

THE ZOMBIE AND HIS ITALIAN HALF BROTHER: THE SATIRIC USE OF THE ZOMBIE MYTH IN THE SHORT STORY ZOologo BY NICCOLÒ AMMANITI

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Sommario

Il mito dello zombie, utilizzato spesso sia nella letteratura dell'orrore sia in quella gotica, viene ripresentato da Niccolò Ammaniti, scrittore italiano pulp, nel racconto intitolato Zoologo. In una trama che mette a confronto l'ambiente urbano italiano con una tradizione sciamanica africana, il personaggio dello zombie viene usato come portavoce di un commento ironico sulla società italiana degli anni Novanta, caratterizzata da un consumismo banale e popolata di giovani ossessionati dalla moda e dalla pubblicità. Il saggio si propone di analizzare il racconto nell'ambito del pulp italiano definendone le originali tecniche di demistificazione.

Key Words: Pulp Fiction – Gothic Novel – Consumerism

Literature almost invariably finds itself in the Janus-like position of simultaneously looking backward – relying on established traditions and conventions – whilst also striving to be ground breaking and innovative. This apparent contradiction has never been more noticeable than in the later years of the twentieth century when postmodern sensibilities attempted to find a voice with which to express the uncertainty and irresolution of a world in flux. In keeping with the concerns of the “post industrial” (Nicol, 2006:565, quoting Bell, 1973), the “post-Fordist” (Nicol, 2006:565, quoting Harvey, 1989) and “late capitalis[m]” (Nicol, 2006:565, quoting Jameson, 1984), literature witnessed a rise in fragmentariness associated with the “new sensibility” (Nicol, 2006:565) of postmodernism. The

multi-culturalism, brought on by the hitherto unprecedented growth of the power of the media – following the market globalisation in the later decades of the twentieth century – fostered an environment in which common cultural concerns were simultaneously addressed in similar ways. More so than ever before in the past, images, ideas and texts now started circulating freely, creating a network of interlinked discourses that encouraged the flattening of time and space in the process of re-evaluation of the individual text. With what Brian Nicol calls “ironic knowingness” (Nicol, 2006:567), the self-reflexivity of the textual focus becomes a definite trend towards ironic commentary.

The most important and interesting aspect of satire is its cumulative nature, whereby disparate and varied references allow the text to become composite works that rely on a vast network of intertextual referencing for their meaning. As in many other instances of literary subversiveness, associated with the fragmentariness loosely called ‘postmodernism’, the Italian pulp movement of the 1990s, focused around the *giovani cannibali*¹ (young cannibals), set about breaking the perceived respectability of the Italian literary writing scene by stitching together layers of social criticism with linguistic experimentation and bloody, violent imagery. Although not specifically adhering together as a formally defined literary group, their shared ideas about writing gave them a communal approach to literary commentary. Along with their penchant for ‘extreme’ writing – splatter iconography – and the influence of American films, the *giovani cannibali* also experimented with writing modalities and genres. Therefore, while using disparate literary traditions as building blocks, these writers variously addressed thorny issues at the heart of the industrial world.

Their focus is on the loss of the individual personality in the emotionally flattened, inter-personal relationships typical of the talk show environment, the loss of self in the drug and drink fuelled nocturnal wanderings of their dysfunctional characters and the moral

¹ Their name was derived from their first published anthology, Ammaniti, N. [and others]. Brolli, Daniele (Ed.), 1996, *Gioventù cannibale. La prima antologia italiana dell'orrore estremo*, Torino: Einaudi.

disjunction on all levels of human interaction. These issues are presented with a postmodernist flair for “[...] pluralities, chaos, instabilities, constant changes, fluidities, and paradoxes [that serve to] define the human condition” (Fuat & Venkatech, 1995:243). Their subject matter is drawn from the extremities of daily living in the urban environment: a single, often unlikely, but realistically plausible event pushed to its extreme consequences and garnered with imagery of extreme and irrational violence, strong language and a lack of ethical consequentiality. Behind the facade of well-to-do affluence, their literary characters exhibit an amoral and antisocial worldview that lacks accountability while endorsing an overwhelming consumerism that underscores their extreme individual angst. The cities of the Italian industrialised north are the settings for most of the stories. The characters move about in an environment thick with the trappings of ‘modern living’: the shopping malls, city streets, apartment blocks or seedy night clubs. The *denouements* of the tales – often in short story form – hinge around ironic twists that reveal the dichotomies at the root of a society that pretends to be good, beautiful, educated and modern but which is, in fact, empty, ruthless and superficial. The only ‘truth’ at the centre of this fictional world is the ousting of a formerly accepted moral order in favour of the branded product and the empty trappings of consumer culture. However, the display of unremitting horror, like the presence of the violent and the arbitrary, juxtaposed to the everyday life of middle class Italy, hinges on an incongruence that belies their interest in ironic commentary.

In spite of the loss of values in the society that they highlight, the ethical framework around which the works of these authors is structured still directs the reader to one of the traditional roles of literature in society; that of guide in the evaluation of societal norms. This strong moral core at the centre of their works recalls the ethical framework of much English Victorian writing, towards which these authors sometimes lean for inspiration. While using the easily identifiable *trash* of the American ‘slasher’ genre for shock effect, the *giovani cannibali* also rely on subtle literary networking as a tool for social commentary. In refocusing the readers’ attention to the literary thematic content of their works, these writers force readers to take a

closer look at their own society with allegorical and critical distance. Their aspiration towards “the adjustment of the reader’s terms of perception” (Sinibaldi, 1997:28) leads them to borrow vastly from disparate literary traditions in order to use these with ironic re-adaptations to their own specific needs. The splatter genre with its focus on a single arbitrary event of low moral or ethical meaning but with a great deal of visual impact, the slang of modern urban sub-cultures, what Sinibaldi calls the ‘contamination’ (Sinibaldi, 1997:30) from other media, the graphic novel and the comic strip with its predominantly visual, highly abbreviated form marked by a conspicuous lack of psychological characterisation meld together in a pastiche of influences and references.

Ammaniti’s short stories display a conscious reliance on numerous iconic traditions against which his own texts are intended to be read. Through the filter of these traditions he is able to comment on cultural and historical issues at the root of his own social ‘present’. His works have been called “a strange meaningful medley in which can be found cinematic and literary horror, Italian B grade comedy, American films made for television, images from advertising and, occasionally, some readings of the classics”² (Pezzarossa, 1999:18) in which elements of the neo gothic, borrowings from canonical Italian literary figures such as Landolfi and Buzzati as well as secondary traditions such as Gothic fiction co-exist as background stage setting for his new texts.

The Gothic mode with its enticing repertoire of horror³, uncertainty and the shifting nature of reality provides a rich seam of source material. Traditionally a literary haven in which issues of identity, uncertainty and cultural angst could be investigated in a fictional framework outside of social and cultural norms, Gothic writing has been revisited often for its rich source material. In its

² “una miscela espressiva singolare, in cui rientrano l’orrore cinematografico e letterario, la commedia all’italiana di serie B, telefilm americani, le immagini della pubblicità e, a caso, qualche lettura di classici” (traduzione di chi scrive).

³ According to Adriana Cavarero terror is associated with the instinct to flight while horror is associated with the inability to act in the face of extreme fear. “In contrast to what occurs with terror, in horror there is no instinctive movement of flight in order to survive, much less the contagious turmoil of panic” (Cavarero, 2009:8). Therefore, it would seem reasonable to equate horror with the impulse towards literature.

heyday in the late 18th century and early 19th century, Gothic literature could be credited with distancing and making sense of a world in which rapid social and scientific changes threatened a social and historical stability that was largely taken for granted. Similarly, the social norms of 1990s Italy, bolstered by innumerable television channels, offering unremitting sexist, consumeristic and fatuous subject matter, were hardly conducive to cultural debate or ethical re-evaluation. Functioning as the voice of criticism within a society “drowned in a sea of commodification”⁴ (Pezzarossa, 1999:39), Ammaniti’s use of the Gothic genre provides an ingenious and fun key to the critical re-reading of contemporary Italian society. Every century has its prevalent anxieties. Finding a means for dealing with prevalent anxieties is particularly central to the understanding of the Gothic in the current era⁵. Gothic writing’s principal means for achieving its true nature of “barometer of anxieties” (Bruhm:2002) is its use of layers of conventions interposed between the fictional world and the surrounding actuality, thereby forcing a re-evaluation of reality and allowing for an alternative viewpoint.

The short story *Zoologo*, first published in the 1996 collection *Fango (Mud)*, uses an array of intertextual references that create a codified dialogue derived from a long standing narrative tradition. This is almost the short hand of horror writing with referencing of popular images from innumerable primary as well as second-rate books and movies.

At first sight the use of the Gothic imagery in Ammaniti’s story appears to be at the level of what Fred Botting has called ‘candygothic’ (1996:134), or the gothicising trappings superficially utilised for the sake of ambience. On closer reading, however, Ammaniti is more careful, using a network of references that use the staples of the genre as literary markers and which lead the reader step-by-step into the unfolding of text. If genre can be seen as “[...] an autonomous entity, [...] as a sealed packet of meaning” (Grey, 2006:3)

⁴ “immersa nel mare della mercificazione”

⁵ Refer to Bruhm, S., “The Contemporary Gothic: Why we need it”. In: *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002).

these models are more than stylistic borrowings. They become the building blocks for an alternatively parodied text.

Images are reduplicated as allusions, often peripherally for both their inherent meaning as well as for the impact of their imagery. Allusions to famous preceding texts create a pastiche of narrative *loci* within which to establish the credentials of the new text, *Zoologo*, as a trustworthy member of the genre ranging from *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* to *The Turn of the Screw*. In this paper reference is being made to these specific texts because they are well known canons that highlight important Gothic literary elements despite not being the immediate models for Ammaniti's short story. Quoting Grey "If our textual world is populated by intertextual ghosts, this [intertextuality] is a system that allows for texts to haunt, target, and beleaguer others, and hence for counter-discursive struggles for both meaning and textual power" (Grey, 2006:40), the ghost text allows allusions to traditions, genres and echoes to inform the later image with the 'powers' of the first if not its actual immediate presence. In themselves these texts have formed the 'Ur' text for most modern Gothic writing. Many more texts of equal importance could be quoted in the genre. As "[...] genre codes serve as shorthand to tell us what is going on [...]" (Grey, 2006:28), the "sense we make of any text relies upon our genre literacy, and upon our overall understanding of its generic grammar" (Grey, 2006:45) thus helping the writer to find a shortened path to the nucleus of the textual message. The area of influence, a general underlay of referred images and textual echoes, is a network of texts from which a multiple range of images are drawn. Built into the notion of intertextuality are the allied notion of irony and parody. Although it is true to say that rewriting is not necessarily parodic in the sense of the consciously subversive with regards to the original, rewriting nonetheless veers closer to parody than not. In *Zoologo*, Ammaniti brings textual allusion into play by using familiar form and images from numerous texts and films in order to facilitate the entry of the reader into a text that will attempt to expose modern failings and present day monstrosities.

Coming as it did at the beginning of a period of ethical uncertainty brought on by revolt against the tenets of the Enlightenment as well as

angst in the wake of powerful cultural and scientific developments of the 19th century, the Gothic became what Beville describes as “[...] the true voice of that which is unspeakable: un-representable” (Beville, 2009:41). Representing the unspeakable is done by interposing many layers of literary conventions, thus allowing the Gothic genre to use its predetermined structure as vessels for the channelling of these unspeakable ‘fears’. The conventions that govern the Gothic text are an integral part of its meaning. For Ammaniti, the unspeakable has shifted from the personally relevant to the generally applicable: the consumer society of the Italian 1990s has taken on the shifting loss of definition and identity that characterises the latter day Urban Gothic. The demons that used to inhabit the old Gothic, immediately recognised by the reader in the paraphernalia of Gothic trappings, are the reduced versions of themselves, reborn in the context of an intellectually diminished society. When Ammaniti borrows elements from other sources, these iconic images are used to show a *papier maché* horror, stock images that, due to their familiarity and assiduousness, no longer have the power to horrify the reader but function as signposting for the literary mode. Mimicking the society that it seeks to describe, the Gothic of the story *Zoologo* is a purposefully created surface pastiche of structural images and tired allusions.

Structurally, the most important borrowing is the framing device which sets the scene for the story itself. In most Gothic texts the main story is introduced by a narrative frame on the outside of the main events; the letters by Walton on an expedition unrelated to the central story of Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, the manuscript written by the shady, and already deceased governess, to tell her horrible tale of the wards haunted by the ghosts of her predecessor Miss Jessel and her lover Peter Quint, or the travel diary of Jonathan Harker, the narrator/traveller first encountered in the forests around the Castle of Count Dracula, whose story recounts, via a series of other diary entries, the tale of the vampire. *Zoologo* opens with a framing scene distanced from the tale by the device of the recounted memory (“I remember well”⁶, Ammaniti: 201). The fictional setting frames a

⁶ “Mi ricordo bene”. Similar words open the retrieved manuscript of the governess in the main section of Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*: “I remember the whole beginning as a

group of academics telling each other stories in the convivial environs of a pseudo-English pub (“It was small and crowded and attempted to resemble an English pub with its wooden panelling and beer mugs hung above the counter”⁷ (Ammaniti: 201) set in a suburb of Bologna (Ammaniti: 201), a Italian city actually at the centre of the development of the Italian pulp literary movement. The fictional setting duly encapsulates the reader in the fireside story-telling tradition that structures the suspense and resultant literary intrigue. The frame is used to dissociate the story – a past and traumatic event – from the telling, the reliving of the terror in a present time. The first narrator, whose role in the narrative process is to pass on someone else’s story, creates a distance that preserves the mystery, rendering it unassailable.

Setting the original tale in what Punter and Byron call “the location that is no more” (2004:51) the distanced narrative, held in check by the frame, allows for an estrangement of the story in the present of the moment of telling and relates it to an event that is safely contained in a distanced past. The terror encapsulated in the recounted story is thus not part of either the life or the present of the listener but part of the life of the ‘Other’. The story is thus mediated via the narrator who is able to pass on the thrill of the terror but not the potential danger.

The use of the remote or historic past tense⁸ in *Zoologo* and the first person narrator whose words, ‘quoted’ by the italic typeset normally used in reported speech, sets the scene for the second narrator – a figure, Cornelio Balsamo, defined by traditional Gothic features – “[...] small dark eyes and a long, pointy nose [...] a rather dark and tenebrous look”⁹ (Ammaniti: 203) – whose tale forms the main body of the narrative. Like Shelley’s character, Dr. Frankenstein, whose scientific experimentation is creation of life,

succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong” (James, 1971:158).

⁷ “Era piccola, affollata e cercava di assomigliare a un pub inglese con quei muri rivestiti di legno e i boccali appesi sopra il bancone.”

⁸ The Italian story uses the *passato remoto* which is usually associated with historical writing.

⁹ “[...] occhi piccoli e scuri e un naso lungo e appuntito [...] un aspetto assai tenebroso”

Balsamo's research is in the regeneration of limbs in the giant lizards, also known as the Dragons of Komodo Island in Indonesia. However, his research involves the regeneration of severed limbs of the dragons which he himself has severed. ("He studies the regeneration of limbs in the Dragons of Komodo Island. I knew that he had amputated the limbs of more than a thousand giant lizards in order to see the phenomenon of scarring"¹⁰, Ammaniti: 203).

In the story's frame, the use of a familiar tone creates a sense of intimacy that draws the reader into the magic circle of the storytelling moment. The parody of the fictional narrator maintaining the anonymity of the 'true' story by changing the name of the subject who is a fictional, zombie-professor of biochemistry, brings the story into the realm of the television docu-drama, which blurs the boundaries between the fictional, the semi fictional and the fictionally 'true' ("It is a true story and I will intentionally change the names of the protagonists in order to protect their anonymity"¹¹, Ammaniti: 204).

The audience listening to the horror story is traditionally coerced into becoming a captive to the telling of the tale; the fireside storytelling as evening entertainment in which a group of people are quasi-forcibly gathered together by social convention (*The Turn of the Screw*), the necessity for telling the horror at the narrator's deathbed (*Frankenstein*), or the alleviation of boredom on an evening during a conference out of town, ("Alone after the congress with the only option of returning to my squalid little hotel room, my colleagues had invited me to go drinking with them"¹², Ammaniti: 201). The reason for hearing the story focuses the reader's attention on the narrative moment, thus providing the required suspension of external time and the exclusion of everyday life in the narrative moment.

The core of the story, once reached through the portal of the frame, transposes the zombie myth to the familiar Gothic setting that is also

¹⁰ "Studiava la rigenerazione degli arti nei varani di Komodo. Sapevo che aveva amputate le zampe a più di mille lucertoloni per vedere i fenomeni di cicatrizzazione."

¹¹ "È una storia vera e cambierò intenzionalmente i nomi dei protagonisti per proteggere il loro anonimato."

¹² "Dopo il congresso essendo solo e con l'unica possibilità di ritornarmene in albergo, nella mia squallida cameretta, i colleghi mi avevano invitato ad andare con loro, a bere."

part of the pulp *mise en scene*. The protagonist, the incapable, bumbling but well meaning student, Andrea Milozzi, on his banded motorbike, “was riding his *Ciao* in the frozen night”¹³ (Ammaniti: 206). His reluctant intervention against a group of racist thugs on behalf of a homeless black immigrant – the relevant issue of xenophobia at the centre of so many political debates in contemporary Italy – leads to his murder at the hands of members of right wing thugs that are part of the political landscape of contemporary Italy (“little street fascists”¹⁴, Ammaniti: 208). The immigrant, Karim, emblematic figure of the itinerant worker in the Italian contemporary city, whose fictional biography recalls the death of Jerry Masslo in 1989, in the town of Villa Literno in Campania, where Karim’s history is also set¹⁵ (“He had only managed to find some work during the summer at Villa Literno. He picked tomatoes. He was paid in kind. In autumn, when it started getting cold, the work had ended”¹⁶, Ammaniti: 212), links the story to yet another political reality of 1990s Italy. Andrea’s reluctant, but morally correct sense of duty towards the homeless man leads to his own beating and subsequent fatal knifing. However, Karim, a shaman in his native – unnamed – small country in West Africa, is a link with a world that is alien and mysterious, a distant location inhabited by stereotypical medicine men and esoteric occultists:

In Africa, he has been an important man in his tribe, respected by everyone. He was the medicine man and the man of magic. He had learnt his magic arts from his father who had learnt them from his grandfather and so forth till the beginning of time. He had learnt the secrets of medicine and of herbs, how to speak to the dead and

¹³ “Andrea correva sul suo Ciao nella notte gelata.”

¹⁴ “Andrea riaprì gli occhi e ululò.” “Andrea si guardò un po’ in giro e ululò alla luna.”

¹⁵ Jerry Masslo, a political refugee from South Africa, had settled in Italy where he became an itinerant worker, picking tomatoes in Southern Italy. He was murdered in a racial attack in Villa Literno in the summer of 1989.

¹⁶ “Solo durante l’estate era riuscita a trovare qualcosa, a Villa Literno. Raccoglieva pomodori. Lo pagavano a cassetta. In autunno, con il freddo, il lavoro era finito.”

how to recall them from their sleep. He had become the priest of the afterlife, he had glimpsed the banks of Hell in his trances¹⁷. (Ammaniti: 212-213)

On witnessing Andrea's brutal killing on his behalf, Karim invokes the return of his spirit from the gods and Andrea is restored to a form of semi-life typical of the zombie.

Again, the core of the story refers back to the Gothic archetypal binary split between the here and the esoteric 'there' where the spirit world in all its nuances can be encountered. But the fearful status of the living dead in Ammaniti's story is reduced. Like the average member of Italian society in the 1990s, the zombies are:

[...] caught in a monotonous longing. The last thing that they experienced in their past life transforms itself in a base and simple instinct, ancient and primitive, and because they are unconscious beings, they don't understand it, but they passively abandon themselves to it.

They live, if that can be called living, irrationally, on the periphery of the simplest norms of communal living and of morality. They are basically crude and bad mannered¹⁸. (Ammaniti: 214)

The attainment of sublime terror involved in the Gothic is, however, lacking in this much reduced and essentially irrelevant social structure within which the story unfolds.

¹⁷ "In Africa, nella sua tribù era stato un uomo importante. Rispettato da tutti. Era l'uomo della medicina e della magia. Aveva appreso le arti magiche da suo padre che le aveva apprese da suo nonno e così fino all'inizio dei tempi. Aveva imparato i segreti della medicina e quelli delle erbe, come parlare con i morti, richiamandoli dal loro sonno. Era divenuto il sacerdote dell'oltretomba, aveva visto nelle sue trance le sponde rocciose dell'inferno."

¹⁸ "[...] incastrati in un monotono desiderare. L'ultimo anelito che hanno avuto nella vita passata si trasforma in un istinto basso e semplice, primitivo e antico, ed essendo esseri incoscienti non lo comprendono, ma ci si abbandonano passivamente. Vivono, se la loro si può chiamare vita, irrazionalmente, al di fuori delle norme più semplici di convivenza e moralità. Sono in definitiva rozzi e maleducati."

The unwelcoming urban Italian setting favoured both by the pulp environment as well as the Gothic tradition is exemplified in the cityscape – “The alley was narrow and full of cardboard boxes and trash that obstructed movement”¹⁹ (Ammaniti: 206), melds with the night-scape which is the privileged terror-time of the gothic tale in which “[t]he city slept silently and very few cars bulleted away in the cold of the night”²⁰ (Ammaniti: 207), where “[...] a side alley shrouded in impenetrable darkness”²¹ (Ammaniti: 206) emblematises the loneliness and squalor of the urban reality. The psychological interiorisation of the dark and dangerous city, derived from the Victorian tradition of the Dickensian-type Urban Gothic in which “drains replace devils” (Mighall, 1999:62), encapsulates both the terror and the alienation of the modern psyche, and is readily recognised by readers of the modern Urban Gothic tale. However, the Urban Gothic of Ammaniti’s story transposes the filth of the degenerated urban environment to the types who inhabit the locale, the dark soul of the city is associated with the ruthless blankness of the violent people who “[...] continued kicking the one on the ground”²² (Ammaniti: 207). The facelessness of the thuggery of the modern, dislocated city in which unnamed assailants “[...] were beating someone”²³ (Ammaniti: 206) typify the undefined agents of the violence – the ‘they’ of the attack on Karim – which also draw this story into a universality of horror that is at the core of Pulp’s ethical questioning of modern society in which alienation and social disintegration are the elemental ‘truth’.

However, death turns out not to be the worst outcome. By concession of the gods, Andrea’s spirit return to his body, couched in the iconography of numerous B rate movies, in which the character, “Then bit by bit [...] slowly descended and fell once again into the

¹⁹ “La vietta era stretta e piena di scatoloni di cartone e rifiuti che ostruivano il passaggio.”

²⁰ “La città dormiva silenziosa e solo poche macchine sfrecciavano nel freddo della notte.”

²¹ “un vicolo laterale chiuso in un buio impenetrabile”

²² “I tre continuavano a prendere a calci quello a terra.”

²³ “Stavano picchiando qualcuno.”

body, shuddering and filling it again of something akin to life”²⁴ (Ammaniti: 214).

The central figure of the story, the zombie, reverts to yet another tradition. In its original symbolism the zombie is a terrifying embodiment of the loss of human quality, or in Haitian terms, “an expression of the memory of slavery” (Mzilibazi Kjone: 3). In the words of Rene Depestre, “The zombie is ultimately a slave deprived of his soul, of his sensibility, of his *imaginaire* and reduced to the state of an exploited object like an ass or a machine” (Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, 1992:553). While this core meaning is always at the centre of the zombie myth, Ammaniti’s story only very superficially refers to specific Haitian iconography.

Ammaniti again makes extensive use of stock images and intertextual webs that are familiar to the reader from a plethora of movies and comic strips in which the zombie makes his formulaic appearance in order to more easily enlist the reader’s familiarity; “Andrea opened his eyes again and started ululating”, “Andrea looked around for a bit and ululated at the moon” (Ammaniti: 214). His walk is described with the familiar iconography of the zombie movie: “He didn’t walk at all harmoniously, but swayed slightly and rocked on his rigid legs”²⁵ (Ammaniti: 215); “Teetering, he reached Regina Elena Avenue”²⁶ (Ammaniti: 215). His ululating screams and gyrating head are redolent of the second rate horror movie; “His head. His head was turned 180 degrees”²⁷ (Ammaniti: 215); “It was strange to see the face, the neck and then the back and bum and on the other side his hair down to his chest”²⁸ (Ammaniti: 218). The act of vomiting green slime in the empty nocturnal bus journey (“The young man twisted his mouth, pinched his nose and vomited an incredible amount of

²⁴ “Poi piano piano precipitò più giù e cadde di nuovo nel corpo, scuotendolo e riempiendolo di qualcosa di simile alla vita.”

²⁵ “Non camminava proprio armoniosamente, sbandava un po’ ai lati e ondeggiando sulle gambe rigide.”

²⁶ “Arrivò su viale Regina Elena traballando.”

²⁷ “La testa. La testa era girata di centottanta gradi.”

²⁸ “Era strano vedere la faccia il collo e poi la schiena e il sedere e dall’altra parte i capelli che gli finivano sul torace.”

warm green slime onto the old woman”²⁹ (Ammaniti: 222) is more visually important than literarily necessary. Our reading of the imagery is here determined by the familiarity that we have with the movies, comic books and advertising where the figure of the zombie makes a clichéd link between the notion of living dead and the society against which he is juxtaposed.

While Gothic fiction is often tied up with issues in which the thematic focus “[...] is the nature of identity [...]” (Lamb, 1992:307), in Ammaniti’s reworking the mythical elements skirt those original layers of meaning while focussing on the dichotomy at the heart of current society. The nature of identity that Ammaniti’s story interrogates is only peripherally that of the monster. In the monster’s confrontation with the world, the measure of the society that surrounds that monster is far more important. While in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* the monster cannot find acceptance in a world that has cruelly predetermined its definitions of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, as well as a strict understanding of the ontological origins of existence, in the modern Italian context the monster finds his place in an environment in which the definition of identity is in keeping with a society that lacks clearly defined terms to describe that identity. As concerned as this society is with designer labels and the value of appearance, the inhabitants of this ‘world’ cannot tell the difference between the zombie and other notions of reality.

Utilising familiar text with their baggage of associations and references allows the writer the opportunity to short circuit long and laborious intertextual references as “[...] a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance” (Hutcheons, 2000:20). The ironic mode thus relies on the inclusion of disparate intertextual echoes that enrich and broaden the base of reference and “prepare [...] us for the text, and prepare [...] the text for us, so that any resulting meaning, power, or effects that the text may be seen to possess are in part a function of the already read” (Grey, 2006:26).

²⁹ “Il ragazzo arriccìò la bocca, strizzò il naso e vomitò addosso alla vecchia una quantità sproporzionata di pappa verde e calda.”

The ontological bases on which existence is posited are still at the centre of the writer's explorations. However, the benchmark of 'identity' available to the modern context is none other than the latest fashion or the current fad. How, in fact, can the zombie be identified as semi-dead when all around him only the semi-real life of the television show or drug junkie are the ultimate reality? A state of semi-existence is already the essence of this society. The zombie's knowledge of biological detail does not stem from his human qualities, yet his 'abilities' – the prodigious memorising of lists of biological names – are prized even though they no longer reflect the human in him. The appearance is all and, as such, even the zombie can find his place in a social milieu that understands nothing outside facile appearance.

Professor Ermini, strict professor of the department where the zombie student Andrea must sit his examination, presides over a Gothic laboratory akin to Dr. Frankenstein's *sanctorum*, "a large hall full of stuffed animals, lined with jars holding organisms in formalin, posters showing the steps of evolution"³⁰ (Ammaniti: 226). But unlike Dr. Frankenstein, whose crisis stems from his deep understanding of the consequences of his choices and actions, Professor Ermini is taken in by the appearance of knowledge and the external signs of erudition. The zombie student is able to recite the names, therefore he deemed to be a gifted student. In such an intellectually bankrupt society, little counts outside of appearance.

The zombie finds his place in this society because the society itself no longer contains its own markers to identify 'being' or 'achieving'. The monster has become the gothic hero in a society that no longer recognises heroes. In reworking the sublime terror of the Gothic sensibility to the comic strip figure of the zombie zoologist, Ammaniti achieves a "signalling of distance" (Hutcheons, 2000:31) by redirecting the reader's criticism towards the workings of his own familiar social environment. In Ammaniti's *Zoologo*, the 'monster' who is also the estranged 'Other' of the gothic genre, is akin to the

³⁰ "[...] in una grande sala con animali impagliati, vasi con organismi in formalina, cartelloni raffiguranti le scale evolutive"

'us', otherwise understood to be the "good society" ("società perbene"), that sees itself in glowing terms in the Italy of the 1990s. The conceptual gap between the actuality of this society and the imagination it has of itself is crystallised in the figure of the zombie. As the latter can no longer extrapolate any relevant 'meaning' from life in the contemporary city, the same society has no means with which to differentiate between real life and semi-life, between the living and the living dead. Thus, the ironic mode in the works by the *giovani cannibali* is a means of admitting the reader into a text with the end of achieving a comment and condemnation of a society's 'blind spots' and lack of self-evaluation. Not only is the ironic mode "[...] an important way for modern artists to come to terms with the past [...]" (Hutcheons, 2000:101), but its understated jocularly is the only critical tool whereby the present can be highlighted, dissected and found wanting.

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