls it – her nickname for the Anthropologist is "bracconiere" ("poacher") (241) – seems anthropology's main modus operandi; for Ada, it is an approach that contributes in orientalizing the South without systematically addressing its problems.

As in De Martino's *The End of the World*, Durastanti represents the crisis of presence experienced by Southern women as symptomatic of a malaise that in our modern epoch has extended to the whole of society. The sense of "losing the world" and that of "being lost in the world" (De Martino 2023, 194) once observed by De Martino is also alluded to in the title of the novel, *Missitalia*. The title conveys the polysemic meanings of the English word "miss": it can be a noun referring to a young unmarried woman, a verb with the double meaning of "longing for something/someone," as well as "failing to hit," or "failing to notice." In addition, "Miss Italia" is the name of a beauty contest that became popular in the post-WWII period; this competition launched naive proletarian women into the media spotlight and transformed them into sex symbols.[15] As one of the characters comments: "miss è una parola speciale perché non ci sono molti suoni che sanno tenere insieme la verginità, la nostalgia e pure il bersaglio appena mancato" ("miss' is a special word because there aren't many sounds that are able to connect virginity, nostalgia and even the target just missed") (Durastanti 2024, 27). The episodes of low witchcraft as well as Ada's malaise described by Durastanti underline the polysemic, translingual connotations of the title and the sense that De Martino gave to loss.

[15] For the way Missitalia contenders came to embody the renewed national image of Italy in the post-WWII period see Gundle's *Bellissima*.

Ada also draws out the ramifications of De Martino's theories when she wonders whether the *tarantate* are better equipped to manage apocalyptic crisis than metropolitan, rationalist Moderns, like herself:

> A Roma c'era un senso precipitoso di progresso che mi generava ansia, lo inseguivo e perseguivo e poi mi veniva la febbre perché temevo di essermi persa qualcosa e mi sembrava più sostenibile quello che facevano le persone rimaste in compagnia di divinità e dei minori, attaccati con lo scotch e la supercolla. Appicicaticci, malconci e condannati a un'eterna riparazione, erano miti che mutavano ogni giorno, tutt'altro che assoluti: erano le protesi a buon mercato a rinnovarli di costante. (Durastanti 2024, 244)

> In Rome, there was a hurried sense of progress; it made me anxious, I chased it, I pursued it, but afterwards I used to develop a fever because I feared having missed something. I looked at other people who had remained in the company of minor gods, [divinities] pasted with scotch tape and superglue, and it seemed to me that what they were doing was more sustainable. Sticky, battered, and in constant need of being repaired, those gods were myths that changed every day, anything but absolute. Thanks to their cheap prosthetic devices, they never stopped renewing themselves.

The two widowed sisters or the female sexton offer telling examples of the ability of low ceremonial magic to adapt and evolve, given that it has always existed at the margins of society. Its myths and rituals have neither the clear-cut certitudes of science nor the ruling classes' recognition, yet, no matter how "malconci e condannati a un'eterna riparazione" ("battered and in constant need of being repaired") they are, they have shown and continue to show their strong resilience. Like the myth of Manasa Devi and the Gun Merchant in Hindu folklore, Lucanian low magic has survived across centuries through variants and new incarnations.

During her stay in Castelluccio, Ada's path crosses a few times with another important character: the nameless male figure known as "the Magnate of fossil fuels" or simply "the Magnate," a rich Italian industrialist of the North who represents the interests of North American groups. He travels to Lucania attracted by the possibility of finding oil and speaks frenetically about the economic gains it will bring: "Sembra di stare in Texas. [Il petrolio] farà grandi cose, ci dobbiamo sbrigare" ["It's as if we were in Texas. [Oil] will do amazing things, no time to waste"] (Durastanti 2024, 275). Ada reminds him that local old people refer derogatively to that new marvel as simply "acqua sporca" ("dirty water") (275). An ironic comment by Ada establishes a revelatory parallel: "Io passavo le giornate a interrogare le vecchie sulle streghe, gli operai [del Magnate] trivellavano. Chi è che stava cercando la vita negli strati più infimi del passato?" ["I spent my days interviewing witches, the Magnate's workers, on the other hand, drilled. Who was looking for life in the lowest layers of the past?"] (276) Two different types of extraction, yet they have in common a violent intrusion into the intimacy of lives or the depths of soil, and both intrusions are justified by the prospect of bringing modernity in those so-called "Indie di quaggiù" ("The Indies from down here").[16] The double

[16] The term was used by sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries to refer to the Mezzogiorno (Sciannameo).

exploitation of both the human and Nature is further exacerbated by the disturbing role played by capital, since the Magnate is also the owner of the cultural anthropology magazine where Ada works and he is partially founding their ethnographic expeditions. Both oil drillers and intellectuals are on his payroll, entangled in a deceptive tactic which today, in the climate crisis age, we would call green-washing – i.e., misleading the public to believe that magnates actually care about the humans whose lives their oil wells and gas ducts disrupt.

Conclusion

In the opening lines of De Martino's *Sud e Magia*, we read:

> Il tema fondamentale della bassa magia cerimoniale lucana è la fascinazione (in dialetto: *fascinatura* o *affascino*). Con questo termine si indica una condizione psichica di impedimento e di inibizione, e al tempo stesso un senso di dominazione … da una forza altrettanto potente quanto occulta (De Martino 2023, 11)

> The fundamental theme of low ceremonial magic in Lucania is binding (in dialect: *fascinatura* or *affascino*). This term indicates a psychic condition of impediment or inhibition, and at the same time a sense of domination . . . by a force that is as strong as it is mysterious. (De Martino 2015, 3)

The translator, Dorothy Louise Zinn, chose the word "binding" in order to translate De Martino's Italian term, *fascinazione*, thus underlining for English readers the associations the word has with physical and psychical impediment (etymologically, it derives from the Latin *fascis,* literally "a bundle of things tied together"). Yet "binding" doesn't convey the positive metaphorical meaning that the word *fascinazione* and its semantically related terms (*fascinatura, affascino, affascinare*) have acquired in both Italian and English, i.e. seductive, charming, or beguiling in a pleasing way. Moreover, in Lucanian magic *fascinazione* means both the malicious influence suffered by a person due to a spell or bewitchment and the exorcism needed to protect the person from such an influence.

The concept of *fascinazione* in all its connotations represents a key aspect of the approach to magic in De Martino as well as Amitav Ghosh and Claudia Durastanti. Like the Italian anthropologist, the fictional characters in *Gun Island* and *Missitalia* are fascinated by the frequent supernatural manifestations they come across in their travels. Whenever they are faced with something that cannot be explained by rationalism or natural causes, they are in turn enchanted and bewildered, enraptured and frightened. Deen fears being possessed while Ada feels "un istinto spontaneo verso quella regione di penombra" ("a spontaneous instinct towards that twilight zone") (Durastanti 2024, 245). Both live the experience as a loss of control, a limitation of their rational faculties, yet it also comes as a revelatory epiphany that opens a new way of looking at reality and expands the realm of the possible. For De Martino, the unreality of magical practices

should induce us to question our own concept of reality. For Ghosh, contrary to what realist novels had us believe, reality exceeds scientifically proven facts. As epigraph to his 1948 book *Il Mondo magico*, De Martino quotes a famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Today, in our Anthropocene of present and impending natural catastrophes, the philosophy directly facing the challenges of climate change is a multidisciplinary conglomerate of different forms of knowledge that goes by the name of environmental studies. Environmental studies urge us to abolish the hierarchical distinction between the human and non-human and acknowledge the agency of the latter (see, for instance, Rosi Braidotti on the posthuman subject or Jane Bennett on vibrant matter). In that vein, the anthropologist and historian of science Donna Haraway has proposed replacing the name "Anthropocene" with "Chtlhulucene," after a small spider that lives in the redwood forests in North Central California. Her intention is to de-emphasize human exceptionalism in favour of multispecism and sympoietic creations (Haraway 2016, 31).[17] Haraway's spider becomes a metaphor for a tentacular, probing, and speculative form of storytelling: "myriad tentacles will be needed to tell the story of the Chthulucene" (Haraway 2016, 31).

Haraway's revolutionary thinking, however, remains within the framework of science: her two categories of human and non-human don't envision the possibility of a third category, the supernatural. At a public talk given at Ca' Foscari in Venice, Ghosh commented:

> For Donna Haraway and many other academics, the non-human still remains always things in the natural world (trees, animals, parasites, Holobiont). However, there is an aspect of the non-human that we have erased that is increasingly forcing itself into our lives; that is, other beings, non-human beings of other kinds, … other forces, maybe demonic forces. Somehow, fantasy brings back for us that aspect of human experience, because it hasn't gone away and is still there. And it is just strange that within the language of modern discourse we have no space for it. (Ghosh 2020, 01:14:00)

Thanks to De Martino's works, Ghosh and Durastanti were introduced to low magic rituals and myths that allow them to pay attention to that other dimension of reality, one which we Moderns have erased. Deen's *risveglio* is due to supernatural, irrational forces very similar to the ones that lead Durastanti's *temerarie* and the Italian South to assert their fragile dignity. All three writers remind us that the spiritual dimension, what we might call "ecospirituality," is an integral part of our being in the world.

[17] Together with Clara Ciccioni, Durastanti translated in Italian Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (*Chthulucene. Sopravvivere su un pianeta infetto*, Nero, 2019).

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