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Autobiography as Self-Ethnography in Italo Calvino's 'La poubelle agréée'

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of Calvino's anthropological readings, often overlooked by scholars, is particularly evident in his autobiographical project *Passaggi obbligati*. The structure of the book, consisting of a selection of crucial turning points in the author's life, is modelled on the theories presented by Arnold Van Gennep in *Les Rites de passage*. Considering 'La poubelle agréée' as a case study, I will highlight Calvino's shaping of his autobiography according to Van Gennep's ritual frame, which can be described as a hybrid form of autobiography and ethnography, and which I define as 'self-ethnography'. The influence of Mary Douglas' reflection on impurity and garbage in her book *Purity and Danger* will then be considered as a further crucial theoretical reference for Calvino's construction of his self-ethnographic narrative.



KEYWORDS

Italo Calvino; Arnold Van Gennep; Mary Douglas; self-ethnography; autobiography

Introduction

The role of anthropological studies in the writings and thought of Italo Calvino is still largely overlooked by scholars, especially with regard to the direct influence that this discipline had on the writer's creative process and the evolution of his intellectual history.¹ Nevertheless, this discipline has always been a central reference throughout Calvino's career as a writer and editor from his very early years. In this article, I start by briefly reconstructing Calvino's relationship with anthropology, not only as an enthusiastic reader but also as an amateur in the discipline. After a quick overview of his first approaches during the 1950s, I identify the presence of a major shift in Calvino's interest in the field, which happened at the end of the 1960s, and its consequences on the author's writings and thought. In this period, Calvino widened the range of his anthropological readings and started to reflect also on the methodological and epistemological aspects of the discipline.

As I highlight in the second section of this article, the relevance of Calvino's anthropological readings is particularly evident in his autobiographical project *Passaggi obbligati*.² The planned

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¹The main studies on Calvino's relationship with anthropology, which focus primarily on the reconstruction of his readings in the field in different moments of his life, are Mario Barenghi, *Italo Calvino, le linee e i margini* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2007); Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011); Alberto Carli, *L'occhio e la voce. Pier Paolo Pasolini e Italo Calvino fra letteratura e antropologia* (Pisa: ETS, 2018); Davide Savio, *La carta del mondo. Italo Calvino nel Castello dei destini incrociati* (Pisa: ETS, 2015).

²The idea of the project probably took shape around 1978 (see Claudio Milanini's comments in 'Note e notizie ai testi', RR III, 1201–3). Quotations from Calvino's works are cited from the complete works published in the 'Meridiani' series using the following abbreviations: RR III = Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti. Racconti sparsi e scritti d'invenzione*, III vols, ed. by Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falchetto (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1994); Italo Calvino, *Saggi. 1945–1985*, 2 vols ed. by Mario Barenghi (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1995).

structure of the book, consisting of a selection of symbolic turning points in the author's life, is modelled on the theories that the Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep presented in *Les Rites de passage*. Not only was Calvino's selection of events to include in his autobiographical project determined by the reading of Van Gennep's study, but this book also provided the author with a new set of methodological tools. The writer also derived from Van Gennep the idea of adopting a ritual frame used to organise and interpret his crucial past experiences.³ This aspect emerges particularly from the most atypical of Calvino's 'passaggi obbligati', 'La poubelle agréée', a text on the everyday ritual expulsion of garbage. In the third section, I consider this work as a case study of Calvino's attempt to write a self-ethnography, a hybrid form that looks at autobiography from the perspective of anthropology, providing us with an ethnographic description of the habits and practices of the subject.

I then proceed in the fourth section to reconstruct the influence of Mary Douglas' reflection on impurity and garbage, carried out in her famous study *Purity and Danger*. Although never quoted explicitly by Calvino, this book played a relevant role in reshaping and rethinking Calvino's fragmentary autobiography, especially in 'La poubelle agréée'. We can identify several points of contact between Douglas' anthropological investigation of purification rituals and Calvino's theoretical analysis of his daily activities related to the *poubelle*. Finally, in the fifth section, I analyse Calvino's reuse of Van Gennep's concept of 'threshold', which brings together the ritual, mythological and economic aspects of his narrative on garbage.

With regard to the methodology that I have used in this article, I conducted a preliminary philological reconstruction of Calvino's anthropological readings and tried to identify the extent to which these studies influenced his writing. Since I aim to retrace both the evolution of the writer's intellectual history and the paths of his creative process, it is not always crucial to identify the reprise of exact quotations from the books of anthropologists such as Van Gennep or Douglas in Calvino's texts. Instead, I mainly tried to understand how ideas circulated from one text to another and how Calvino re-employed them in his writings. This reuse of anthropological ideas is particularly evident in Calvino's effort to build a new literary method in the late 1960s. Therefore, it is worth looking at how within the general reshaping of the writer's perspective anthropology represented a useful tool to interpret reality and expand the possibilities of literary narrative.

Calvino between Theory and Practice of Anthropology

The dialogue between literature and anthropology was a long-term and fruitful one throughout Calvino's entire career, both as a novelist and an essayist. In order to understand the different roles played by anthropology in Calvino's works, it is necessary to start by briefly tracing the roots of the writer's interest in the discipline and, subsequently, highlight the evolution of this fertile relationship. The novelist's first contact with studies in the fields of folklore and popular culture dates back to the first half of the 1950s when Calvino worked as an ethnologist collecting Italian fairy and folk tales. The outcome of this vast research was the collection *Fiabe italiane* (1956), which were widely appreciated by scholars as well as by the wider public.⁴ At this time, Calvino's main references were the narratological theories of Vladimir Propp and the works of Italian folklorists dealing with Italian popular culture (Alberto Mario Cirese, Raffaele Pettazzoni, Giuseppe Cocchiara).

Although at this time his main interests lay in the area of Italian popular culture, Calvino soon explored other fields of anthropological research. It is worth remembering Calvino's participation in Einaudi's ground-breaking book series, the 'Collana viola', which undoubtedly contributed to widening the writer's knowledge of anthropological studies. The 'Collezione di studi religiosi,

³With the term 'ritual', anthropologists indicate a series of gestures or actions that should be repeated according to a precise and determined sequence. Rituals are often charged with a sacred meaning, but the concept can be extended also to the profane sphere. As we will see further on in the article, this is what Calvino does in his autobiographical writings.

⁴Italo Calvino, *Fiabe italiane* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956). For the anthropological approach used by Calvino while collecting the folk tales, see Carli.

etnologici e psicologici' (as it was officially named) was set up by Cesare Pavese and Ernesto De Martino after the end of World War II, with the first text published in 1948. The 'Collana viola' made accessible for the first time to the Italian public several classics in the fields of anthropology and history of religions – from Malinowski to Frazer, from Kerényi to Eliade.⁵ After Pavese's suicide, Calvino eventually took charge of the book series in close collaboration with Cocchiara.⁶ The 'Collana viola' had an enormous influence on Italian writers and intellectuals, including Calvino himself, even though thorough research on this topic has yet to be carried out.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the new editorial role and the greater availability of anthropological texts in the Italian market enabled Calvino to explore new aspects of the discipline. Despite the wider range of readings (as shown by their frequent citation in essays and interviews), in these years, Calvino was probably still thinking of anthropology in close relation to other disciplines and theories, like narratology, semiotics, and structuralism, as a useful tool for identifying and understanding all the possible features and structures of a narrative.⁷ Alongside the texts of other theorists (such as Genette, Barthes, Greimas and Todorov), the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss undoubtedly represented one of the key discoveries of these years, and would remain a crucial reference point for Calvino for a very long time.⁸

In the second half of the 1960s, two main events can be considered as key turning points in Calvino's relationship with anthropology. The first one is the rethinking of the life and thought of Pavese, which eventually led Calvino to consider the legacy of Pavese's works on his own writing and intellectual history.⁹ While editing the second volume of Pavese's letters in 1966, Calvino noticed how fundamental the role played by anthropological readings was in the author's writings and worldview, as well as in his private life.¹⁰ Calvino elaborated his reflections on this topic in the introduction to the aforementioned volume of the letters and the essay 'Pavese e i sacrifici umani' (also published in 1966).¹¹ Interestingly, Calvino himself also explored the theme of human sacrifice in several narratives written from the late 1960s to the 1980s, like the unfinished project of *La decapitazione dei capi* and the short story 'Sapore sapere'.

In a central passage of 'Pavese e i sacrifici umani', Calvino situates Pavese's idea of literature at the intersection of autobiography, mythology and ethnology, stating: 'non era un interesse momentaneo. Collegare l'etnologia e la mitologia greco-romana alla sua autobiografia esistenziale e alla sua costruzione letteraria era stato il costante programma di Pavese' (S, 1230). The nexus of autobiography, writing, mythology, and anthropology is also important in Calvino's work, as I will explain in the next sections dedicated to the close reading of 'La poubelle agréée'. We can therefore consider Pavese as the starting point of Calvino's reflection on the relationship between anthropology and autobiography and one of the main sources of inspiration for Calvino's reshaping of his own autobiography in the hybrid form of a 'self-ethnography' – a concept that I will explore in detail later on.

The second crucial moment for understanding the shift in Calvino's relationship with anthropology is his participation in the project for the new interdisciplinary journal *Ali Babà*. After Vittorini's death in 1966 and the consequent conclusion of the decennial experience of *Il menabò*, Calvino invited several intellectuals and writers belonging to different fields to join the new project, such as the historian Carlo Ginzburg, the philosophers Guido Neri and Enzo Melandri, and the

⁵An interesting reconstruction of the editorial history of the book series through the exchange of letters between Pavese and De Martino can be read in Cesare Pavese and Ernesto De Martino, *La collana viola. Lettere 1945–1950*, ed. by Pietro Angelini (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2022).

⁶Stefano Calabrese and Sarah Cruso, *Il folklore unplugged: Calvino, Cocchiara, De Martino, Pavese e la tradizione popolare* (Bologna: Archetipolibri, 2008).

⁷For Calvino's interest in the narrative structure of folk tales, see the chapter *Le fiabe ritrovate* in Carli, pp. 149–78. For a complete picture of Calvino's complex relationships with semiotics and structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, see Raffaele Donnarumma, *Da lontano. Calvino la semiologia lo strutturalismo* (Palermo: Palumbo, 2008).

⁸Donnarumma, pp. 45–8 dwells on the influence of Lévi-Strauss on some of Calvino's novels.

⁹See Belpoliti, *Settanta*, pp. 110–17 and Barengi, *Italo Calvino* (particularly, the chapter *Calvino e i sacrifici umani*, pp. 229–52).

¹⁰Cesare Pavese, *Lettere (1945–1950)*, ed. by Italo Calvino (Turin: Einaudi, 1966).

¹¹Belpoliti, *Settanta*, pp. 114–15.

novelist Gianni Celati.¹² Despite four years of discussions, which lasted from 1968 to 1972, the first issue of *Ali Babà* was never published, mainly due to marked divergences between Calvino's and Celati's ideas of literature. Nevertheless, the editorial work and the fertile interdisciplinary dialogue heavily influenced Calvino, who at that time was also reviewing the strong epistemological paradigms of Marxism and Structuralism. As scholars have noticed, from the late 1960s onwards, the writer conducted a general rethinking of his method.¹³ Calvino took advantage of the debates among the intellectuals taking part in the *Ali Babà* project and tried to build a new interdisciplinary method, acting as a *bricoleur* and bringing together several different disciplines – from geography and Foucault's archaeology to astronomy, biology and natural sciences. This new postmodern method undoubtedly rests on weaker epistemological foundations but can be constantly readjusted and reconfigured in order to fit every interpretative need.¹⁴ This method also enabled Calvino to explore different solutions and work on various projects at the same time, testing the epistemological and narrative potential of the various disciplines in which he was interested.

Among all the disciplines listed above, anthropology gained growing importance in Calvino's intellectual history and its role changed significantly compared to the previous decades. Similarly to what happened in the 1960s, when science heavily influenced his writing, Calvino was prone to conducting a new epistemological investigation of the world thanks to the theoretical framework and methodological tools provided by anthropology. This shift was determined not only by the general resetting of Calvino's methodological approach but also by a radical change in his ethnological readings. Calvino's interests were no longer related solely to folklore but instead became open to the field of cultural anthropology. During the 1970s and 1980s, Calvino considerably expanded his anthropological knowledge, reading and quoting a diverse range of studies: from the outdated, but fascinating explorations carried out by Van Gennep in *Les Rites de passage* to new and original publications, such as Douglas' *Purity and Danger* or Marvin Harris' *Cannibals and Kings*.¹⁵

We can better understand why Calvino developed a growing interest in the theoretical and methodological aspects of anthropology if we consider a passage from Lévi-Strauss' *Anthropologie Structurale*. Here, the anthropologist defines the discipline as a 'device of displacement' and explains how it can help us understand how we look at the world, which is a matter of primary importance for a novelist too:

[Le ricerche etnologiche] infatti consistono in un insieme di procedimenti d'indagine resi necessari non tanto dalla condizione tipica di talune società, quanto dalla condizione particolare *in cui noi ci troviamo* nei confronti di società su cui non grava nessuna speciale fatalità. In questo senso, l'etnologia potrebbe definirsi come una tecnica dello spaesamento.¹⁶

¹²On the *Menabò* and the collaboration of Calvino and Vittorini, see Silvia Cavalli, *Progetto 'menabò' (1959–1967)* (Venice: Marsilio, 2017).

¹³See in particular Belpoliti, *Settanta* and Barengi, *Italo Calvino*. Another analysis of this change in Calvino's career and its influence on the author's writings is carried out in Domenico Calcaterra, *Il secondo Calvino: un discorso sul metodo* (Milan-Udine: Mimesis, 2014).

¹⁴Several scholars focused on the importance of the *Ali Babà* project. For a general historical reconstruction and transcriptions of letters documenting the exchange of ideas among the participants in the project, see the fundamental issue *Ali babà. Progetto di una rivista 1968–1972*, ed. by Mario Barengi and Marco Belpoliti, Riga 14 (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1998). An analysis of the role of the *Ali Babà* project in Calvino's intellectual history is also made in Barengi, *Italo Calvino* (see particularly the chapter *Congetture su un dissenso: Calvino, Celati e il progetto 'Ali Babà'*, pp. 175–88); Belpoliti, *Settanta* (see the chapter 'Nella grotta di Ali Babà', pp. 141–76); Savio. On how the contrasting conceptions of literature of Calvino and Celati emerge in *Ali Babà*, see Monica Francioso, 'Impegno and Ali Babà: Celati, Calvino, and the Debate on Literature in the 1970s', *Italian Studies*, 64.1, 2009, 105–19, but also the articles by Monica Jansen, Claudia Nocentini, 'Ali Babà and Beyond: Celati and Calvino in the Search for "Something More"', and by Anna Botta, 'The Ali Babà Project (1968–1972): Monumental History and the Silent Resistance of the Ordinary', both in *The Value of Literature in and After the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*, ed. by Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão, *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, 1 (2006), 574–89 and 543–58.

¹⁵Calvino also wrote reviews, of Harris's and Van Gennep's books soon after their translation into Italian, which were published in *La Repubblica* (5 II, 2025–30 and 2045–49).

¹⁶Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strutturale* (Turin: Il Saggiatore, 1966), p. 136 (emphasis in original). '[Les recherches ethnologiques] consistent dans un ensemble de procédés d'investigation rendus moins nécessaires par la condition propre à certaines sociétés, que par la condition particulière ou nous nous trouvons, vis-à-vis de sociétés sur qui ne pèse aucune fatalité spéciale. En ce sens, l'ethnologie pourrait se définir comme une technique du dépaysement', Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), p. 132 (emphasis in original). All Lévi-Strauss' texts are cited first in Italian and then in the French original in the footnotes because these were the languages in which Calvino read them.

Moreover, in the same book Lévi-Strauss defines the anthropologist as ‘*l’astronomo delle scienze sociali*’.¹⁷ This comparison, that the author of the *Cosmicomiche* must have loved, reaffirms once again the centrality of the gaze, perspective and positioning in the anthropological method. In this respect, anthropology and literature appear to be quite close to each other and to share the same epistemological problems, tackling the question of our point-of-view on reality in a similar way.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, for both Calvino and Lévi-Strauss, the major concern of the two disciplines is related to the position of the observer rather than to the object observed.

The anthropologist and the novelist should always consider the ‘view from afar’ as the distinctive feature of their method, no matter whether they are considering a small Amazonian village or a busy European metropolis.¹⁹ Acquiring the tools and the methodological approach of anthropology helped Calvino to better understand the radical Otherness of distant cultures – as happens, for instance, during his travels to Japan, Iran or Mexico.²⁰ Furthermore, following the path of anthropological interpretation of cultures enabled Calvino to also look at the Western world and his own position in it with a change of perspective and describe it with an estranged gaze. This approach, which works for both essays and fictional texts, was adopted by Calvino in some of his most famous works of this period, such as *Le città invisibili*, where his native San Remo, disguised as Venice, is presented as fifty-five imaginary cities built by unknown civilisations. However, it is particularly evident in a series of minor writings, often part of wider unfinished projects, which present strong connections with anthropology in the very choice of the theme or setting, as for the aforementioned case of the travel writings. Most notably, in these writings, Calvino reflects on anthropological questions and often openly quotes the theories of a wide set of anthropological sources, as we will see in the following sections for the case of ‘La poubelle agréée’.

Calvino’s Rites of Passage: Anthropology and Autobiography in *Passaggi obbligati*

Throughout his career, Calvino always found it extremely problematic to write autobiographical texts, preferring to disguise himself behind his characters in most of the narratives he wrote, from *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* to *Palomar*. Nonetheless, we know that in the late 1970s Calvino was thinking about writing an autobiographical book or at least collecting texts belonging to this genre that he had previously written. This idea persisted in Calvino’s mind for several years, as we can see from this 1979 interview with Nico Orengo, in which Calvino states: ‘un giorno o l’altro mi deciderò a scrivere un libro direttamente autobiografico, o almeno a raccontare schegge di “vissuto”’.²¹

Among the various projects for autobiographical books that Calvino began but never completed, it is worth remembering *Pagine autobiografiche*, which was intended as a collection of eight essayistic notes and self-presentations. *Passaggi obbligati* appears instead as a more structured project, even though Calvino did not write all of the nine texts that he wanted to include in it.²² This second book was published posthumously in 1990 with the title of one of the writings, *La*

¹⁷Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strutturale*, p. 414 (emphasis in original). ‘L’anthropologue est l’astronome des sciences sociales’, Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale*, p. 415 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸Calvino’s epistemological idea of literature is considered in Pierpaolo Antonello, ‘The Myth of Science or the Science of Myth? Italo Calvino and the “Hard Core of Being”’, *Italian Culture*, 22.1 (2004), 71–91, and in Pierpaolo Antonello, *Il ménage a quattro: scienza, filosofia, tecnica nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: Le Monnier università, 2005). On Calvino’s gaze on reality, see the ground-breaking work by Marco Belpoliti, *L’occhio di Calvino*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2006) and the entry ‘sguardo’ in Domenico Scarpa, *Italo Calvino* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999), pp. 230–34.

¹⁹Donnarumma, pp. 45–8.

²⁰On Calvino’s travels to Mexico, see Alessandro Raveggi, *Calvino americano: identità e viaggio nel Nuovo Mondo* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2012). On the relationship of Calvino with Japan see the following essays by Claudia Dellacasa: ‘Italo Calvino in Giappone. Mille giardini verso il vuoto’, *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture*, 31.2 (2019), 93–110; ‘Italo Calvino in Japan, Japan in Italo Calvino’, *Exchanges and Parallels between Italy and East Asia*, ed. by Gaoheng Zhang and Mario Mignone (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), pp. 61–79. See also Claudia Dellacasa’s article published in this special issue.

²¹Calvino: Ludmilla sono io’, interview by Nico Orengo, *Tuttolibri*, 28 July 1979.

²²Detailed information on Calvino’s several autobiographical projects is provided by Claudio Milanini in ‘Note e notizie sui testi’, RR III, 1199–1209.

strada di San Giovanni.²³ The several texts completed by Calvino can give us an idea of how the unfinished autobiographical projects might have looked, especially if we consider the case of *Passaggi obbligati*. In this section, I will look closely at the structure of the book delineated by Calvino and then analyse one of his texts, 'La poubelle agréée', as a case study to consider Calvino's use of anthropological concepts to structure his autobiography.

Calvino included in the book plan each moment of his own life that played a significant role in the construction of his identity or in developing his point of view on the world. The texts that make up *Passaggi obbligati* relate to his relationship with his father ('La strada di San Giovanni'), his discovery of cinema ('Autobiografia di uno spettatore'), and a battle he took part in as a partisan during the Liberation War ('Ricordo di una battaglia'). As scholars have noticed, in the choice of title of the book project, we can see a clear reference to *Les Rites de passage* by Van Gennep. We know that Calvino read the book and had been deeply impressed by the ideas proposed in it, as we can deduce from the introduction that he wrote for the 1981 Italian translation:²⁴

Leggendo Van Gennep non possiamo fare a meno di domandarci per ogni avvenimento della nostra vita quotidiana o delle nostre esperienze fondamentali, quali 'riti di passaggio' inconsci o impliciti siamo portati a compiere: certamente ci sono, li pratichiamo continuamente anche se non sappiamo riconoscerli come tali.²⁵

Even from this brief excerpt, we can see how Calvino chooses to talk about the rites of passage as the rituals marking the key moments in a person's autobiography as well as in our everyday life. This represents an important clue regarding Calvino's careful reading and thorough understanding of Van Gennep's theories but also suggests how he could reuse these ideas in his creative work. Even though there is no direct evidence, we can deduce that Calvino had probably read *Les Rites de passage* several years before he wrote the review to the Italian translation of the book. First of all, Calvino seems to know the writings of Van Gennep very well since he mentions his work on French folklore ('Van Gennep, i cui meriti da ricercatore sono legati a monumentali opere sul folklore francese').²⁶ Van Gennep's folkloric studies on French popular tradition came out between the 1920s and 1940s and were undoubtedly consulted by the young Calvino while he was working on the *Fiabe italiane* in the early 1950s. If we come back to the review of the Italian translation of *Les Rites de passage*, we can see that Calvino presents it as 'un classico dell'antropologia [...] che viene ripresentato ora [...] (o forse presentato per la prima volta in italiano [...])'.²⁷ From this excerpt, we can assume that he must have read the original French version of the study several years before this date and, therefore, it is highly plausible that he had Van Gennep's theories in mind while building the structure of *Passaggi obbligati*.

Calvino is interested mostly in the fact that Van Gennep gives a general and unifying interpretation of a vast range of habits and rituals, based on the idea that every human life is marked by a series of crucial passages and that every human culture developed specific rituals to celebrate these moments. Furthermore, we can identify a connection with the work of Van Gennep if we consider the choice of themes and the method used by Calvino to interpret reality and his own life experience in his autobiographical writings. It is only thanks to the ideas he took from Van Gennep's anthropological essay that Calvino could set his own life experiences into a wider frame. Selecting specific moments of his life and considering them as moments of passage, Calvino is able to understand how even apparently irrelevant actions of our everyday experience (such as the collection of garbage) can be better considered and understood from an anthropological perspective. As I will show in the next sections, the adoption of a ritual frame and the identification of his

²³*La strada di San Giovanni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990) included the four texts written for *Passaggi obbligati* ('La strada di San Giovanni', 'Autobiografia di uno spettatore', 'Ricordo di una battaglia' and 'La poubelle agréée') and *Dall'opaco*. The editors of the third volume of the 'Meridiani' include this last text in another section, titled *Altri ricordi, altre confessioni* (RR III, 89–101). We can now read these texts in the section titled *Ricordi-racconti per 'Passaggi obbligati'* (1962–1977), RR III, 5–80.

²⁴The link between *Passaggi obbligati* and Van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* is suggested by Claudio Milanini in R III, 1203.

²⁵Italo Calvino, 'Arnold Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*', S II, 2045–9 (p. 2048).

²⁶Calvino, 'Arnold Van Gennep', p. 2045.

²⁷*Ibid.*

life's rites of passage also helps Calvino give a unifying structure to his fragmentary experience, overcoming his problematic relationship with autobiographical writing. This also means that a series of dispersed texts written over a long span of years (the first one, 'La strada di San Giovanni', which opens the project of *Passaggi obbligati*, dates back to 1962) could now acquire a new meaning because they are now considered from a different theoretical perspective.

'La poubelle agréée' as Self-Ethnography

The best way to understand how Calvino used Van Gennep's ideas to shape his autobiographical project is to consider the text that best makes use of them, that is to say, 'La poubelle agréée'. Even though it deals with a seemingly trivial topic, the daily collection of garbage, and even if for this reason it may seem the most atypical among the 'passaggi obbligati' of Calvino's life, it perfectly exemplifies the features of Calvino's reuse of ideas taken from his anthropological readings. In 'La poubelle agréée' Calvino writes as if he were an anthropologist himself and he uses the tools of this discipline, which he takes from the studies by Van Gennep, Douglas and Lévi-Strauss; at the same time, the autobiographical genre shapes and directs the subject of his study, which is the author's own behaviour and life experience. The focus and main character of the narration is clearly the author himself, and 'La poubelle agréée' starts with the retrospective account of Calvino's life and past experiences (RR III, 62–3). For this reason, I decided to define Calvino's hybrid attempt at both reconstructing and critically analysing his life as 'self-ethnography'. This definition contains the element of the self, which is at the core of the autobiographical narrative and indicates the key method adopted by the writer, who decides to test the validity of Van Gennep's (and Douglas's) anthropological theories on his own life experience.

'La poubelle agréée' starts with an accurate description of Calvino's daily task of taking the garbage out. The author carefully lists the several phases of the process:

L'operazione si divide in varie fasi: prelievo della pattumiera di cucina e suo svuotamento nel recipiente più grande che sta nel garage, poi trasporto del detto recipiente sul marciapiede fuori della porta di casa, dove verrà raccolto dagli spazzini e vuotato a sua volta nel loro autocarro. (RR III, 59)

This opening directly recalls what Van Gennep says about the structure of the rites of passage, which always follow the same sequence.²⁸ Van Gennep identifies a pre-liminal phase, which is here represented by the transfer of garbage from the small kitchen bin to a bigger one, which is then placed on the sidewalk outside the front door. The liminal phase corresponds to the period during which garbage is left outside during the night. The final collection of it represents the post-liminal phase, which concludes the rite. The echo of Van Gennep's theories resonates also in Calvino's subsequent interpretation of his actions. In the following paragraphs, the writer reflects on the meaning of these everyday acts, seeing it as the 'trapasso dal privato al pubblico' (RR III, 60–1), as a ritual that connects these two separate spheres of life. As Van Gennep states, the rites of passage accompany the transition from one stage of life or role to a new one – here from the role of the *paterfamilias* to the role of the good citizen accomplishing his duties – and their structure is valid both for public ceremonies and autonomous systems:

Lo schema dei riti di passaggio si ritrova dunque non soltanto alla base degli insiemi cerimoniali che accompagnano, facilitano o condizionano il passaggio da uno stadio di vita all'altro, o da una situazione sociale a un'altra, ma è anche a fondamento di parecchi sistemi autonomi che sono adottati per il bene delle società generali nella loro totalità, delle società speciali, o dell'individuo. In tutti questi sistemi cerimoniali si nota un parallelismo che vale non soltanto per alcune forme, ma anche per le loro stesse strutture.²⁹

²⁸For a brief explanation of the three phases of every rite of passage, see Arnold Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1981), p. 18 [*Les Rites de passage* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909), p. 27].

²⁹Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 163. 'Le schéma des rites de passage se retrouve donc à la base, non seulement des ensembles cérémoniels qui accompagnent, facilitent ou conditionnent le passage de l'un des stades de la vie à un autre, ou d'une situation sociale à une autre, mais aussi de plusieurs systèmes autonomes qu'on utilise pour le bien des sociétés générales tout entières des sociétés spéciales ou pour celui de l'individu. On découvre ainsi, entre tous ces systèmes cérémoniels, un parallélisme non pas seulement pour quelques-unes de leurs formes, mais quant à leurs armatures', Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, p. 267.

The daily ritual of expulsion and collection of garbage clearly shows traits belonging to both the private and the public sphere. For this reason, this topic offers Calvino a good starting point to explore and reconstruct his own autobiography. After the introductory paragraphs of ‘La poubelle agréée’, a longer section lists all the different habits of garbage collection that Calvino has always observed during his life (RR III, 62–3). Once again, while recalling his autobiographical memories related to this specific aspect of his life, Calvino openly adopts the perspective of the amateur anthropologist. The novelist recalls the garbage collector that in San Remo in his childhood years used to ‘venirsene su a piedi su per i tornanti del viale fino alla villa, a raccogliere i rifiuti dal bidone di zinco’. This flash of the bourgeois lifestyle of the pre-war Ligurian Riviera is then compared to the American way of life. In the ‘sterminati sobborghi residenziali delle civiltà industriali individualistiche e prospere e democratiche e industriali’, men who all look the same leave every day their standardised garbage bins on the sidewalk in front of their terraced houses. The third option mentioned by Calvino dates back to his years as a young writer in Turin. Here, the blocks of flats used to have ‘condotti verticali’, through which gravity conveyed garbage into ‘oscuere cripte a livello del cortile’.

In relation to this last practice of garbage collection, the writer draws the reader’s attention to the small range of options available to humankind in the elimination of waste and the persistence of certain habits over millennia among different human groups and civilisations. For example, the action of getting rid of garbage through the use of gravity was a ‘procedimento [...] di cui s’avvantaggiarono per primi gli uomini delle palafitte’, while the ‘sistema dell’ammucchiamento in anfratti reconditi [...] fu prima ancora adottato dai cavernicoli’ (RR III, 62). The only apparent innovation introduced for the residents of the blocks of flats of the industrial cities over several thousands of years is simply a combination of these two primitive practises.

As a side note, we can notice how the different habits connected to garbage collection – and this last comparison in particular – may recall what Lévi-Strauss says in *Anthropologie structurale* about the relationship between ecology, social structures and the spatial configuration of human settlements. In this book, that Calvino must have read at least in the 1966 Italian translation, we read as follows:

Le ricerche di ecologia urbana presentano dunque un eccezionale interesse per l’etnologo: lo spazio urbano è abbastanza ristretto ed omogeneo (in tutti i sensi, oltre che sul piano sociale) perché le sue proprietà qualitative possano essere attribuite a fattori interni, di origine formale e sociale al tempo stesso.³⁰

A few paragraphs later, Lévi-Strauss adds that ‘si può anche procedere a uno studio diacronico, grazie ai documenti archeologici che attestano interessanti variazioni’.³¹ This is precisely what Calvino does by comparing the habits of people living in apartment blocks with those of our Neolithic ancestors and highlighting the many continuities despite the enormous temporal distance.

It is truly remarkable to notice how much Calvino focuses his attention on the relationship between the structure of a neighbourhood or a city (Paris, Turin, San Remo, the suburbs of New York), the social classes living in the area and the possible range of solutions to the problem of rubbish, thinking as an anthropologist would do. Thus, we can better understand that the opening description of the steps to be followed to get rid of garbage was a necessary prologue, setting the writer in his actual social position. He narrates to the reader his behaviour as the owner of a terraced house, while his habits would have been completely different if he was still living in an apartment block or an isolated villa on the hillside.

³⁰Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strutturale*, p. 324. ‘Les recherches dites d’écologie urbaine offrent donc un intérêt exceptionnel pour l’ethnologue: l’espace urbain est suffisamment restreint, et assez homogène (à tous égards, autres que le social) pour que ses propriétés qualitatives puissent être attribuées directement à des facteurs internes, d’origine à la fois formelle et sociale’, Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale*, p. 320.

³¹Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strutturale*, p. 325. ‘Dans ce dernier cas, on peut même procéder à une étude diachronique, grâce aux documents archéologiques, qui attestent d’intéressantes variations’, Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale*, p. 321.

If we consider that ‘La poubelle agréée’ is part of a wider autobiographical project, dealing with some of the crucial turning points of the writer’s life, this writing can be linked not only to Lévi-Strauss’ hypothesis of a connection between ecology, social structures and spatial configurations of human settlements but also to what Van Gennep explains in *Les Rites de passage* about the relationship between rituals and changes of domicile. Van Gennep states that ‘il cambiamento di categoria sociale implica un cambiamento di domicilio, il che trova la sua espressione nei riti di passaggio nelle diverse forme’.³² This idea is also present in Calvino’s paragraphs on the suburbs of American cities, where he identifies himself with his friend Antonio Barolini, who had moved from Italy to the United States. Once married, Barolini started to take charge of emptying the garbage bin every day. After moving to Paris and, thus, acquiring a new role in his work and family life, the same happened to Calvino: ‘La voce dell’amico morto mi torna da quando sono diventato anch’io padre di famiglia, e d’una famiglia forestiera’ (RR III, 63).

In this respect, we can also invert the terms of Van Gennep’s correlation and say that a change of domicile implies a change of social status; this leads to a consequent redefinition of the rites of everyday life. As a child and adolescent, Calvino experienced the pre-war ‘vita signorile’ in his family’s Ligurian villa, where the garbage bin was emptied every day by a collector; then, as a single young writer and editor, he moved to Turin and its apartment blocks, where garbage was thrown into funnels and collected into a communal container; finally, as a married *paterfamilias* and world-famous novelist, he settled with his family in Paris (a city that, as he writes in ‘Eremita a Parigi’ in 1974, he associates with maturity – RR III, 110) and started to perform the daily routine he narrates in ‘La poubelle agréée’.

Nevertheless, there are some limits to Calvino’s depth of analysis in ‘La poubelle agréée’. The writer is aware that the choice of carrying out a self-ethnography and adopting a personal point of view will exclude other aspects of the ritual of garbage collection:

Ma come posso io inferire ciò che pensa e vede l’uomo venuto dall’Africa a svuotare la mia poubelle? È sempre e solo di me stesso che parlo, è con le mie categorie mentali che cerco di capire il meccanismo di cui faccio (facciamo) parte’. (RR III, 71)

What emerges from Calvino’s words is that this attempt at ethnographical description is condemned to be partial. The writer’s study could involve subjects who are similar to him (producers of rubbish in the same position, like his friend Barolini) but forcefully excludes the radically distant experience of those subjects who are on the other side and collect the garbage that he left in the *poubelle*.

Why Write about Garbage? Calvino as a Reader of Mary Douglas

Although the interaction between autobiography and garbage may not be a very common pairing, Calvino’s thematic choice works very well.³³ The question that we should ask ourselves at this point is how Calvino decided to write about this topic. We can start our investigation from the very last page of ‘La poubelle agréée’, where Calvino reconstructs the creative process that leads him to choose the topic of the narrative and reports a list of notes on this theme. In this brainstorm of ideas written on a scrap of paper, we read as a first point ‘tema della purificazione delle scorie’, followed by ‘spazzatura come autobiografia’ and ‘autobiografia come spazzatura’ (RR III, 79). These three brief notes not only reveal the core of Calvino’s project of self-ethnography, but also make explicit some of the sources of the narrative.

All these notes, and in particular the one on the purification of waste, clearly address the main topic of Douglas’ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.³⁴ The

³²Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 168. ‘Bref, le changement de catégorie sociale implique un changement de domicile, fait qui s’exprime par les rites de passage sous leurs diverses formes’ (Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, p. 276).

³³On the motif of garbage in Calvino’s works, see Angela M. Jeannet, *Under the Radiant Sun and the Crescent Moon: Italo Calvino’s Storytelling* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 134–54.

³⁴Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966).

examination of the possible influence on Calvino of this well-renowned study, which investigates the role of dirt, rubbish and impurity in our lives and their connection with rituals and the sacred, can help us to better understand the atypical nature of 'La poubelle agréée' and set it into the wider frame of Calvino's autobiographical project. Originally published in 1966, *Purity and Danger* was translated into Italian in 1975.³⁵ This happened precisely during the planning and writing of 'La poubelle agréée', which took place between 1974 and 1976. As a side note, the group of the 'einaudiani' were aware of Douglas' theories, as is confirmed by the fact that another book by Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology*, was being translated by Primo Levi for Einaudi in 1975.³⁶

For all these reasons, even though Douglas is never mentioned in Calvino's writings or interviews, some clues lead us to think that *Purity and Danger* is likely to have been among his readings soon after the Italian translation. In 'La poubelle agréée' Calvino addresses the central topic of *Purity and Danger*: the role of dirt, rubbish and impurity in our lives and their connection with rituals and the sacred. However, as with the case of *Les Rites de passage*, the connection does not rely only on the similarity of the content. There are two main theoretical reasons which make it possible to argue for this direct relationship between Calvino's narrative and Douglas' book. The first one is the direct dependence of some key ideas of *Purity and Danger* on *Les Rites de passage*, which might also explain the presence of both these anthropological studies as sources of Calvino's writing. The second reason is the frequent mentions made by Douglas of connections between rituals of purification and the organisation of the narrative self, which also constitutes the core of Calvino's reflection in his autobiographical writing. Therefore, in 'La poubelle agréée' we can identify two parts, each dedicated to one of the two main sources, Van Gennep and Douglas. In the first part, Calvino connects the different modalities of garbage collection to different moments of his life, while in the second part he introduces personal and existential reflections on the relationship between the constant process of construction of our identities and the cycle of waste production and expulsion.

My investigation of the role played by *Purity and Danger* in the ideation and writing of 'La poubelle agréée' will focus mainly on Douglas' theoretical reflections on the connection between the processes of purification and the construction of the self. According to Douglas, the actions that we perform when getting rid of impure or unwanted objects are very similar to what we do when we construct our autobiographical self by preserving, discarding or reshaping past memories and experiences. In the introduction to her study, Douglas writes: 'io credo infatti che le idee di separazione, purificazione, demarcazione e punizione delle trasgressioni svolgano come funzione principale quella di sistematizzare un'esperienza di per sé disordinata'.³⁷ This conception can be compared with Calvino's attempt to organise his life experience through the general frame of ritual, both in 'La poubelle agréée' and, more generally, in the whole project of *Passaggi obbligati*. Furthermore, while describing a man acting in the social sphere as an 'animale rituale', Douglas specifies: 'ogni rappresentazione simbolica quotidiana comporta per noi, individualmente, diverse cose: ci fornisce un meccanismo di messa a fuoco, un metodo mnemonico e di controllo dell'esperienza. Tanto per iniziare con la messa a fuoco un rituale fornisce una cornice'.³⁸ Calvino applies the structure of the rite of passage to his own autobiography and creates the coherent pattern of the narrative of his life.

As for the reason why Calvino decides to include a chapter on garbage in *Passaggi obbligati*, we can read in *Purity and Danger* that 'nessuna esperienza è troppo bassa da non poter essere assunta

³⁵Mary Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo. Un'analisi dei concetti di contaminazione e tabù*, trans. by Alida Vatta (Bologna: il Mulino, 1975).

³⁶See Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 368. The book was published only four years later by Einaudi with the title *I simboli naturali: esplorazioni in cosmologia*, trans. by Primo Levi (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).

³⁷Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 23. 'For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 4).

³⁸Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 103. 'For us, individually, everyday symbolic enactment does several things. It provides a focussing mechanism, a method of mnemonics and a control for experience. To deal with focussing first, a ritual provides a frame' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 63–64).

a rituale e rivestire così un significato sublime'.³⁹ We can argue that from this sentence Calvino assumed that narrativising concepts such as dirt, impurity and garbage and inserting them into a proper ritual frame contributed to giving them a strong literary value. Reading on in Douglas' explanation of her view on the theme, the anthropologist seems to back a choice like the one made by Calvino: 'Più personale ed intima è la fonte del simbolismo rituale e più è espressivo il messaggio; tanto più il simbolo è tratto da un fondo comune di esperienza umana, tanto più ampia e sicura sarà la sua ricezione'.⁴⁰ What Calvino does in 'La poubelle agréée' is indeed to follow both these paths: on the one hand, he chooses a strictly personal point of view and describes mostly his own experience with the *poubelle* in order to stress its literary potentialities for his autobiographical narrative; but, on the other hand, his effort is to present his private experience as something common to everyone thanks to the choice of setting it into a ritual frame. Moreover, it is worth observing that, precisely by describing his experience in terms of a 'rito di purificazione', the writer points out very clearly the connection between the choice of narrating the daily act of expelling garbage and the process of construction of his own identity:

L'importante è che in questo mio gesto quotidiano io confermi la necessità di separarmi da una parte di ciò che era mio, la spoglia o crisalide o limone spremuto del vivere, perché ne resti la sostanza, perché domani io possa identificarmi per completo (senza residui) in ciò che sono e ho. Soltanto buttando via posso assicurarmi che qualcosa di me non è stato ancora buttato e forse non è né sarà da buttare. (RR III, 65)

It is striking to note that Douglas deals with the very same idea, arguing that every day we discard things that we perceive as a threat for us, because and as long as they have a discernible identity. This threat vanishes only once garbage has been pulverised and every distinguishing feature of it has disappeared, reducing it simply to formless matter:

Nel corso di una qualsiasi imposizione di ordine, sia nella mente che nel mondo esterno, l'atteggiamento verso pezzi e bocconi respinti attraversa due stadi: primo, essi sono manifestamente fuori posto, una minaccia per il buon ordine, e perciò vengono considerati una causa di disturbo ed energeticamente spazzati via. In questo stadio essi possiedono una certa identità: si possono vedere come i frammenti indesiderati di una cosa – quale che sia – da cui essi provengono: capelli, cibo o involucri. Questo è lo stadio in cui sono pericolosi: conservano ancora una loro semi-identità e la chiarezza della scena in cui si trovano è turbata dalla loro presenza. Ma un lungo processo di polverizzazione, di dissoluzione e di putrefazione attende fatalmente tutte quelle materie fisiche che sono state riconosciute come sporche, e, alla fine, ogni identità se n'è andata. L'origine dei vari bocconi e dei vari pezzi è andata perduta ed essi sono entrati nella massa dell'immondizia generale. Non è piacevole andare a frugare nei rifiuti per cercare di recuperare qualcosa, poiché ciò fa rivivere l'identità: finché l'identità è assente l'immondizia non è pericolosa. [...] ⁴¹

Thus, in order to free ourselves from unwanted or disordered objects we need to follow a ritual connected to the expulsion of garbage, 'non solo per un naturale scrupolo d'igiene ma perché domani svegliandoci si possa iniziare un nuovo giorno senza dover più maneggiare quanto alla vigilia abbiamo lasciato cadere da noi per sempre' (RR III, 65). This resonance between 'La poubelle agréée' with the words of Douglas represents a further clue and suggests that Calvino drew significant inspiration from *Purity and Danger* to compose his self-ethnographical narrative. The adoption of a ritual frame and the connection of garbage disposal with the construction of the

³⁹Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 177. 'No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 115).

⁴⁰Ibid. 'The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception' (Ibid.).

⁴¹Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 242. 'In the course of any imposing of order, whether in the mind or in the external world, the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognised as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish. It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity. So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 161).

autobiographical self represent a satisfying solution to the difficulties experienced by Calvino in framing his autobiographical work. Although, in some respects, ‘La poubelle agréée’ may seem far from the standards of the autobiographical genre and the other pieces collected in *Passaggi obbligati*, it undoubtedly represents a fundamental example of Calvino’s theoretical reflection on and exploration of the manifold possibilities of the genre.⁴²

Thresholds and Mythological Symbology

As became clear in the previous sections, ‘La poubelle agréée’ is a complex and multi-layered text, and the narrative explores several different directions. As well as focusing his attention on the social and ritual aspects of the expulsion of garbage, Calvino also stresses its economic implications. Throughout the narrative, all three levels are always strictly intertwined. In order to understand this last outlook, it is worth coming back to *Les Rites de passage* and measuring how Van Gennep’s presence in ‘La poubelle agréée’ is not limited to the formal reprise of the structure of the rites of passage as a narrative frame.

One of the key concepts formulated in the work of the Belgian anthropologist recurring extensively in Calvino’s text is that of the liminal phase. Described also with the images of the edge and the threshold, it represents the actual moment of passage to a new status during a ritual. Van Gennep argues that the liminal phase can sometimes be considered independently and it may gain a separate status outside a circumscribed ritual situation, creating an extended liminal space, as happens with pregnancy or mourning.⁴³ ‘Il fenomeno del *marginé*’ – Van Gennep writes – ‘può riscontrarsi in molte altre attività umane e si ritrova nell’attività biologica generale, nelle applicazioni dell’energia fisica, nei ritmi cosmici’.⁴⁴ When considered independently from their strictly sacred nature, rites of passage are connected to a more general need for regeneration, ‘a tal punto da assumere talvolta la forma di riti di morte e di rinascita’.⁴⁵ Van Gennep also notices that the progressive loss of the sacred value of a ritual in modern societies reduces it to a merely economic fact, which is, indeed, one of the key aspects of the garbage collection of the *poubelle*.⁴⁶

Calvino chooses to tangibly represent the concept of threshold in his writing with a symbolic object: the grinder of the garbage truck. Considering the expulsion of rubbish from an economic perspective, Calvino sees the grinder as the liminal space where the processes of production and destruction of goods meet: ‘Questa macina non sarebbe soltanto l’ultimo traguardo del processo industriale di produzione e distruzione ma segnerebbe anche il punto da cui si ricomincia da capo, l’ingresso in un sistema che inghiotte gli uomini e li rifà a propria immagine e somiglianza’ (RR III, 70). But, since the different levels of interpretation are always intertwined, we can consider the grinder’s perpetual destruction of discarded goods not only as a mere economic function. Calvino confers on the grinder a ritual role and symbolic metaphysical value, shared with the waste incinerator too (‘il grande strumento purificatore, il viscere essenziale della città, l’inceneritore’, RR III, 67).

After merging the economic and the symbolic value of the ritual through the figures of the grinder and the incinerator, Calvino openly talks in the subsequent sections of ‘La poubelle agréée’ about sacrifices and fertility rites connected to the annual cycle of agriculture. These rites are associated by Van Gennep with the secular version of rites of passage, with human groups and individuals connecting the passing of their lives to the cycle of the seasons. Calvino starts by

⁴²For some aspects, ‘La poubelle agréée’ recalls the dense reflection on perspective and point of view dominating ‘Dall’opaco’ (RRIII, 89–101), written just a few years earlier, in 1971.

⁴³Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 168; Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, p. 275.

⁴⁴Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 159 (emphasis in original). ‘Le phénomène de la *marginé* peut se constater dans bien d’autres activités humaines, et se retrouve dans l’activité biologique générale, dans les applications de l’énergie physique, dans les rythmes cosmiques’ (Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, pp. 259–60, emphasis in original).

⁴⁵Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 159. ‘[A]u point de prendre parfois la forme de rites de mort et de renaissance’ (Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, p. 260).

⁴⁶Van Gennep, *I riti di passaggio*, p. 30. Van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage*, p. 49.

noticing the great distance running between the old rural culture and the present capitalistic world, observing how things have significantly changed over the course of just a few decades. Sacrifice and rites of fertility are topics deeply rooted in Calvino's memory and linked to the legacy of Pavese, as we can read in the aforementioned essay in the memory of his mentor and friend, 'Pavese e i sacrifici umani'. But when Calvino talks about the natural cycles of death and rebirth, he has of course in his mind the clear picture of the luxuriant allotment of his father (a botanist), described in 'La strada di San Giovanni'. The rituals connected to the annual cycle of agriculture, in which 'nulla era perduto [perché] [...] ciò che era sepolto nella terra rinasceva' (RR III, 70), have been replaced in the capitalistic era by sacrificial offers of discarded goods and scraps. Moreover, men are no longer directly involved in this process, because the cycle of production and destruction is now exclusively managed by the god of Capital.

Despite the general process of desacralisation taking place in the western world and the radical shift towards observations about the economic implications of the elimination of garbage, Calvino manages to identify the sacred aspects of the act, which he considers as 'un'offerta agli inferi, agli dei della scomparsa e della perdita' (RR III, 66). This daily tribute represents for the novelist an exorcism of our own death ('questo funerale domestico e municipale della spazzatura, è inteso in primo luogo ad allontanare il funerale della persona', *Ibidem*), a simulated funeral officiated by garbage collectors, who are seen both as 'emissari del mondo ctonio, necrofori delle cose, caronti d'un al di là di carta unta e latta arrugginita' and as 'angeli mediatori indispensabili tra noi e il cielo delle idee' (*Ibid.*).

Once again, together with Van Gennep, we can identify in Calvino's observation the theories of Douglas. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas links the act of throwing out garbage and the fertility rites, creating a bridge between our practices and the habits of distant cultures: 'Dobbiamo dunque considerare la moda e le pulizie di primavera delle nostre città come dei riti di rinnovamento che focalizzano e controllano l'esperienza allo stesso modo dei riti Swazi per i primi raccolti'.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Although Calvino's focus in 'La poubelle agréée' is mostly on his personal experience, he manages to use his life writing to explore also the symbolical, mythological and economic dimensions of garbage expulsion and, therefore, to widen the horizon of his self-ethnography. The adoption of the perspective of the ethnographer enables him to see his habits from outside and confront them with those of other times, places and cultures. By referring to Douglas' ideas, Calvino wants to stress that there is no real difference between primitive cultures and western civilisations in the symbolic interpretation of the natural cycles. This difference is based on the prejudice stating that the behaviour of Westerners is grounded on science and that of distant cultures on symbolism. As Douglas explains (and Calvino certainly agrees with her view), all human behaviours are built instead on the search for symbolic meanings in natural events and cultural behaviours. Douglas states that the true difference lies in the fact that we have lost the ability to transfer the same set of symbols from one system to another because our experience is fragmented:

La differenza tra noi e loro non è che il loro comportamento si basa sul simbolismo ed il nostro sulla scienza, poiché anche il nostro comporta significati simbolici. La vera differenza sta nel fatto che noi non trasferiamo lo stesso ordine di simboli, sempre più potenti, da un contesto all'altro: la nostra esperienza è frammentata.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 111. 'So we must treat the spring millinery and spring cleaning in our towns as renewal rites which focus and control experience as much as Swazi first fruit rituals' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 69).

⁴⁸Douglas, *Purezza e pericolo*, p. 111. 'The difference between us is not that our behaviour is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning. The real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented' (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 70).

As we have seen previously, it is only through giving our experience the structure of a ritual that we can try to organise and narrate it. Conceiving autobiographical writing in a ritual frame represents thus the only possibility for a Western man like Calvino to overcome the divide between different symbolic systems and set the fragments of his past experiences into a new integrated perspective. This can happen only through the medium of writing and thanks to the power of the written word. Calvino's decision to associate a set of symbolic meanings with an anthropological narration empowers its possibilities and enables multiple readers from several different cultural backgrounds to understand it.

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