

Gothic landscape, memory and food: A reading of Valerio Varesi's *The Dark Valley*



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What is known as Mediterranean Noir has crimes that occur in a landscape set under the azure skies and seashores of cities such as Marseille, Barcelona or even Venice. In contrast, Italian writer, Valerio Varesi, relocates his crime novels to the more rural landscapes of villages in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna. In these places, it is the landscape of mist, rivers and mountains that creates the noir Gothic narrative and atmosphere surrounding the crimes committed. My article will examine how, in Varesi's *The Dark Valley*, a subtle fusing of the devices of landscape, food and a Gothic disruption of the return of the past into the present are central to the story world of the novel. This dislocation between past and present, I contend, will lead to Varesi's detective, Commissario Soneri, questioning his own identity.

Gotiese landskap, herinnering en kos: 'n Lesing van Valerio Varesi se *The Dark Valley* [*Die Donker Valle*]. Die Mediterreense Noir is bekend vir misdade wat plaasvind in 'n landskap met asuurblou hemel en seekuste van stede soos Marseille, Barcelona of selfs Venesië. In teenstelling hiermee, plaas die Italiaanse skrywer Valerio Varesi sy misdaadromans in die meer landelike landskappe van dorpe in Toskane en Emilia-Romagna. In hierdie plekke is dit die landskap van mis, riviere en berge wat die Noir Gotiese vertelling en atmosfeer skep waardeur die misdade wat gepleeg word, omring is. My artikel sal ondersoek hoe, in Varesi se *The Dark Valley* [*Die Donker Valle*], 'n subtiële saamsmelting van die tegnieke van landskap, kos en 'n Gotiese ontwrigting van die terugkeer van die verlede na die hede sentraal tot die storiewêreld van die roman is. Hierdie ontwrigting tussen die verlede en die hede, sal, volgens my, daartoe lei dat Varesi se speurder, kommissaris Soneri, sy eie identiteit bevraagteken.

Introduction

Food has come to play a fairly prominent role in Mediterranean crime fiction, what is often called Mediterranean Noir, in works by writers such as Andrea Camilleri, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Jean-Claude Izzo, Massimo Carlotto and Donna Leon, to name but a few. In these novels, food and place become integral to the identity of the detective and the underlying sociopolitical aspects of the plot. Numerous critical studies tracing the history of Italian crime fiction as a genre and its sociopolitical relevance to Italy have been done, so I will not attempt to situate my article within the development of this historical continuum.¹ While much attention has been paid to the work of Italian crime writer Andrea Camilleri and the importance that the regional food and landscape of Sicily holds for his Commissario Montalbano, relatively little engagement with the importance of the Gothic landscape and food in the crime novels of Valerio Varesi has occurred.² A Gothic landscape is one marked by darkness, fog and disintegration and these aspects are present in Varesi's noir novels with their landscapes of melancholy, rain and mist that establish a dense atmosphere (Barwig 2008:115). Underlying this dense atmosphere are the repressed spectres of a past, which constantly threaten to return and destabilise the present. Maria Beville (2009:102) notes that through this return a reader or character can 'realise the potential of his or her own ghosts within and without' (Beville 2009:102). The Gothic landscape is also marked by a corruption of morality, which Barbara Pezzotti (2014:76), in relation to the rural landscape in Italian crime novels, indicates is symbolic of a 'more general dishonesty' that can be considered one of 'bribery and illusion'. I will demonstrate that the evocation of such a Gothic landscape, along with the gustatory taste of place, are integral strands woven into the criminal investigation that Varesi's

1. See Eynaud (2006), Pezzotti (2014), Cicioni and Di Ciolla (2008), Buckler (2014) and Forshaw (2014).

2. Rai Due in Italy presented the television series entitled *Nebbie e Delitti* (Fog and Crime 2005–2009), based on Varesi's Commissario Soneri mysteries.

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Commissario Soneri undertakes in the novel *The Dark Valley* (2012 translation).³

Where Mediterranean Noir is often set under the azure skies and seashores of cities such as Marseilles, Barcelona or even Venice, Varesi relocates his crime novels to the more rural landscapes of small villages in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna where mist, rivers and mountains create the brooding atmosphere of the narrative and the crimes that occur. The ambiance of the rural setting and its regional specificity are important in founding the sense of place Varesi establishes in his novels. Varesi's book, *The Dark Valley*, seems to combine the realism of the crime novel with what Rinaldi (2009:153) terms the 'gloomy, dark atmosphere' of the noir genre that encapsulates a number of Gothic elements. She goes on to add that the 'negative meaning of the past in noir fiction presents a harmful period of time' because what occurred there tends to lead to the 'downfall and death' of certain characters (2009:158). Similarly, Gabriella Turnaturi (2013:60) observes that Mediterranean Noir is 'the narration of a present, often charged with a dark past, but without a future; it is the narration of chaos and disorder, and not of re-established order'. The Gothic-like crime fiction is marked by a 'disruptive return of the past into the present', which acts to disrupt and fragment not only social order but also bodily identity (Scaggs 2005:15; Wolfreys 2002:12). Maria Beville (2014:52) indicates that this return of the past in Gothic writing 'challenges notions of history' and it is this repressed history that returns to 'haunt and terrify the narrative present'. Beville goes on to reference Paul Ricoeur's concept of history as uncanny, something that is both familiar and strange that provides a sense of Otherness (2014:52). Employing the Gothic device of memories that return to haunt the detective's present, Varesi is able to 'reflect upon the present through past events', revealing how the present attempts to suppress and deny these events (Pezzotti 2012:11). This denial and suppression of past events acts to accentuate the Gothic otherness or uncanniness located in the landscape and history of Commissario Soneri's natal village, as well as his own childhood memories.⁴ Though Varesi's novel employs an external narrative voice, the experiencing of the landscape and its association with food, as well as the violent murder that occurs in the novel, is focalised through Soneri's perspective. However, for my argument it is the Gothic landscape that is the main character and generating locus of what happens in the novel. It becomes the unknown Other that evokes repressed memories and forces Soneri to become the instrument that brings forth the hidden crimes of the past (Leffler 2013:148).

The sense of place

Barbara Pezzotti in her 2012 book, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction*, explores the representation

3.Varesi's novel was originally published in Italian in 2005 by Edizioni Frassinelli as *Le Ombre di Montelupo* (*The Shadow of Montelupo* (my translation)). I am employing Joseph Farrell's English translation entitled *The Dark Valley* (2012) and while aware of the loss of cultural equivalence, a discussion of the complexities of translation remains outside the scope of the current article. The translation of Varesi's novels into English has provided access for non-Italian speakers to this interesting voice in current Italian crime fiction.

4.Throughout this article, I will use the term Commissario as there is no real adequate translation in English.

of place in 1990s Italian crime fiction, where the focus is on the detective and his or her relationship with the landscape of the city. She goes on to comment that it still needs to become apparent if the crime fiction of the 2000s will add to this discourse on place or merely 'exploit an already successful trend' (2012:164). I wish to suggest that Varesi's novel, though situated outside the city in a regional village, does indeed contribute to the current discourse concerning the representation of place in Italian crime fiction. Unlike the more hard-boiled Italian crime novels that situate the detective within a specific city whose streets are mapped into his or her brain providing a form of expert knowledge, in the novel *The Dark Valley*, Commissario Soneri returns to the natural landscape and tiny village of his childhood. Situating the detective into the natural landscape of childhood, Varesi is seen to challenge the traditional city landscape of noir crime fiction (Most 2006:28).⁵ When Soneri is questioned about his presumed knowledge of the place, he says 'yes, but it doesn't feel like it. I still know the district and I have some memories of my own, but that's all' (Varesi 2012).⁶ This is not the expert knowledge of the city detective, but one of the semi-forgotten mappings of memory from a boyhood past spent in this sombre landscape. As Angela Barwig, in her brief allusion to Varesi's work observes, 'the landscapes of Varesi's novels can be seen to be the central protagonist of the mysteries in which Commissario Soneri becomes involved' (2008:115). It quickly becomes apparent that the uncanny misty and mountainous landscape and its relation to food and memory form the very fabric of Varesi's narrative (Pezzotti 2012:2). Amy B. Trubek (2005), writing on the role of the natural world in French culture, indicates that this is located in the sense of taste, where the earth and the gustatory become a single sense of place or *goût du terroir*.⁷ The potent interlacing of earth, landscape and the sensation of taste, associated with food and eating, caught in the nuance of the French expression is, I suggest, similarly evoked in the Italian phrase *sapori della terra* that merges humans with the natural world that they inhabit.⁸ Trubek observes that place and taste, in relation to the notion of *goût du terroir*, are often connected to the idea of roots or a 'person's history with a certain place', which she argues is essential and 'as timeless as the earth itself' (2005:261). Pierre Bourdieu has argued that taste is related to what he terms the 'habitus' of different classes and this influences our experience of the world. He goes on to write about tastes of luxury and tastes of necessity, where the former implies wealth and free time and the latter of the working class and foods of necessity (2005:71–78). Both Trubek and Bourdieu indicate that taste and cuisine form a part of the landscape and reflect the reality of the

5.For the hardboiled regional detective novel, see works such as those by Massimo Carlotto, Laura Grimaldi, Carlo Lucarelli, Dacia Maraini, Andrea G. Pinketts and Giorgio Scerbanenco.

6.As I am employing a Kindle edition of the book with no page numbers, I am relying on the Harvard method which only requires (author name: date) for in-text referencing.

7.Taste has a very extensive philosophical history where the bodily or gustatory sense of taste has always been considered lower than that of the aesthetic and visual perceptions of taste. This relates to the embodiment of taste as gustation and to the perception of the physical body as lower than that of the rationality of the mind, spirit versus bodily experience. For an exploration of taste, see Korsmeyer (1999), Kaplan (2012) and Allhoff and Monroe (2009).

8.Both the French and Italian expressions translate not only into a 'taste of the earth' but also into a 'sense of place' with its regional, socio-economic and cultural connotations which make the landscape and its natural products the fabric of human life.



region in which it occurs along with the sensual, practical or habitual relationship of the people themselves (Trubek 2005:261; Bourdieu 2005:74). The cuisine that forms part of the landscape in Varesi's novel is one of necessity and the reader becomes aware that the meals the detective consumes during the course of the novel are those of what, in Italy, are termed *cucina povera*. This term refers to the food of the poor and generally consists of pork, beans, flour, pasta and meats such as donkey, horse, goat and dried meat, such as the *salame* that is a symbol of the murders in *The Dark Valley*. Landscape and food become connected and are seen to form an essential aspect of the emotions and existence of the characters in Varesi's novel. Trubek considers this interrelationship between taste and place as revelatory of a 'dimension of nostalgia' that she regards as 'extending beyond the memory for certain foods and drink' to 'a way of life' that is more representative of the 'past than the present' (2005:268). This type of nostalgia for an idyllic rural past is firmly located in Commissario Soneri's memories of his upbringing in the village to which he has returned on a mushroom-picking holiday.

Soneri returns to his natal village in an Apennine valley below the looming mountain of Montelupo. Escaping from a misty Parma, he has 'come home' in order to rest and to pick mushrooms, an activity that is the essence of rural life in Italy and the village. His arrival coincides with a feast day and a set of posters announcing the disappearance and return of one Paride Rodolfi, the son of the Rodolfi patriarch Palmiro. It is the wealthy Rodolfi family's *salame* factory that provides employment for the majority of the villagers and intrinsic to Soneri's own childhood. He remembers the 'once-familiar trademark featuring a chubby, moustachioed pork-butcher standing alongside a plump pig. An image, which had haunted his imagination since boyhood' (Varesi 2012). Soneri's present is swiftly immersed in the landscape of his past and the memories of boyhood and of food: 'hams hanging from hooks in grocers' shops which smelt of lard' (*ibid*). Even looking at the mountain peaks, he imagines them as a 'well-used set of dentures' (*ibid*). Food, smell and the past connect Soneri with his surroundings, yet he senses something unsettling within the space of the village that seems to exude panic and malevolence. The creeping sense of an atmosphere of Gothic gloom seems to emanate from the topography of the hamlet and the murmurs and whisperings he hears around him. These heighten the underlying sense of unease of the place, which Soneri sees as resembling an 'immobile body' covered in cold sweat (Varesi 2012). To offset his feelings of uncomfotableness, he thinks of his planned mushroom hunting in the mountains as an escape into a 'perfect environment', a place in which he can lose himself. The natural landscape and its offerings of food becomes a space in which identity and its complexities can be ceded and the uncomplicated life of boyhood can be regained. Barbara Pezzotti indicates that this form of nostalgia represents a need to reclaim the harmoniousness of a time past, one perhaps that never actually existed (2014:8). I would suggest that the landscape and its relation to food and memory become part of the underlying Gothic elements in Varesi's novel and can be seen to affect everything that

occurs (Geherin 2008:3). The sense of place, *sapori della terra*, in the novel is linked specifically to the regional and local specificity of Soneri's personal history, so that the natural environment, in which the deaths occur, constructs the identities of the victim, the murderer and the Commissario himself (Pezzotti 2014:1).

The mountain of Montelupo is a major character in the novel having its own life that interplays with the past and the present of the villagers. Soneri sees it cloaked in the very mist that he has tried to escape from in Parma, yet his quest for mushrooms, with their earthy, gustatory associations, is heavily associated with the woods of this looming mountainside. Going for a walk in the woods, he initially feels 'totally at home', as mist 'floats around him' and he walks 'into and out of the swirling greyness' (Varesi 2012). However, the mist rapidly becomes thicker and Soneri feels it 'pressing down from above and the black earth beneath his feet made him shudder' (*ibid*). The effect of the mist establishes an uncanny atmosphere of Gothic disquiet and Soneri senses that he is not alone, and 'the tunnel of trees which grew darker with every step', becomes a threatening harbinger of danger and violence (*ibid*). The nebulosity makes the world around him deceptive and his disorientation takes on darker overtones when a shot is fired at him. On returning to the village, he is told that 'the mountains have become very dangerous' and that there is 'plenty of gunfire' on its slopes as though someone was 'lying in wait for something', but catching anyone would need 'a whole army' (*ibid*). For Soneri, the landscape starts to assume a perplexing and unfamiliar aspect and the allusion to an army references a past in which German soldiers hunted Italian partisans on the slopes of Montelupo. Historical past and the present merge in a disquieting fashion and the discussion around Soneri, concerning the disappearance and reappearance of Paride Rodolfi, leads the Commissario to the realisation that there is a 'growing distance between himself and the people here', and he has 'deluded himself that he could easily re-enter the community' (Varesi 2012).

A sense of isolation and displacement fills his nostalgic yearning to return to the world he left when he was young. The landscape's 'cloudy sky' seems to mirror his mood as it closes off 'every beam of sunlight on the mountains' and the temperature drops as the mountain assumes the role of Gothic backdrop to the events that are to occur in the novel (Varesi 2012). However, this falling, cold darkness is a prelude to gustation, as from the inn in which Soneri is staying the 'scent of *tortelli* with chestnut filling served with mushroom sauce' emanates. This olfactory prompt reawakens Soneri's memories of 'long forgotten dishes and flavours' of his mother and his boyhood spent in this landscape, as well as of his forebears who 'lived season after season ... clearing the juniper bushes from the land and hauling timber from the woods' (Varesi 2012). The natural environment and its food and economic benefits are visibly present in the mention of juniper, which is possibly an allusion to the use of its wood for curing meat and its berries for flavouring dishes. Thus, the resources of necessity have



always been supplied by the mountainous landscape. The meal Soneri enjoys consists of *tortelli* with three kinds of fillings 'chestnut, potatoes and herbs' and is followed by a main course of 'assorted rabbit, boar and goat meats with a little polenta on the side' and finally a dessert of '*crema di zabaione*' (Varesi 2012). Food is directly linked to the landscape and the natural products it supplies whether chestnuts, herbs, mushrooms, potatoes, polenta or the assorted meats and the dessert – a custard of creamed raw egg yolks. The image of this dessert will later return in a description of sunset as fading 'until it took on the colour of a *zabaione*' (Varesi 2012). Throughout the novel, the interrelated 'habitus' of the landscape and peasant food is shown to underlie the past and the present of the village, so that Soneri's memory of place and his identity are held in the act of gustation and its relation to the surrounding natural world.

Central to the necessity of the life of the village remain the Rodolfi family. All daily gossip and chatter, Soneri quickly realises, revolves around this family and he grows increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation. He finds it filled with innuendoes that he cannot share and it has become like 'listening to a foreign language' (Varesi 2012). In his efforts to try and uncover the mystery he senses surrounding the Rodolfis, who seem to appear and disappear, the continual gunfire on the mountain and the unease of the villagers, Soneri finds himself becoming ever more confused. His alienation is compounded when he is told that 'There's so much going on ... It's not easy for someone who doesn't live here to understand' (Varesi 2012). Soneri has indeed gone from being a 'home-insider' to a 'home-outsider' and he acknowledges that his intimate sense of belonging to the village and his wish to re-establish contact is impossible (Pezzotti 2012:17). To overcome his sense of alienation, he reasons that he has only come back on vacation and looking up he sees 'the wooded slopes of Montelupo capped by woolly mist' and feels 'the tug of the mountain' (Varesi 2012). Trudging through this landscape in search of mushrooms, he is 'aware that he was retracing the steps of his father, his grandfather and of who knows how many others' (*ibid*). This sense of historical antecedents reveals the rooted nature of Soneri's attachment to the landscape, which Dylan Trigg argues 'allows memories to be held by that place' (2012:9). Soneri's memories will have a profound effect upon his disaffection and growing estrangement from his sense of self. He locates a few 'horns of plenty' or 'trumpets of death', mushrooms that are dark in colour 'with a tapering stalk' and have a 'sinister appearance' but make 'good eating' (Varesi 2012). Content with his find and wishing to enjoy the sense of freedom he feels in this landscape, Soneri partakes of a meal of parmesan, fruit and *prosciutto* along with wine. As he eats, he remembers his father and the periods of rest allowed during the hunting season, when they partook of a similar frugal meal together. Landscape, food, past and present intertwine and invest place with a personal value and nostalgic attachment that seems to confer on Soneri a sense of self and identity (Trigg 2012:8–9). However, within the woods and mountain, there is the promise of something sinister held in the indifference of this landscape to human existence.

Uncanny landscape: Food and murder

On his return from the mountain, he is informed that Palmiro Rodolfi, the family patriarch, has committed suicide by hanging himself. Soneri's innkeeper friend connects the mushrooms he has gathered directly with this death when he says

Do you know the names we use round here for that mushroom? 'The Black Chanterelle' or even 'the trumpet of death'. That's a better name after what has happened to Palmiro. (Varesi 2012)

An atmosphere of dark tension and suspense seems to be inculcated by the superstitious belief that this black and unattractive mushroom is the dirge-like instrument of a buried corpse or an augury of death. It seems a gustatory warning of the second corpse that will be found. This second death seems to be further presaged in a dialogue between Soneri and a friend Maini about the gunfire on the mountain. Soneri comments that 'in the mist you can do anything you want. It gives you cover', to which Maini responds 'True enough, even for a murder. Nobody can see you' (Varesi 2012). It is these words that cause a 'tremor up his spine' as Soneri experiences an uncanny apprehension of something threatening that is not definite but remains hidden (*ibid*). The landscape has become an alien space where the banality of destruction and the violent dissolution of life and identity can be enacted. The landscape, I would suggest, has become a sentient antagonist and its external alterity starts to undermine and threaten Soneri's inner subjectivity by destabilising his sense of belonging and understanding of the natural surroundings.

Out walking on the mountain, Soneri's nostrils are suddenly filled with a 'stench carried by a gust of wind. It was a stench he knew only too well from having many times in his career smelled it' (Varesi 2012). In an inaccessible hollow, Soneri finds the dead body of Palmiro Rodolfi's son, the disappearing-reappearing, Paride. As he waits for the village police to arrive, Soneri feels a

bitter, eerie chill at the bottom of the hollow, and in the silence it was impossible to miss the obscene swarming of the insects as they fed on the corpse ... It was not the first time he had been affected by the presence of death, but it was the first time it had happened to him in the woods in his home town. He felt inside himself a deep emptiness and an overwhelming bewilderment ... All that remained to him was a useless weight of memories. (Varesi 2012)

The Gothic atmosphere of the landscape is caught in the words 'eerie chill' and 'silence' rendering the effect of the 'obscene insects' as abjectly grotesque and uncanny. The earth and its creatures are eating the decomposing meat of the human body with gustatory appetite. The contamination and dissolving of the borders of what was once a living and discrete corporeality establishes a pervasive and 'free-floating anxiety' in Soneri (Botting 1999:141). The scene is one where identity is no longer respected and the landscape becomes a space where nourishment both sustains and eradicates life



(Michelis 2010:148). Dylan Trigg observes that the uncanny can result in a feeling of 'disempowerment' where the 'unity of self-identity becomes vulnerable' resulting in a lack of ease with the self (2012:28). He goes on to observe that 'no places are more conducive to the uncanny than the places that we cherish ... be it the places in which we dwell or the places of our own body' (2012:28). Though Trigg specifically relates this concept of the uncanny and place to the home in *The Dark Valley*, it is the landscape that leads to Commissario Soneri's sense of inner bewilderment and disempowerment, as the familiar natural landscape has become unfamiliar and alien. The decomposing body uncannily confounds interior and exterior as bodily integrity and subjectivity dissolve. The landscape has become an external threat, yet, at the same time has invaded and started to dismantle Soneri's memories and subjectivity so that the distinction between outer and inner space, human and nature is dissolved (Leffler 2013:147).

Soneri's memories appear 'useless', bound up as they are with his feelings of a loss of connection with the landscape to which he felt he belonged. As Heidegger notes, the uncanny is a feeling aroused when one 'no longer feels at home in his most familiar environment' (1985:289). For Soneri, the sustaining reality and order he felt himself to be a part of has dissolved and his inner world has been overturned 'arousing emotions that vainly seek a [meaningful] referent' (Botting 1999:144). The murdered body has compounded Soneri's sense of exclusion from the social identity of the village and has resulted in his estrangement from the landscape. The uncanny revulsion that he experiences in relation to the landscape, food and memory is reiterated during the removal of the corpse from its location. When the body is moved, the ooze assumes a 'recognisable place in the imagery of Gothic texts' (Botting 1999:151). The ooze and sliminess of the corpse, which is both life-giving and part of the decay of death, disgusts Soneri because this dissolution threatens identity and the integrity of the body.⁹ The seeping and decomposing corpse is seen to be filled with a 'repulsive, writhing tangle of wax-coloured worms now deprived of their sustenance' (Varesi 2012). The landscape, I suggest, is rendered abject and feminine as it is coupled with these oozing unclean fluids. The natural hollow in which the body is found appears to represent a home or womb that is 'fillable from the outside', a space now associated with 'festering putrefaction' (Grosz 1994:206). The natural surroundings are portrayed as an appetitive being that feeds off the dead in a mute and brutal fashion evoking an atmosphere of decay and fleshly slime (Botting 1999:139). This reduction of the body to putrefying matter ensures that it becomes a locus of Gothic horror; the place of the unnameable in which resides the 'void of pure self' (Botting 1999:143-144). The investigating Captain, Bovolenta, expresses the human fascination and disgust aroused by the conflation of the landscape and its eating of the corpse when he says, 'So this is death. It's even uglier than we imagine' (Varesi 2012). He goes on to remark to Soneri that he must remember the spot where there is a

large blood patch because, 'you'll get some fabulous mushrooms here' (*ibid*). In bitter response, Soneri replies 'Any mushrooms that grow here will taste of fat' (*ibid*). The mushrooms that live off the blood represent a form of cannibalistic gustatory exchange between the landscape and the living through the intercession of the dead. Soneri's obvious repulsion and sense of loathing, I argue, reveals how this exterior move to otherness of the human subject is mirrored in his interior disintegrating of a sense of self.

Yet, it is the mystery and uncertainty of Palmiro's suicide and Paride's murder that draw the Commissario into his own unofficial investigation. This need to uncover the secret of these deaths becomes a reclamation of his own past identity. Driven by a sense of apprehension, Soneri stumbles upon the rifle used to kill Paride driven into the mud with the barrels down 'like a biscuit ready to sink to the bottom in a glass of milk' (Varesi 2012). Landscape, food and death meld and this interrelationship is further affirmed as Soneri begins to 'scrape the mud away with a piece of wood, cutting from the top down as though he were slicing ham' (Varesi 2012). The allusion to the Rodolfi's production of such meat, along with the weapon that slaughtered Paride Rodolfi, associates food to the earth of the landscape, so that nourishment and the dissolution of existence are intricately intertwined. Soneri slowly pieces together what has taken place, and the village is exposed as a place founded on lies, deceit, hatred and the banality of monetary greed; a dark, repressed past that has led to suicide and murder. During the Second World War, Soneri is told, Palmiro Rodolfi was in league with the Fascists and allowed to work the black market in foodstuffs which he sold 'at exorbitant prices' to the villagers (Varesi 2012). He also killed two young partisans and then when the Fascists were in retreat he changed sides and obtained similar rights from the Americans. After the war, Palmiro was wealthy enough to establish the *salame* factory that made the villagers economically dependent upon him as employees. Expanding the business, he induced the villagers to part with money, which he promised would receive a very high interest in return. Soneri is told that the villagers downfall has been their greed 'all that stuff about trust in the firm, or that we were all together ... Money, that's what they were after. They'd never have parted with as much as one cent if it hadn't been for the mirage of easy riches' (Varesi 2012). It is these riches that Palmiro's murdered son, Paride, squandered through unsound financial investments. This monetary speculation has lost the villagers their money and their jobs, but allowed certain of Paride's friends to become extremely wealthy on the ruination of the company and the workers. Prosperity and greed, something associated with food and consumption, have led to 'third-generation decadence' and corruption by wealth. Pezzotti, discussing the sociopolitical concerns of much Italian crime fiction, observes that these novels tend to expose the underlying conflict between the

values of the past generation and that of the present, between tradition and modernity that is shown in the depictions of the young's desire to leave the villages for the cities and the better more materialistic lifestyle they perceive awaits them there. (2012:155)

9. One of the most influential texts for the interpretation of this fear, repulsion and disgust in relation to the corpse and the unclean and leaking body is Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.



Commissario Soneri has been brought to the painful realisation that the village is dying because the youth in the village have got 'everything that they want, but they get bored ... as soon as they can they're out of here' (Varesi 2012).

The facade of normality and unity of the village starts to disintegrate into a state that is 'seething with silent hatred and stoking up a dying flame, as people do with the smouldering embers and ashes in which on autumn evenings they bake potatoes' (Varesi 2012).¹⁰ This image of the potato as the poor food of necessity, of the peasant, becomes associated with the landscape and its seasons as well as the ashes and embers of a dying, yet dangerously inflammatory community, one from which the young escape as soon as possible and the old remain, caught in the values and hierarchy of their past.¹¹ The community and its role as a provider of a collective identity, and of Soneri's own sense of self, is destabilised and the detective feels 'many of his most deeply held convictions and memories disintegrate' (Varesi 2012). The fact that Soneri's father worked for the Rodolfi family seems to make his father complicit in the Rodolfi's underhand doings. It is this possibility that eats away at the truth and integrity of Soneri's remembrances of his father and his childhood. He is haunted by remembrances of hunting firewood, chestnuts and mushrooms in the forest and his father's love of the mountain and the landscape. He recalls their perfect accord communicated through 'glances or gestures', and Soneri becomes ever more confused as the familiarity of his past is rendered unfamiliar and alien (Varesi 2012). The landscape has triggered Soneri's experiences in the present, and in so doing has activated memories of the past. It has ensured that Soneri recalls a boyhood of shared meals and familial ties, but this has forced Soneri into an awareness that these memories are no more than a subjective response to a certain place and time in the past.

In trying to find out about the past, Soneri learns that his father used his position as a Partisan to protect Palmiro Rodolfi after the Second World War, thus saving Palmiro from being sentenced to death as a traitor.¹² However, this repressed and hidden past has returned and underlies the murder and suicide in the present, so that 'what the partisans had failed to do, Palmiro had himself carried out many years later' (Varesi 2012). The present no longer coincides with the innocence of Soneri's remembered childhood, associated with his father and the landscape, which he idealistically perceived as representative of a carefree happiness. He now feels totally excluded from the 'one place he should have been able to feel at home' (Varesi 2012). This results in him making a decision 'never to return to the places where he had grown up' (Varesi 2012). Soneri and his father's shared

history are entangled with that of the village community and the Otherness of the landscape, so that the deaths that occur have abraded Soneri's perception of reality, place and memory. As Julian Wolfreys has observed, what is repressed, hidden or forgotten always returns to haunt us across the generations (2002:18–19). For Soneri, the murder and suicide represent 'the past cancelling out the present', where the evil of a repressed history returns to exact revenge on a present that disdains the past's precepts, yet has unduly and immorally profited from them (Varesi 2012).

Conclusion

Luc Boltanski, writing on the origins of the crime genre, discusses how it is the principles of human behaviour with its driving and hidden dark desires that establish a sense of realism within these novels. Yet, this realism, he goes on to say, excludes any possibility of a stable reality because the motives for what happens are always unpredictable (2014:8). In a similar fashion to Bourdieu's exploration of 'habitus', Boltanski links the environment in which crimes are committed to certain organising laws in which exist individuals and other more diverse entities such as class, regionality, politics and economics (2014:10–11). The plot of Varesi's crime novel works on numerous levels through its interweaving of sociopolitical, regional and historical past of the locality in which the action occurs. The rancorous and violent implosion of the small village community in the novel *The Dark Valley* sunders any sense of collective identity that Soneri might feel. The bitter taste of Soneri's personal experience, in both the present and the past, now leaves only regret and anguish as he knows he is 'engaged in a farewell ceremony which had nothing to do with the seasons, but everything to do with himself' (Varesi 2012). This farewell to the landscape and himself is indicative of the unreliable and subjective nature of Soneri's role as focaliser. The exploration of the present crimes has led to an excavation of the past, which reveals an external world based on instability. Soneri's perceptions of this environment are based on his complex bond with the landscape, which acts to transform and direct his alienated and disoriented mental and subjective states. It is the loss of the 'taste' of the landscape, the *sapori della terra*, along with the resurfacing of its hidden past, that leads to Commissario Soneri reassessing his own version of the past that results in a deep-seated regret for the loss of a part of himself.

My aim in this article has been to explore the special interrelationship between the Gothic landscape, food and memory in Varesi's novel. I have suggested that the environment and atmosphere, or the *sapori della terra*, are central to the fabric of the plot and that Varesi engages with the social changes that Pezzotti mentions in relation to Italian crime fiction of the 1990s, but situates these outside the confines of city life and inside a regional world haunted by the trauma of the recent violence of a historic past. Varesi allows this savage past to reside in Soneri's memory of the physical landscape, and with this past's return into the present, the tension and disequilibrium created are re-enacted through the body and identity, not only of the

10. Potatoes have always been regarded as the food of the peasant class, whether in Italy or Ireland, because as a food they were not costly and were easy to cultivate, as well as being filling. Potatoes form an important part of *Cucina Povera*.

11. Though outside the scope of this article, the visual and lyrical descriptions of the landscape can be considered as a part of the fluid Gothic attributes of Varesi's novel that seems to make no distinction between the villagers and the landscape, where human and landscape seem to become merely extensions of one another.

12. The Partisans were the resistance movement that fought against the Fascists and occupying German forces in Italy during the Second World War.



murderer but also of the victim and the investigator. For Soneri, the broadly familiar world of the landscape assumes a creeping Gothic suspense as his investigation into the crimes of the past and present destabilises and undermines his sense of an ordered reality and identity. He has realised that any enquiry was 'a procedure which only superficially aimed at re-establishing order. In fact, the opposite happened. Searching meant creating disorder' (Varesi 2012). In Varesi's novel, while the investigator has 'solved' the crime, the culprit cannot be handed over to the police for justice, leaving the village with no form of restitution. Soneri is left with a past that remains elusive, in which good and evil are seen to blur so that Soneri's investigation only establishes an 'unofficial justice' through its resolution of who committed the murder (Pezzotti 2012:117). As the landscape of the village is blanketed with falling snow, Soneri has come to the realisation that it is

covering everything. Montelupo, ... the Rodolfis, the dull, dishonest village ... the woods and even the mushrooms he had come to collect ... covering a part of his own past, one he was now leaving for good. (Varesi 2012)

The leaving or hiding of his past seems to promise a return of this repressed and hidden aspect of his life. The past is always carried into the present and the future. As Soneri goes on to say to his girlfriend Angela, 'The thing is that I don't recognise myself in the present ... Nor in my future' (Varesi 2012). Soneri has uncovered that which was hidden and in the process has realised that there is little distinction between the 'real' and the 'unreal' because the real is always haunted by the unknowable past.

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Competing interests

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