

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**The Urban Space in Italy Between Modernity
and Modernism**

The Short Stories of Verga and Pirandello

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a. The aim of the dissertation, delineation of the subject

In my dissertation I deal with the representation of urban space in the short stories of Giovanni Verga and Luigi Pirandello. Pirandello and Verga are authors of whom I have dealt in my research, also in relation to urban short stories. This constant interest in the work of the two Sicilians, determined both by personal interests and by the orientation of the University of Catania in which I was trained, merged with the interest in urban space, especially in the literature of the twentieth century, providing the stimulus from which my work springs. The question from which this investigation originates is to understand whether in Italy between the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, despite the industrial and urban planning delay compared to the large European cities, there are significant literary representations of urban space. The objective of this study is to observe and describe the phenomenology of the literary representation of the city and of life in the city, which can be defined as an overall urban experience, in two important Italian authors such as Verga and Pirandello, one modern and the other modernist, because in them an interesting area of intersection is formed between attention to the literary representation of urban space, use of the short stories, sensitivity towards what we have defined urban experience. The form of the short story in Verga and Pirandello proves to be particularly effective in representing scenes of urban life for single pictures, yet emblematic at the same time. The aim of this research is to understand whether even in Italy, starting as early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urban space produces important representation spaces in literature.

The specificity of the chosen topic and the vastness of the literary production of the two authors meant that I limited the scope of the research, therefore, only to urban short stories and a few other texts in which the two authors define their idea of the city. In the thesis I analyze Verga's Milanese short stories belonging to the *Per le vie* collection and a substantial selection of Roman short stories written by Pirandello. The texts analyzed cover a time span that goes from 1874 to 1936, the period that marks the passage from modernity to modernism, whose chronological terms are clarified in the thesis.

The starting point of the thesis is that the cities, in which the two authors, moving from Sicily, have chosen to live, are present both in the short stories and in other writings, such as letters and contributions in volume. Apart from a few studies

centered on space or in Verga or Pirandello, there are no systematic studies that investigate whether and how spatialization changes in the passage from modernity and realism to modernism and modernist realism. Through the analysis of the texts I try to identify points of contact and differences in the space of representation of the works of the two authors and to understand if the modes of representation are connected to the era in which the two authors live and to their poetics.

b. Delineation of the applied methods

The research work was carried out in stages. Initially, I deepened the study of the literature relating to the spatial methodological approach, linked to the spatial turn, which is an extremely vast and difficult subject to frame on which I had to return in later stages. In this way, I came to make a selection of the methodological approaches that I considered most similar to my original method, which is historical-literary, and most useful for the interpretation of the texts. In this study I refer to space, in particular to urban space as an object of literary representation by the author, as an anthropological experience and as a historical-cultural experience, characteristic of Western modernity. Urban space is both a source of inspiration for Verga and Pirandello, and a direct object of representation in texts set in the city, and an experience that directly affects the form of literary representation, for example by determining precise choices of poetics regarding the structure of texts and macro-texts, the construction of the plots, the construction of the characters and the choice of the literary genre. So the basic idea is that the urban experience interferes on several levels in literary production. The space of literary representation is in fact still a fictional space in which heterogeneous, social, historical, cultural and, last but not least, psychological factors come into play.

The complexity of the theme, its tendency to be multi and interdisciplinary, its constitution as an experience, feeling and idea at the same time have directed this research from the beginning towards a territory in which eclecticism, the use of different theoretical approaches and complementary, has increasingly appeared as a resource rather than a limit. On the other hand, the issue of space in literature presents a great complexity, since it is impossible to frame the spatial elements within an order that is applicable to all spatial experiences and all narrative works. I drew very important and decisive methodological insights from the studies on space by Michael Bakhtin, Jurij Lotman, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Henri Lefebvre, Marc

Augè and, above all, from the recent geocritic mastered by Bertrand Westphal. In the introduction of the thesis (chapter I) I try to think critically on the theoretical ideas offered by the various scholars, also in relation to the authors being studied.

The preparatory work on Verga, in the selection of the texts to be analyzed, was facilitated by the fact that almost all the urban short stories are found in a single collection; I realized that there are very few specific studies on urban space and in a foreign language (with a focus on some aspects of the city, on the female body and on prostitution), while there are really many historical-literary and philological studies on the Milan of Verga and the Milanese short stories. For Pirandello the work was much more complex due to the vastness of the short stories production, which I had to entirely re-read and evaluate in the light of the object of the research, the urban space, to make a correct selection of the texts. Also for Pirandello almost all of the critical studies, which in this case too are very many, have a historical-literary and philological approach, many studies concern the Pirandellian places, very few the urban space.

c. List of results

Chapter II: *Metamorfosi urbane*. Before starting the systematic study of the literary texts of the two authors, I studied aspects of the modern city and the important urban change that took place throughout Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Naturally, the focus is on the urban development of the two cities of Milan and Rome, the city of choice of the two authors, in the periods under study. Milan in Italy, from the nineteenth century until today, is the city par excellence, which represents the industrial development and modernity of the country. Rome is a city with complex facets, in which different souls come together, from the ancient to the papal one to the bourgeois one of building speculation. The purpose of this study was to place two authors in a precise historical-urban context, which at times accounts for some significant spaces of representation present in their work.

Chapter III: *Verga e Milano*. In this chapter I deal specifically with Verga. Initially, I clarify the reasons why Verga decides to move from Catania and why he moves from Florence to Milan, a city where publishing is one of the most modern and developed industries. Therefore, I explain the modalities of Verga's passage to realism and his approach to writing short stories, the increase of which in the context of Italian production is linked to the choices and orientations of Milanese publishing.

I identify a dichotomy in the representation of the city of Milan present in the works of Verga. On the one hand, in the letters and in an important occasional writing, *I dintorni di Milano*, Milan is an exciting and stimulating place, on the other hand the literary representation brings out above all the alienating effects of the modern city. In the next paragraph, I analyze the literary representation of the city in the texts preceding the short stories of *Per le vie*, even in non-veristic short stories, in a gradual approach to the only Verga work truly centered on Milan. The focus of the chapter is, in fact, the analysis of the short stories from the *Per le vie* collection set in Milan. From the analysis of the macro text on the basis of the internal-external opposing couple, I identify a structure for concentric circles in the internal organization of the short stories, which I link to the circular map of Milan. Urban space, both the spatial practice of the labyrinth of streets within the circular map and the representation of space, with a strong ideological value, becomes the structuring substance of the literary work, determines it and returns to the reader as a secondary modeling system, offering us a space of literary representation that has very specific characteristics. The map of Milan becomes a literary space and acts on the other levels of the text, starting from the essential internal space-external space dichotomy up to acting on the characters and their stories. From the analysis of the individual texts. Inside the structure made of concentric circles, the characters move throughout the city, in every area, inside the circle of the walls and sometimes even outside. The city in this literary representation is unitary and integral, it is a space that can be fully embraced. The characters can be heroes of the *locus immobile*, locked in a space, or heroes of the open space, who do nothing but move through the open space of the city in a time that is linear, the time of progress. Verga also uses a series of dichotomous oppositions, often in relation to each other, which serve to express and give meaning to the relationships in which objects are in the urban space: interior-external, stasis-movement, day-night, inside-outside, sickness-health, near-far, city-countryside. Everything that is static is opposed to the vitality and movement of the city, what is far away generates the memory of the countryside, always melancholy, what is close is urban and present.

Inside the city Verga isolates a series of topological objects, which serve to express the spatial organization and which arise from the fusion of a spatial meaning with a cultural one. The train, the station, the carriage, the shoes, the hands spatialize and symbolize the movement, the essence of the city, the movement, the speed, the work which are also the prerogatives of modernity. Among all objects, the window and

the letter assume a special semantic value, because they have the function of marking the spatial distance, and the body.

Finally, I interpret the function of the many toponyms within the collection. The one hundred and fifty-four toponyms of the collection allow us to go deeper into the urban space, giving it a social and cultural interpretation. They explain to us the human and social movements of the characters, create a spatial narrative that clearly shows how the victims of progress denounce their condition of degradation through the movement, presence or exclusion of their own bodies from the very center of the city, that is from the striated space.

Chapter IV: *Tra Verga e Pirandello*. The chapter creates a link between Verga and Pirandello. First of all, I deal with defining the cultural framework of the early twentieth century in which the short stories is very much in vogue. I highlight how the short story between realism and modernism undergoes important changes through the irruption of the everyday into the narrative, specifying what is meant by modernist realism and by epic of the casual. I therefore outline the relationship in which Pirandello places himself with Verga from the point of view of narrative ideas. To clarify this relationship, I refer to Federigo Tozzi, an important coeval writer of Pirandello and like him a representative of modernist realism, as well as a leading contributor to the editorial staff of the literary supplement *Il messaggero della Domenica*, directed behind the scenes by Pirandello. The two writers work together on common ideas for the renewal of the Italian novel, but also of the short story. As can be seen in some texts by both Tozzi and Pirandello, Verga's work is taken as a model for the solidity of the narrative structure and for the concept of realism which, due to the absence of rhetorical emphasis, stands in a clear contrast to D'Annunzio.

Chapter V: *Pirandello e Roma*. The chapter is entirely dedicated to Pirandello. In the initial part I deal with the author's first approach to the third Rome and his residential odyssey in the city. I then go on to expose the perception that Pirandello has of the crisis of the early twentieth century, with the progressive fragmentation of reality and the impossibility of progress being able to provide certain answers to the deepest questions of the human being. The author arrives at a cognitive relativism and, from a literary point of view, the poetics of humor, already practiced but elaborated only in 1908 in the essay *L'Umore*. Humor allows us to penetrate the contradiction of reality and reveal the double that exists in the situations represented. Pirandello's humor, while representing countless cases, unmask illusions and fictions, making them fall. The

humorous writer has the ability to grasp those details that appear vulgar but have the strength to reveal reality in his horror.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there is an enormous theoretical ferment around the perception of time and space, around memory, around the unconscious. The subjective dimension of man affects all fields of knowledge and very important theories are formulated that modify the vision of space. The discovery of the unconscious is parallel to the disintegration, to the subjectivization and therefore to the relativization of the spatial dimension. In Pirandello's writing, the spatialization of the urban dimension is affected by this climate, which in Italy in the literary field started by Pirandello himself.

In the sub-chapter *Acquasantiera e posacenere* I analyze some texts, in this case taken from the novels *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, *I vecchi e i giovani* and *Suo marito*, in which Pirandello presents an often humorous representation of Rome.

In the following sub-chapters I dedicate myself exclusively to short stories. I select from among the two hundred and fifty-two Pirandello short stories those set in Rome and among these I select a choice of short stories dividing them into four groups, based on the function of the city in the narration.

A first group is made up of short stories in which the space of representation of the city reveals the problems that that urban space poses, also defining the relationship of modern man with the city and with nature. In the short stories of this group it is sometimes possible to find a nostalgic tone for the non-urban past of spaces, when nature dominated. The years in which Pirandello begins to observe the disintegrated city are precisely those in which Rome changes most from an urban point of view. These changes are not without problems and have their own specificity. The great urban development of Rome with new streets, squares and entire neighborhoods, urban public transport with trams, urban lighting are all elements that modify and determine a new imaginary, are experienced by people in a new spatial practice. Classical Rome is a strong place with its own *genius loci* where nature and architecture are in perfect interaction. The third Rome, on the other hand, expands indiscriminately, devoid of an order, of a unitary and ideological project and has difficulty in finding its identity, its *genius loci*.

The second group of short stories is the one in which the society of the great capital city of Italy is represented. Undoubtedly, the representation of the Roman bourgeoisie dominates, since the capital Rome is a bourgeois city and Pirandello is very

interested in observing small bourgeois lives. In the space of representation, social and economic problems related to building speculation also emerge, while the anti-heroic and twentieth-century figure of the inept stands out in the crowd of characters. In these short stories, urban issues are looked at from a sociological and historical point of view. Pirandello, in fact, shows how the new building fabric of the city, through its anonymous and crowded physicality, is experienced and conceptualized by the characters to determine their action in the world. The city acts on the character and on his psychology and at the same time the psychology of the character conceptualizes a certain type of urban objects.

In a third group of short stories Rome is seen through a multiplicity of different gazes than that of the citizen, now accustomed to life in the big city. The city can be observed from a multiplicity of gazes and always appear different because the process of imagination that elaborates the shape of the city is different. The subjectivity of perceptions, which creates plural truths in each of the characters, is for Pirandello the fundamental question of human incommunicability, but it is also the primary essence of the time in which he lives. There is no objective truth, nor an objective way of perceiving reality, but there are as many truths as there are human beings. Rome can be seen through the eyes of characters who, strangers like their author, visit the city and bring their inner dimension into it, but it can also be seen through the estranged gaze of those who after many years return to Rome and no longer find the city he knew. The space of representation no longer coincides with the representation of the space that he created it, generating estrangement and a sense of disorientation. These alienated gazes return the image of a city which, in its classic garments and skullcaps, has a strong identity, but in its modern garments it is subject to constant changes and has not yet found its identity.

In the short stories of the fourth group, Pirandello focuses on the existential condition of the man who moves in parts of the intricate urban fabric. The city becomes, with its objects and spaces, the place where man suffers the trauma, unpredictable and fortuitous, which makes him come out of the form he had created to live. Once the social form, which determines daily actions, has been lost, man wanders around the city in search of meaning and begins to see real life flowing. In these short stories, casual urban encounters often take place that open cognitive gaps in the characters. The encounters can be intertwined with real urban walks. The characters find themselves for one reason or another crossing specific areas of Rome, indicated by precise toponyms,

in urban walks that on the one hand reflect the character's inner state and are determined by his inner state, and on the other reveal themselves internally decisive for the character, since he makes a decision or implements it or becomes aware of his existential condition.

A sub-chapter is dedicated to each group of short stories. The short stories are analyzed in depth, focusing on the representation of the urban space. Chaos dominates the stories and the fragmentation of space, typically twentieth century, is expressed through the representation of individual parts of the city that are synecdoche of the entire city, unlike Verga in which the character could move throughout the city. Pirandello also uses objects that spatialize the city, the building, the window, the Tiber river, the bridge, the border. Urban space in Pirandello contributes considerably to mark the psychology and actions of the characters. Also for Pirandello I interpret the wide use of toponyms.

Chapter VI: Conclusions. In the conclusions I summarize the results of the analyzes carried out and the interpretation of the spatializing elements of the texts taken into consideration, highlighting the similarities and differences between the two authors in the representation of urban space and linking these differences also to the epochal change that took place in the early twentieth century.

Thanks to the investigation of the urban short stories by Verga and Pirandello, it clearly emerges that the representation of the city, in Italy, is not an exclusive prerogative of the literature of the late twentieth century. The analysis of the stories of the two Sicilians amply demonstrates the impact of the urban dimension, but above all the fact that the space has an informing function both of the literary structure and of the characters and stories narrated in the works. The short stories reveal themselves more clearly to be an integral part of the literary projects, of the theoretical reflection and of the production of the two. Finally, thanks to the works of the two authors, it is possible to observe how, between modernity and modernism, the way of perceiving urban space and representing it changes a lot. In the urban short stories of our authors, Milan and Rome are the scenario through which modernity acts on the individual.

The deep observation of space in Verga's urban short stories places the short stories more decisively in the great project of the *vinti*. They continue it, deepen it, show in short parables, devoid of any light of hope, that the sparkling tide that moves in urban spaces ends up engulfing many individuals in a desperate shipwreck. The victims of capitalist progress and the big city are represented above all, on whom the lights of the

city go out. The toponyms become a powerful channel of language that formalizes the space and, with their massive presence, give us back the *milieu* in which the bodies of the characters move, in which the objects are placed, in which the carriages show themselves, defining the social identity of the city and, therefore, also that of the characters themselves. It is thanks to the presence of toponyms that we can understand that the city is a space that in the modern age can still be fully embraced, it can be completely covered by the characters.

Pirandello's Rome is a modernist city and therefore disintegrated, divided. The toponyms present in Pirandello's short stories, in addition to socially placing the events narrated in a specific urban space, have a prominent linguistic function because they reveal the author's narrative impossibility to fully embrace the city in a single short story. The character never moves from one end of the city to another, but always moves in a limited space. If the characters of Verga could move in any direction within the circle of the whole city, no one of Pirandello's characters can. Everyone always and only moves in a portion of the city. Toponyms therefore take on, even in Pirandello, a strong semantic value revealing not only the social element but also the cultural and existential change that began at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which the subjectification of time is accompanied by the shattering of space. In Pirandello's short stories the city is represented with a strong sense of depth, created by the presence of often multi-sensorial perceptions and by the simultaneous presence of different objects in the visual field. The sense of depth places the characters themselves in the space they perceive, envelops and determines them, caging or freeing the characters' conscience.

The novelty of my work consists first of all in having combined the spatial method with the historical-literary approach in order to analyze the texts respecting their specificity and with a method that is as complete as possible with respect to the chosen theme. The thesis also explores the topic of space for a period in which it has been little investigated, identifying how the urban, historical, cultural, psychological factors and the poetics of the two authors combined with their personal urban experience also mark through their space of representation of the city the passage from one era to another.

Appendix: The thesis is accompanied by an appendix containing figures and tables. There are three figures: a diagram showing the structure in concentric circles of the *Per le vie* collection, the map of Milan in 1880 and a still from Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* film. The two tables contain the toponyms present in all the urban novels of the two authors.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

1. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Una giornata di Luigi Pirandello.
In: Scritture e letture: novella e racconto. A cura di: Andrea Manganaro, Bonanno, Acireale-Roma, 111-120, 2009. ISBN: 8877965258

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

2. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Vittorini e Verga.
Annali della fondazione Verga. 11, 83-93, 2018. ISSN: 2038-2243.

Foreign language conference proceedings (4)

3. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Vagando per le vie: verga, la novella, Milano.
In: Rappresentazioni Narrative : Realismo, verismo, modernismo tra secondo Ottocento e primo Novecento. Sperimentazione italiana e cornice europea : Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi. A cura di: G. Alfieri, R. Castelli, S. Cristaldi, A. Manganaro, Fondazione Verga ; Leonforte (En) : Euno, [Catania], 131-140, 2020. ISBN: 9788868591953
4. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Visionarietà e visione: un percorso tra immagini cinematografiche e narrativa italiana del '900.
In: I cantieri dell'italianistica : Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo : Atti del XVII congresso dell'ADI - Associazione degli Italianisti Roma Sapienza, 18-21 settembre 2013 / a cura di B. Alfonzetti, G. Baldassarri e F. Tomasi, Adi editore, Roma, 1-11, 2014. ISBN: 9788890790546
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List of other publications

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7. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Autobiografismo e forma nei sonetti di Foscolo.
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8. **D'Arrigo, P.:** Linee di confine ne Decameron.
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9. **D'Arrigo, P.,** Marino, S.: Serrando e disserrando: L'arte della parola come competenza di vita.
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