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THE OPERATION OF THE EYE

Brief Introduction

Since the chapter selected for review belongs to the middle of the manuscript, I am attaching a brief introduction in order to help the reader to make sense of the material. In fact, by this point in the manuscript, political and economic dynamics in Sardinia, with the issues that mostly concern people and market practices have already been introduced. Hence, a reader starting from the middle of the manuscript might be struck by this abrupt start in medias res and will need some time to adjust. Notwithstanding, I chose this chapter because it represents crucial practices of the market that give us an opportunity to consider the common belief in absolute market rationality. It also exemplifies my theoretical orientation, bringing together theory, fieldwork, and the practice of ethnography.

The overall project is about practices of exchange, particularly theft, cheating, and humor, which are elusive for an outsider. As a native ethnographer with family members involved in the fish business, I was able to gain insights otherwise unattainable for a woman and an outsider to this almost all-male community. My American academic training offered ways of de-familiarizing the native context, opening new lines of interpretation. To expound a topic that is somewhat out of the ordinary, I have mobilized the existing anthropological literature, which largely ignores urbanization in Sardinia, and theories from other fields, such as psychoanalysis and literature. This composite methodology mimics the multivocality of the fish market, where a unitary assessment of what is property, legality, and truth is not universal and determined in advance, but it is constructed in a certain context and often determined by that context.



Concern with producing a viable cultural and linguistic translation for the reader mimics market-goers' preoccupation and practices of translation. The market is in fact a place obsessed with translation; and if in my writing, translation and commensuration occurs between pieces of literature, theories, and fragments from the field, in practice people in the fish market are obsessed with exchanging money for things, things for words, stories for reputation. Translation is constant, but the process does not only involve a transformation focusing on content; the material nature of the medium is also emphasized. Naming plays a large role. Nicknames become monopolized not only for their content but for their sounds; vulgar and nonsense rhymes capitalize on the power of the signifier, producing sudden shifts of meaning. Translation mobilizes the literalism of names and humor operates by turning names into signs while everything is circulating: people, goods, money, words, and gestures; everything becomes sign and the tension between name and sign and the play between being seen and not being seen makes all these things possible.

The project involves following trajectories in their multiple points of view, articulations and shapes: in this process an object is followed in its transformation: thus a tuna can be stolen from Japanese nets and then re-sold to the Japanese. A tuna can be fished in Sardinia and end up at the fish market in Tokyo. Corky can steal and sell Attimo's fish to Tony, his boss's across-the-hall competitor; there the fish ends up at half price, while Attimo imagines that it arrived from some unknown cheap supplier in Greece. Fish caught by the Giordano brothers are followed along the wholesale and retail market. Fish in the fish market are followed through their movement in and out of the

fridge cells toward the supermarket and consumption, or in the way they are hoarded transgressively inside the cells.

This work is not, however, the study of alienated objects taken out of context and followed in isolation; context is always emphasized as that which makes and transforms perception and relationships. Thus, in communicative practices, ideology, action, language and value take peculiar concrete forms. The poetics of masculinity are concretized in thievery and humor, while linguistic trajectories and transformations conjured up by particular names and nicknames recreate an ambiguous environment, where people often seem to think in roundabout ways, and mistrust and deception play an important role. This dissertation is not only about fish; it is also about wish. As such, it recalls the roundabout trajectories of desire that psychoanalysis has celebrated. The ravaging and transforming properties of time—that in a commodity like fish leaves such a strong mark—are the epicenter of the miraculous creation of value and its destruction. Following loss there is sometimes restitution, which often has a hallucinatory quality, as in the operation of the eye or in the stuffed fish. These operations, though dream-like procedures, allow some satisfaction within a harsh reality that denies one's desires, while time destroys even what one possesses. Because of the importance of wish and of the roundabout ways desire is satisfied, because not all the practices are always rational, coherent, and logical, psychoanalysis offers a great tool for investigation.

The market is a place for translation, where people meet, negotiate and elaborate different micropolitical, economic and cultural positions. Instead of closing down the investigation into dualistic and essentializing terms (such as the community and its outside, or the North and the South), it is more useful to explore the market, its people

and their relations in all their diversity. Then, it becomes possible to follow their connections outside the gates of the market and their ways of making coherent arguments out of the multiple realities that surround them, bringing together various strands of ideology as they negotiate their interests. The market is a site from which to observe the town. From the market we can also observe the villages, as well as influences coming from the outside: the growth of imports and their consequences for local fishermen, the crisis of fish sellers due to the harsh competition of large supermarkets. We also observe a town inhabited by the contradictions of an economic crisis and a growth of revenues, which in Sardinia do not come from increased production and improved infrastructure; but from State funding, which forged an oversized tertiary sector and increased consumerism.

Following the Introduction (Chapter 1), a series of “Profiles” (Chapter 2) gives a first impression of the world of these men. The people chosen are representative beyond their personal experience; yet the concreteness of their experience is an important testimony. By their words and through a glimpse of their worlds outside the fish market, we can observe ways in which the market is connected to the larger environment.

Chapter 3, “Practices of the Fish Market,” introduces the activities and people of the fish market. I have attempted, by an accumulation of stories and activities, to evoke the busy market place, outline the major activities taking place in the fish market, present the people, and let their voices be heard. In this chapter, communicative practices such as jokes, nicknames and stealing are introduced. These make visible people’s ideas of themselves and their social world. Therefore, in this chapter, I have invoked the theories

of Bourdieu, Foucault and de Certeau as tools for the analysis of people's actions—the way they negotiate power and how they find a place of their own.

Chapter 4, “The Operation of the Eye” [l'operazione dell'occhio], describes one of the most fascinating practices of the fish market, involving “plastic surgery” of fish, a dissimulation which allowed the old fish to be sold after its time in the market. This practice mostly belongs to the past—to a time in which sales were slower and the market relied mostly on the scanty local fish. Then, it made sense for sellers to waste time in delicate rejuvenating operations on their fish. Among marketgoers, it is not entirely clear whether the eye operation was practiced as a joke or for gain, but older marketgoers avidly, proudly and nostalgically recount it. These stories resonate with Benjamin's story of Scherlinger and Danto's theorization of the work of art.

Chapter 5, “Markets and Economy,” introduces the setting and provides a brief history of the fish market and its position in global and local perspectives. By using articles of the local newspaper *L'Unione Sarda* and political-economic literature, this chapter offers insights into how exchange has evolved over the past fifty years and how regional and global issues are interrelated, producing the economic conditions of dependence and crisis that affect marketgoers.

Chapter 6, “Giordano's Fish,” is a picture story providing background and illuminating the trajectory that local fish follow before arriving at the market. It also attempts to shed some light on the fishermen's world.

Chapter 7, “Stealing in The Fish Market,” brings together marketgoers' ideas about stealing and anthropological interpretations of animal theft, vendetta and kidnapping in the Mediterranean and in the interior of the island. Both the ethos of

masculinity and of men's valor, stealing, and the ideology of equality, which are for many scholars the foundation of shepherds' traditions of negative reciprocity, are useful tools for understanding theft in an urban, capitalized environment such as the fish market.

Chapter 8, "Analysis of a Theft: Attimo, Corky, and The Cat," describes a theft in terms of its play with temporality. There is also an exploration of the similarities between this episode of fish theft with a work of fiction, "The Purloined Letter" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Chapter 9, "A Tuna's Trajectory," provides another picture story from the fishermen's world, describing the fishing of a tuna and its destination. Tuna, unlike other Sardinian fish, is exported, and can travel as far as the Japanese market. This chapter therefore renders visible the island's material relation to the global economy.

Chapter 10, "Joking: Its Meanings and Dynamics," explores humorous practices involving scatology, sexuality, tricking and stealing. Ultimately, I suggest, humorous themes seem to be reducible to the master concept of virility, as humorous practices endlessly dwell upon the ways of being a man and of being good or bad in the process. In this chapter, specific humorous practices such as horseplay, nicknaming and humorous conversations are described and explicated. They are revealed as ambivalent practices, which can promote or hinder business, by playing on the borderline between profit and expenditure, creation and destruction. In humorous practices, good and bad are often jokingly made to mark the gender divide and if incompetent men are often debased by being called feminine, competent women can only be re-gendered, jokingly, in masculine terms. Whatever the symbolic or economic profit that the joke creates, it would seem that humor marks the joker's power, letting him be the arbiter and judge of the event.



The Conclusion seeks to be revolutionary rather than reactionary. Thus, instead of bringing together once more the threads of argument by summarizing the past and what has been said, I attempt a leap into the future, abandoning secure ports and letting the imagination shape a different world. Perhaps, setting off from the imaginary, a new trajectory of social anthropology may be enunciated.

Main Identity

From

Attimo

To:

Anthrofish

Sent:

Friday, December 15, 2000 11:56 AM

Subject:

ziu lollottu

Ω

Swish-swish-swish! Anthrofish!

When 'gnazio pomponi was little
he was very little. This was a blessing for
his father, the old uncle lollottu (who had just died).
Uncle lollottu sold fish at retail's with a scale *stradera*
(called in sardinian *sa romana*); I mean the one with the chains.
His son 'gnazio helped him in his activity. The old father used
to prepare many packets of half a kilo, one kilo and a kilo and a
half of dead eels and of various dead and rotten fish and put
them below the counter, where 'gnazio also hid. When a
client wanted to buy a kilo of eels, uncle lollottu, to satisfy him,
chose all the best eels for him and put them on the scale's dish.
Simultaneously addressing the client, he used to shout "A kilo of
good eels!!!" This was a sign for little 'gnazio who squatted
underneath to take the packet of nice eels from the scale and
replace it with a pack of dead or rotten eels. Sometimes the chap
would make a mistake and instead of putting eels he would put a
different kind of fish or a different weight, and pronto! A kick of
old lollottu to his son, who was hidden underneath the counter.

Uncle¹ lollottu would also shout his correction:
I said a kilo of nice eels! Growing up 'gnazio became so good
that he would substitute the glassy eye of a living
sepia with the lifeless eye of a rotten fish.
Then he invited the client: ladies and gentlemen,
look at this very very fresh fish,
look at
these eyes!!

We are well and so we hope are you

Squish-squish-squish! An-thro-fish!

¹ Fictive kin, indicates familiarity.



4. The Operation of the Eye.²

In the very oldest regions of Tlön, it is not an uncommon occurrence for lost objects to be duplicated. Two people are looking for a pencil; the first one finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but more in keeping with his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and, even though awkward in form, are a little larger than the originals. Until recently, the *hrönir* were the accidental children of absent-mindedness and forgetfulness. [...] The methodical development of *hrönir*, states the eleventh volume, has been of enormous service to archeologists. It has allowed them to question and even to modify the past, which nowadays is no less malleable or obedient than the future. One curious fact: the *hrönir* of the second and third degree, that is, the *hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, and the *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön*—exaggerate the flows of the original. [...] Stranger and sometimes more perfect than any *hrön* is sometimes the *ur*, which is a thing produced by suggestion, an object brought into being by hope. [...]. Things duplicate themselves in Tlön. They tend at the same time to efface themselves, to lose their detail when people forget them. The classic example is that of a stone threshold which lasted as long as it was visited by a beggar, and which faded from sight on his death. Occasionally, a few birds, a horse perhaps, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater”

—Borges “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

Q: Why don't you starve in the desert?

A: Because of all the *sand which is* there

—Culler *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*

“There are various factors that determine a fish's value,” Attimo claims,

The excellence of the meat and its freshness, the quantity of fish present in the market, and the customs of the area. First quality fish, like mullets, white breams, gilthead, soles, dentex, sea bass and sea breams, have always been expensive, because of limited quantities and good quality. In the last ten years, markets have been filled with sea bass and gilthead from the farms, so even if the fish remains first quality, its price has dropped from 30,000 or 40,000 liras to 10,000 or 15,000 liras.

² Almost all names, family names and nicknames are pseudonyms, while original nicknames are in italics.

Many retailers and wholesalers disagree with Attimo, maintaining that fish from the farm cannot compete with wild fish, and therefore cannot be considered first quality.³

“The value of the fish,” Attimo continues,”

also depends on the local traditions. In Sardinia there were once many fishponds (peschiere) that produced gray mullets, “sparlotte” [diplodus anularis], lithognathus mormyrus and eels. This fish was excellent when it was fished in the right season, that is, in autumn and winter. Now that fishponds are almost non-existent, we import this kind of fish from the Adriatic or from Orbetello in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Therefore, we keep our culinary tradition, but we buy the fish from people that do not hold the same tradition and therefore sell the fish much cheaper. Value depends on the offer/demand basis. For instance: When we offer small quantities of sardines in their best season, this vulgar fish almost reaches the price of the farmed gilthead or the sea bream. Or again, in the summer when there is good demand and little catch of octopus, this good can be sold at Lire 12.000 or 13.000 per Kilo at the wholesale, while in the spring the price rocks down at Lire 4,000 per Kilo.

Value of the fish fluctuates, depending on the changing season, tastes and supplies of fish; in Chapter 5 “Giordano’s Fish: A picture Story,” we see how the Giordano brothers— the fishermen supplying the commission agent *The Chemist*— were able to transform an undefined sandy mass into precious fish. We also heard their complaints about the diminished value of their catch, in these times of market globalization.

Certainly, freshness has a capital role in the establishment of price in the markets of

³ Here is the comment of a Cagliariitan customer: “Look, neither the ‘Chemist’ with his ‘drugs’ nor ‘Head of Beef’s Dick’ with his second quality fish are going to cheat on me ... I want fresh fish at a fair price... fresh fish from the sea and not gilthead and sea bass fed with chicken... it is better to get some fresh roasted “sparlotte” [diplodus anularis] and “zerri” than sea bass that tastes like chicken. Once, ‘Head of Beef’s Dick’ cheated me with some mullet with gasoline taste... but I made him return me the money, what an idiot, and after that he didn’t see me anymore at his counter;-)”

[balla chi a mei non mi frigat ne su "potecariu" cun is ‘mixinas,’ ne ‘conca'e zirogna’ cun su pisci a scarara... deu bollu pisci friscu a su pretzu giustu... pisci friscu de mari e non carina e spirritu pascias cun su pappai fattu cun sa petza de pudda... mellus sa sparedda e su giarrettu friscu arrustiu chi cudda carina a sabori de pudda. Conca'e zirogna una borta m'iat frigau cun lissa a sabori de nafta... ma gi mi d'iat torrau su dinai, balossu chi non est atru, e pustis non m'at biu prus ;-)” (Danix’s e-mail comment on “<sa-Limba@uni-koeln.de>” Listserv, 11 Feb 2002).

Cagliari. (But the sense of freshness is contextually defined. When Attimo visited the fish markets in New York City, he was disappointed and defined them altogether as putrescent.) Even a beautiful dentex loses value in a short time, finally dropping out of its commodity status when it becomes old. Nevertheless, people like *The Chemist* are particularly reluctant to take into consideration the time/value parameter, and avoid letting their fish go at the market price. Sellers of fish are expert in presenting their goods under the best light. Before the massive importations, when sales were slower and fish less plentiful, sellers engaged in all sorts of tricks to make their goods appear fresh; then, preparation of the fish for sale had an artisanship quality. A seller might ask a butcher friend to use some animal blood to make up in brilliant red some sepia or octopus that had acquired a brownish hue, or to color up putrescent gills. By these tricks, the signs of time are hidden, and the fish can pass for fresh for a longer time. Fish that was bony and emptied by sea fleas could be reshaped and refilled with newspapers that the buyer would only notice much later, when he had left the market and could not do anything about it. Among the many tricks, the most celebrated in market dwellers' stories is "the operation of the eye," which was a sort camouflage to make old fish look fresh. Since the eye is the first part of the fish to betray decay, vendors would extract eyes from any cheap fish, from an occhione for instance, provided that it had transparent glassy eyes (a sign of freshness) and insert them in the ocular cavities of expensive but old fish that had remained unsold, often a "pagaro" [pagrus pagrus] or a dentex. Thus, the fish had another chance to live in the market.

Yet, the purpose of these tricks is unsettled in the fish market, as sellers do not agree on the reason for their tricks, when, for fun and pride, they recount their stories.

According to some, the operations were performed to trick the buyer and make some money out of nothing; for others, tricks were only meant for play and laugh, and the player had no intention of taking advantage of a client; most probably, both play and gains were involved. Nowadays, this attitude toward the manipulation of value has ceased and is seen as childish and certainly it belongs to a market in which time, space and the flow of goods were of a different kind. Even in the stalls where business is poor and time abounds, such complicated tricks are abandoned, and only sprinkling fish, washing it in water and moving boxes in ways that mimic fish leaping help rejuvenate fish. In addition, the increased control by the State on the sales and the risk of fines is a deterrent against tricking. Because of better transportation, better standards of living and the diffusion of fish demand, retailers from the villages have now become good clients in the wholesale fish market of Cagliari, coming to buy on a regular basis. In these new circumstances, trustworthy relationships between buyers and sellers have developed. In the hope of increasingly long-term business relationships, many sellers consider it unwise to trick.⁴ As the cosmetic operations of the fish occurred quite often, however, it is surprising that for people of the market they did not become a stale joke. Instead, they were ceaselessly repeated and perhaps, from the seller's point of view, the operation, as a compulsion to repeat, also aimed to master the difficult concept of value and its disappearance by resorting to an artificial manipulation of the signs of aging: *fort-da* (Freud 1962: 14).

⁴ In his book *Trust* Gambetta remarks that trusting relationships tend to develop when partners in business see that there are long-term advantages to be pursued in their relation. Instead, if they do not mean to do business over time, then they might have less interest in promoting trust and might consider cheating (Gambetta 1988: 37).



The retailer The Cat employed cosmetic tricks for pure fun, and did not intend to trick anyone. Instead, Attimo admits to having employed these tricks for gain, deceiving his clients. The position in which Attimo and The Cat stand vis-à-vis their altered fish reminds one, in many respects, of Danto's discussion of the difference between "representation" and "imitation" which he highlights when discussing, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the nature of the work of art. For Plato, Danto claims, art is imitation. As imitation, art mimics the real (particularly the beautiful) in a way that tends to obliterate the means of production. The latter allows the spectator to forget its nature as simulacrum, perceiving the object almost as real, as it produces in the senses the same sensations as did the original: "If illusion is to occur, the viewer cannot be conscious of any properties that really belong to the medium, for to the degree that we perceive that it is a medium, illusion is effectively aborted" (Danto 1994: 151). In imitation, as well as in illusionism, the artist delivers a message while hiding his medium: "so art is the message and the medium is nothingness, much in the way in which consciousness is held, by Sartre for instance, to be a kind of nothingness. It is not part of the world but that through which the world is given, not being given itself" (Danto 1994: 152). In modern times, when, according to Danto, a strong sense of reality develops, mimesis loses its primacy in art to give way to representation. The latter's purpose is the conscious exploration of the boundaries between art, philosophy and the world. Then art, instead of reproducing the real by mirroring, duplicating and denoting an object, consciously and pleasurably plays in the gap between reality and something else that contrasts with it (Danto 1994: 79), being not only a content, but



showing something about that content, thus bringing into light a possible discussion of the medium (Danto 1994: 148).

If we look at the altered fish from Danto's perspective, Attimo seems to operate according to the parameters of illusionism, as Attimo, in his fish operation, used to collapse the old valueless dentex with the fresh (also valueless) occhione and by their combination, with the re-contextualization of the eye, was able to create a counterfeit "fresh expensive fish." In his operation, he would hide his maneuvers and deliver a product whose value was a fake. Neither the old valueless eye nor the body of the cheap fresh fish survived the operation, as only their forgetting and concealment allowed for the appearance (or counterfeiting) of value.

Attimo's production, by defying the natural law of temporality, bringing "alive" a dead fish and putting value where there is none, marks his omnipotence. Yet, it is also a sign of powerlessness as he uses make-belief and trickery to promote what in the end can only be an illusion. However, it is an illusion that pays and allows the fish to circulate toward consumption, as Attimo is able to produce value out of putrefaction. The Cat's case is more complicated, as his art seems more at the service of philosophy and self-reflection than commerce. If we believe what he says, that when performing the operation of the eye, people were invited to spot his trick and enjoy it, his playful fish was not a trick to promote the sale but functioned as a pun and as such it demanded to be discovered and laughed about, not to be hidden, like Attimo's fish. Unlike Attimo, who uses the time of work to deceive the work of time, The Cat misuses his time of work to bring attention to the process of the unfolding of time and its manipulable signs of value. While Attimo hid the medium to deliver a message of



illusion, The Cat brought into light the play with the medium and the illusion of value. It would seem that The Cat's fish operation was not meant to create illusion for gain, but was a metaphor.

In the operation of the fish, each item is in dynamic transformation. A valuable expensive fish, such as a fresh dentex, is only a remembrance or a wish at the moment of the play. Then, the fish seller has to enchant reality, fetishizing and transforming the nothingness he possesses into the valuable object of his and the others' desire. His dentex, which was valuable once, having a sign of freshness in its glassy and vivid eye (+e), now presents a reddish eye (-e) that marks it as old and valueless. However, besides its eye, the old dentex's body could pass for fresh and valuable (+b) as the signs of time in its body make a late appearance. Then, the eye, marking alone its un/freshness (-e,+e), can become a valuable object in the manipulation of value. Thus, a fresh eye taken from a valueless fish, such as an occhione, can denote freshness and value when it is re-contextualized in the old dentex's body:

$V = (+bD + eD) =$	\$\$\$	\$D Fresh valuable dentex (past and wish)
$-V = (+bD - eD) =$	0	0D Old valueless dentex (harsh reality)
$-V = (-bO - eO) =$	0	0O Fresh but valueless body and eye of occhione (harsh reality)

Attimo collapses the boundaries of reality and wish in a single formula:

$$V = (+bD + eD) = (+bD \pm eO) = \$\$ \5$

While Attimo proceeds “economically,” yielding to the imperatives of the market, The Cat complicates the picture in a profusion of metaphors in which language and reality play; valueless and valuable remain suspended in an unceasing species-crossing, as the altered fish is neither one fish nor another: it stands as a third fish which has not forgotten its origins. It is “a valueless dentex as a valueless occhione as a worthy mongrel as a worthy dentex.” Each metaphor keeps its identity and enlightens the others. For the altered fish, to be *and* not to be, that is the question.

When discussing paintings depicting Napoleon in Roman attire, Danto makes a similar case. In these paintings, the identity of the model and the subject are not collapsed and their combination powerfully sums up the attributes of the other, without exchanging identity. Thus, Napoleon remains Napoleon and gains the attributes of power and grandiosity of the Roman Empire. The result is a “transfiguration rather than transformation: Napoleon does not turn into a Roman emperor, he merely bears the attributes of one” (Danto 1994: 168). What then do the fish gain in their metaphoric transfiguration? The surgery creates a slippage that brings attention to time, desire, exchange and the item of exchange as both a repository of value and a medium for its manipulation. The Cat’s fish lays bare the fact that value is ultimately

⁵ Puns like “Famillionaire,” “Lard militaire” and “Merdecine,” that have in their bodies the kernel belonging to another realm that transforms them, present similarities with the altered fish. In fact, both these puns and the altered fish have an intact “body” in which a particle is inserted. This particle has the power of transformation and transvaluation. Thus, the decontextualized eye corresponds to the excessive “million,” that transforms the generous but presumptuous Rockefeller’s manners from familiar to familiar, while the military arts are transformed, by a “d,” into military fat. By an “r” medicine becomes entangled with excrement.



not a content held in the fish. Instead, value lies in its surfaces; it is a play of signs, which people take for universal and real, forgetting how value is normative and relational. Thus, they can buy and eat a week-old fish and even be satisfied with it (as long as they do not realize the trick or get a stomachache);⁶ they would not buy an edible cheap *occhione* merely for socio-cultural dislike but its eye, put in an old dentex body, would bewitch them, inducing them to buy an old valueless fish. Thus, when people assess what is good, fresh and what constitutes a delicacy, they are only talking of simulacra, which the altered fish brings to the fore. If the operated fish now possesses a glassy and transparent eye, the buyer's eye retains his Saulian scales of blindness. The Cat's fish is a fish about fish—metafish—a fish about language, value and time; it is not, primarily, an item for exchange. It is a metalinguistic device whose main purpose is not, like daily language and commerce, the circulation of goods and meanings though the effacement and forgetting of the medium. Rather, its primary task is, like Danto's art, *aboutness* and self-reflection, doubling itself to unveil the processes of time, exchange and value. The Cat's fish is a pun.

In *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Attardo offers a clear explanation of the linguistic structure of a pun which we can use to understand The Cat's pun of the fish, even if the latter is made out of images and concepts rather than phonemes. Puns, Attardo claims, are effective because people have a general belief that language is not arbitrary and that from similarity of shape corresponds similarity of meaning and vice versa. The pun exploits language by bypassing its use and sense in the "normal" world by opening up to another dimension which, being incongruous and yet somewhat

⁶ "Mmm! Martell is always Martell!" Attimo's guest would knowledgeably exclaim, to his nodding and smiling host, as he sipped the precious drink. He did not know that he had been drinking all along a cheap imitation which Attimo would pour for him into an old Martell's bottle.

meaningful, brings laughter. Attardo goes at length through numerous examples and taxonomies but essentially, he defines a pun as a conscious linguistic construction and contamination in which two strings of words, phonemes or linguistic expressions of same or similar sound are brought together in such way that a relationship between their senses is attained. The pun can be announced explicitly or its meaning can be inferred, but it is important that both senses and their ambiguity be maintained (Attardo 1994: 130-134). The latter makes the interpreter perceive that “something is wrong with the text” and leads him not to trust it and entertain it with a *non-bona-fide* stance (Attardo 1994: 130). Mistrust is fundamental to proceeding backward vis-à-vis one’s first interpretation (S1) and to confronting it with a second one (S2). Thus, a connector and a disjunctive function in the texts to catch the critical attention of the listener who realizes his error of judgment and is enabled to grasp the intertextual allusion (Attardo 1994: 149). Thus, the context that generally dissolves language ambiguity is in the pun crafted to enable a suspension of two meanings, connecting two worlds and contexts and allowing for a space in which something can be and not be at the same time. After resolution, the two senses can appear unrelated,⁷ S1 can force its connotation onto S2⁸ or vice versa,⁹ or both can coexist.¹⁰

The Cat connects two fish with different value and age into one, but leaves their membership in a class ambiguous enough to address marketgoers’ suspicion. The

⁷ Here is an example: “Why did the cookie cry? / Its mother had been away for so long. [a wafer]” (Attardo 1994: 128).

⁸ “Newslitter” (Attardo 1994: 137).

⁹ “Entre deux mots il faut toujours choisir le moindre” (Ibidem).

¹⁰ “Bassompierre was a prisoner at the Bastille. While reading, he flipped the pages of his book hastily. The warden asked him what he was looking for, and Bassompierre replied: “I am looking for a passage, but I cannot find it” (Ibidem).

body of the old fish, the altered one, and the fresh fish are almost the same while the fresh eyes are like “homophones” in shape with very different meaning. In this complex pun, more than two strings of expressions are involved, and dis/connective clues are diffused in the punning fish, leaving its final membership suspended. In the same way as “metalanguage suspends the rules of the object language” (Attardo 1994: 168), so the fish pun blocks the sale, introducing an unreal space which might be only for fun but is meaningful, leaving all its meanings suspended in an oscillation which moves the object from gold to litter and vice versa. In the end it fails or renounces the possibility of eliciting the leap toward gain that Attimo, by contrast, is able to achieve.

The discovery of the trick in The Cat’s fish (which perhaps from an excess of make-up was rendered a parody of Attimo’s counterfeiting) allows for a dialogue between the different fish and brings merriment. Attimo forecloses the existence of the valueless fish to give priority only to a saleable fish that had the illusion of value. The Cat’s fish is a parody both of time and the remedies that defeat the work of time. It is an attempt to play with value and to play with its signs, overriding the market’s practical purpose.

However, we cannot praise The Cat for his didactic intentions and accuse Attimo of dishonesty for breaking the laws of the market, because, ironically, the way in which Attimo produces value is similar to the process at work in the generation of value of any commodity, at least as it is envisaged by Keenan in his reading of Chapter One of Marx’s *Capital*.

In “The Point is to (Ex)Change it: Reading ‘Capital’ Rhetorically,” which I discuss in the Conclusion, Keenan explores Marx’s analysis of the commodity, reaching the



conclusion that the commodity, in order to be a thing that is first and foremost exchangeable, has to go beyond its use. Only through this abstraction can things that are utterly different be exchanged, while abstraction both de- and re-animates exchange. Yet, this institutionalized process of exchange and substitution is imposed upon the matter, violating its nature—like an operation of the eye. It would seem that what commodities have in common could only be defined negatively, as the erasure of their difference, that is, by abstraction. Commodities then, in exchange, operate like ghostly placeholders:

The turn to fetishism finally grants us the rhetorical room to theorize this placeholder prejudice. There is nothing at once particular and common that an abstraction could substitute for, no common trait: if use values (or productive labors) have nothing in common, by definition (being *only* ways of use or working themselves), and thus requiring their radical (subatomic) erasure, doesn't the so-called common or third term have to be substituted for nothing? The *Genspenst* that Marx calls abstraction is a substitution for nothing, which in constituting the nothing as a something that could be substituted for, institutes an originary simulation of exchange between something (common abstract) and nothing. But the institution is structured like a substitution. It looks like the positing of an improper name (a common noun)—say “exchange –value,” or just “value,” or “abstract human labor,” or more precisely “human”—for something which has no name of his own (Keenan 1997: 129).

The third term that allows exchange between heterogeneous commodities to take place, making its appearance in the moment of abstraction is a ghost, a *résidu* which allows, albeit negatively, for the objects to be exchanged. The whole use-value of the consumable body of the commodity must be forgone in order to allow exchange, and the body (as sign) can circulate in a system of mutually assessing values. Total abstraction is not possible and yet it takes place; it is the operation that prepares the thing for exchange. This procedure of forced substitution in which a word is wrongly inserted for another is called catachresis.



This is what makes exchange possible while exchangers, unconcerned with the trick at its core, engage in it as if it were natural (Keenan 1997: 131-132). Could we then posit a similarity between Attimo's play and the play of value in Keenan's commodity? Attimo's tricks should not be considered transgressive and deceitful; they rather mimic the principles of commodity exchange.

For The Cat's altered fish, there is no commodity exchange or creation of value, and his attempts at restoring the fish's past only mark the impossibility of that move.¹¹ The latter recall the process of the *mémoire involontaire*. Carol Jacobs discusses Benjamin's reflections on the Proustian image, claiming that the *mémoire involontaire* does not restore a past in its plenitude, as there can never be coincidence and direct access to real life. Instead, the work of memory is akin to the work of forgetting, dream and non-coincidence. It allows for a gap of interpretation between image and life and brings the shock of a voided life, as the pairing and mirroring of aging and remembered youth does not facilitate a re-appropriation of the past, but loss of life (Jacobs 1999: 39-58). Benjamin uses the image of a sock from the laundry chest to describe the Proustian play of emptying the self; the sock with which children play appears as a bundle and a pouch, and children never get bored of this transformation. Jacobs' comments on this image illuminate The Cat's play:

[...] The stocking contains nothing but its rolled-up self. The apparent contents do not exist; the outside surface only seemed to assure access to a full interior. The rolled-up stocking that functions as a sign of its own fullness is now emptied

¹¹ Thus Jacobs presents Benjamin's writing of origins: "It is the performance of a dialectic in which the reader is bound to see double: both the gesture toward a restoration of what seems to have come before and, precisely within that move towards reestablishment, the incompleteness of that gesture. Singularity never arises in and of itself but only appears as a failure of a repetition that can never be brought about, at least not completely" (Jacobs 1999: 9).



of its apparent meaning: it has become an empty sign, signifying nothing beyond itself and serving no purpose. It is a mere ornament. But the frivolous nature of this sign does not surprise the children. For them, the reaching into the stocking is a game. They know from the start that the apparent container is empty. It is not their desire for a content which they have difficulty in satisfying: they are obsessed, rather, with the goal-less desire to repeat the game of transforming pocket and content into a stocking (Jacobs 1999: 44).

Both Attimo and The Cat are creators of a new fish; however, they take a different stance vis-à-vis their creation. Attimo denies paternity, and by erasing his authority and “quoting” the original (in a performative act), he creates the illusion of the past collapsing with the present: the original fish has revived and the old dentex has become a valuable fresh fish. Instead, The Cat does not take part in fraudulent exchange, focusing instead on the trickery of the fish seller’s omnipotent engendering. He lays down his tricks and laughs about them, losing time, productivity and gain. Instead of taking advantage of a system of signs which could make him richer, as Attimo does, The Cat takes a critical jocular distance, attempting to sabotage the system from its interior. To the linear time and circulation that Attimo exploits, The Cat substitutes a dead time of siren-like sounds, evoking Benjamin’s Scherlinger, the protagonist of Benjamin’s “Myslowitz-Braunschweig-Marseilles: The Story of a Hashish-*Rausch*”¹² (Benjamin 1972: 729-737).

It is said that Scherlinger was once close to making a million, but like The Cat, he lost his profit by defying time and reality and pursuing language and its doubles.

“Myslowitz-Braunschweig-Marseilles” is a story of the renunciation of fortune and goods

¹² For this story was first published in November 1930 *Uhu*. I was not able to find an English version in paper. I am using James Thompson’s translation, Internet edition, and can be found at <http://www.wbenjamin.org/story.html>. The German edition can be found in Benjamin’s collected works: 1972. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV: 2: 729-737, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauer eds. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.

and of refraining from consumption. When wealth is within reach, it becomes valueless for the protagonist. The story describes the wanderings of Scherlinger in Marseille, who, after having inherited a discrete sum of money, leaves his Germany for France. His money remains deposited in a bank, where the junior director oversees his interests. If a profitable investment comes up, the director contacts him, and, by a telegram signed with a code name, Scherlinger can authorize the banker to act on his behalf. Choosing a codename for himself is the occasion of Scherlinger's first paralysis: "After all, it's not always that easy to just slip into a strange name, like a costume" (Benjamin 1972: 730).¹³ "Braunschweiger" is the chosen name and Scherlinger reflects on the consequences of naming, as words and worlds become connected and might produce unexpected effects. The story goes on with Scherlinger's whereabouts in the town of Marseille. The story is charged with correspondences and duplicities that intensify after Scherlinger eats his hashish. It is then that a dispatcher informs him that the bank director is waiting for his permission to purchase Royal Dutch. However, because of his intoxication, his mind wanders between a tendency toward the accomplishment of his errand to the post office, where he has to send an OK to the bank's junior director with his codename, disappointment for being disturbed, and dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of his hashish. As he leaves the hotel for the post office, places are transfigured and duplicate themselves under the effect of the drug. Thus, wigs, toupees and powder boxes in a barber shop become piles of bonbons and cakes; he discovers he has a gift for physiognomy and sees places as they change relationally to the people inhabiting them. As binary structures assessing meaning and value blurs, all existing beings become

¹³ Even though I am quoting the Internet English translation, I am also providing the page number of the quote in the German edition.

doubtful and contaminated. While waiting for the opening of the bank, he orders a black coffee at the bar; silently, his brown hand holds the cup, and an illumination seizes him. “Braunschweiger,” his code name, finally reveals its appropriateness and necessity: It is brown and silent [German: braun and schweigend], like himself:

The ‘open sesame’ of this name which should conceal all riches in its interior had disclosed itself to me. There must have seemed no end to the compassion with which I was now smiling as I reflected for the first time on the Braunschweigers who live there in their little central German city without knowing anything of the magical powers with which their name has been endowed. (Benjamin 1972: 737¹⁴).

On a bench [German Bank], he waits and naps for the opening of the office and he wakes too late, at the news of the sudden rise of Royal Dutch. By then, he had lost his occasion.

Both *The Cat* and Scherlinger lose themselves in the world of representation, doubling signs, and as a consequence they disempower them in the world. Scherlinger loses himself chasing his visual and linguistic puns, which both distract him from his real purpose and reproduce it symbolically, but not effectively. *The Cat*’s play on time does not rush to reach time’s speed and to recreate the qualities that time has unraveled in a rejuvenated old fish. Instead of blindly mimicking the illusion that the normative system offers, by doubling this illusion (becoming, as Attimo’s fish, a shadow’s shadow), *The Cat* reveals that illusion. Like Ulysses, both *The Cat* and Scherlinger could have bound

¹⁴ See note 50 on page 172.

themselves to the mast of reality and purposeful action, binding language to it; instead, they followed the sirens of language, and, for a while, lost themselves in it.

Scherlinger's intoxicated enlightenment follows an exploration of the contradictions of the city boundaries, with its warehouses full of goods and the poverty of its inhabitants. It also follows an astonishing apparition of commodities in the bazaars of Marseille, which in their occurrence recall Marx and Keenan's description of capital as "a monstrous collection of commodities"¹⁵ (Keenan 1997: 103):

A mountain range of 'souvenirs' stretches all along the bazaars here from one end of the port to the other. Seismic forces have heaped up this massif of glass flux, limestone and enamel where the ink-wells, steamships, anchors, mercury columns and sirens intermix. To me it was as if the pressure of a thousand atmospheres which this whole world of images was urging and convulsing and staggering beneath were the same force which tests itself in the firm hands of a sailor on women's thighs and women's breasts after a long voyage; the voluptuousness which urges a red or blue velvet heart from out of the mineral world of a shell pyx so that it may be pricked by pins or brooches; the same force which quakes the streets on payday (Benjamin 1972: 731).¹⁶

Once Scherlinger had taken his poison, his movement becomes limited, and as paralysis overcomes him, he discovers that there is no need to hustle in the world to possess worldly treasures, as words are in themselves warehouses full of heaps of all kinds.

Language becomes magic and a word like "Braunschweiger" can be his "open sesame."

¹⁵ Wealth appears as... a monster: something immense, colossal, but also a thing compounded of elements from different forms, wild but not natural, certainly not domesticated, simply thrown together into a heap, grown beyond the control of its creators. [...] Something(s) assembled or collected, but in such a way that the parts do not add up to a whole: nothing but parts, unnatural and uncommon, *démesuré*. Aberrant, deviant, the monstrous is the form of the appearance of wealth, the way it signifies itself, as something else (Keenan 1997: 104).

¹⁶ See note 50 on page 172.

By this turn, paradoxically, the container becomes the contained, as in Benjamin's image of the sock, and heaps of goods and warehouses of commodities that contained a fortune are now contained in words of fortune. Scherlinger lets his economic riches go and lets himself be blessed with their linguistic remainders. So does The Cat, renouncing the selling of fish, paralyzing it in his stall and making it an object of contemplation and laughter instead of exchange. *The Chemist*, a wholesaler and commission agent holding sales at the wholesale fish market, relates to his fish sales in similar ways. He resists exchange and is not content to give up his fish to the client while keeping its remainder, the money he would earn. For him, his fish is always more valuable than the market price. Thus, he refuses to sell as much as he can and hoards fish in his cells. He is willing to sell it at the asking price only when the fish is old. By then, his fish cannot retain its original price in the market. What *The Chemist* and The Cat resist is the idea that the fish has its value only in circulation. Outside of it, as when *The Chemist* keeps it stored in his warehouse for too long, it is dead matter. Thus, value (or shall say, the fetish?) lies in another sort of renunciation not in the abandonment of the worldly things for the warehouses of words, or in *The Chemist's* renunciation of exchange in a paralyzing grip on the object of exchange. Value lies in renunciation of the good toward exchange, and refusal to enter in the labyrinthine experience of the warehouse of words. Instead, words should be exchanged in communication and should be bound 'economically' to exchange. Attimo is a master of the latter and does not lose an opportunity to let the fish go, at the cost of making it up for the client, as it is better to substitute the demanded fish with its material "synonym" or "homonym" or even a "catachresis," rather than avoid exchange at all. In the same way, Attimo does not lose

himself in the word's warehouses, but only fetches from the linguistic warehouse what best suits him in furthering communication and gain. Words are not, as they are for Scherlinger, warehouses in themselves, but, as we will see in Chapter 9, they can be mobilized actively as symbolic capital for furthering exchange and building a reputation, or when a "phonological context"¹⁷ allows a (symbolically and economically) profitable change of context.

The Cat and *The Chemist* are often blind to these linguistic and economic possibilities, yet Attimo's stance, which is often so attentive and swift in exploiting symbolic possibilities, has its own blindness. Sometimes, for him the linguistic material fails to bring together the reality it should evoke. Mechanically, he makes jokes against his will, stranded as he is in his obsessions about fish, time and exchange. Then words and things are not any more the manifold storage of all meanings, but inversely, all words and things have become fish as he tries to seek profit for his business everywhere. Therefore, Attimo seems to be interrupting the game with Benjamin's sock and its ceaseless play of meaning and form.

It was mid August and we were getting in the car to go to the wholesale fish market. It was before dawn and falling stars stormed the sky, but all Attimo could see and think of was fish and his business. He could barely hear me when I was pointing to the falling stars above us:

"Daddy, daddy, look at the *stelle* [stars]! How many *stelle* there are today!"

¹⁷ I borrow his expression from Robert Fitzgerald who, while discussing the *Odyssey* in his "Postscript," remarks that the storyteller fashions his action and dialogue by inspiration, formulaic lines and also by phonological context. The context, through its meter, rhyme and sounds, allow certain words to be used and certain scenarios and stories to develop (Fitzgerald 2000: 487).



“*Arselle* [clams] ? *Arselle* ? Yes, Yes, there are plenty today in the *celle* [fridge].
Now get in the car, it’s late.”

“Papà, papa, hai visto le stelle? Guarda quante stelle ci sono oggi!”

“*Arselle*? *Arselle*? Sì, sì, oggi ce ne sono tante nelle celle. Su sali in macchina
che è tardi!” (Journal, 11 August 1998)

Piece substituted from Diss

Main Identity
From Attimo
To: *Anthrofish*
Sent: Friday, December 15, 2000 11:56 AM
Subject: ziu lollottu

Swish-swish-swish! Anthrofish!

When ’gnazio pomponi was little he was very little.
This was a blessing for his father, the old uncle lollottu (who just died).
Uncle lollottu sold fish at retail’s with a scale *stradera* (called in sardinian *sa romana*); I mean the one with the chains.
His son ’gnazio helped him in his activity.
The old father used to prepare many packets of half a kilo, one kilo and a kilo and a half of dead eels and of various dead and rotten fish and put them below the counter, where also ’gnazio hid.
When the client wanted to buy a kilo of eels, uncle lollottu to satisfy him choose all the best eels for him and put them on the scale’s dish.
Simultaneously, addressing the client he used to shout “A kilo of good eels!!! This was a sign for little ’gnazio that squatted underneath would take the packet of nice eels from the scale and replace it with a pack dead or rotten eels.



Sometimes the chap would make a mistake and instead of putting eels he would put a different kind of fish or a different weight, and here we go! A kick of old lollottu to his son, who was hidden underneath the counter. Uncle¹⁸ lollottu would also shout his rectification: I said a kilo of nice eels! Growing up 'gnazio became so good that he would substitute the glassy eye of a living sepia with the lifeless eye of a rotten fish
Then he invited the client: ladies and gentlemen, look at this very very fresh fish, look at these eyes!!

We are well and so we hope of you

Squish-squish-squish! Anthrofish!

¹⁸ Fictive kin, indicates familiarity.



4. The Operation of the Eye.

In the very oldest regions of Tlön, it is not an uncommon occurrence for lost objects to be duplicated. Two people are looking for a pencil; the first one finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but more in keeping with his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and, even though awkward in form, are a little larger than the originals. Until recently, the *hrönir* were the accidental children of absent-mindedness and forgetfulness. [...] The methodical development of *hrönir*, states the eleventh volume, has been of enormous service to archeologists. It has allowed them to question and even to modify the past, which nowadays is no less malleable or obedient than the future. One curious fact: the *hrönir* of the second and third degree, that is, the *hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, and the *hrönir* derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön*—exaggerate the flows of the original. [...] Stranger and sometimes more perfect than any *hrön* is sometimes the *ur*, which is a thing produced by suggestion, an object brought into being by hope. [...] Things duplicate themselves in Tlön. They tend at the same time to efface themselves, to lose their detail when people forget them. The classic example is that of a stone threshold which lasted as long as it was visited by a beggar, and which faded from sight on his death. Occasionally, a few birds, a horse perhaps, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater” (Borges 1962: 29-30).

Q: Why don't you starve in the desert?

A: Because of all the *sand which is* there
(Culler 1988: 84).

“There are various factors that determine a fish's value,” Attimo claims,

The excellence of the meat and its freshness, the quantity of fish present in the market, and the customs of the area. First quality fish, like mullets, white breams, giltheads, soles, dentex, sea bass and sea breams, have always been expensive, because of limited quantities and good quality. In the last ten years, markets have been filled with sea bass and giltheads from the farms, so even if the fish remains first quality, its price has dropped from 30,000 or 40,000 liras to 10,000 or 15,000 liras.

Many retailers and wholesalers disagree with Attimo, maintaining that the fish from the farm cannot compete with the wild fish, and therefore cannot be considered first quality.¹⁹

“The value of the fish,” Attimo continues,”

also depends on the local traditions. In Sardinia there were once many fishponds (*peschiere*) that produced gray mullets, “*sparlotte*” [*diplodus anularis*], *lithognathus mormyrus* and eels. This fish was excellent when it was fished in the right season, that is, in autumn and winter. Now that fishponds are almost non-existent, we import this kind of fish from the Adriatic or from Orbetello in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Therefore, we keep our culinary tradition, but we buy the fish from people that do not hold the same tradition and therefore sell the fish much cheaper. Value depends on the offer/demand basis. For instance: When we offer small quantities of sardines in their best season, this vulgar fish almost reaches the price of the farmed gilthead or the sea bream. Or again, in the summer when there is good demand and little catch of octopus, this good can be sold at Lire 12.000 or 13.000 per Kilo at the wholesale, while in the spring the price rocks down at Lire 4,000 per Kilo.

Value of the fish fluctuates, depending on the changing season, tastes and supplies of fish; in Chapter 5 “Giordano’s Fish: A picture Story,” we see how the Giordano brothers—the fishermen supplying the commission agent *The Chemist*—were able to transform an undefined sandy mass into precious fish. We also heard their complaints about the diminished value of their catch, in these times of market globalization.

¹⁹ Here is the comment of a Cagliari customer: “Look, neither the ‘Chemist’ with his ‘drugs’ nor ‘Head of Beef’s Dick’ with his second quality fish are going to cheat on me ... I want fresh fish at a fair price... fresh fish from the sea and not gilthead and sea bass fed with chicken... it is better to get some fresh roasted “*sparlotte*” [*diplodus anularis*] and “*zerri*” than sea bass that tastes like chicken. Once, ‘Head of Beef’s Dick’ cheated me with some mullet with gasoline taste... but I made him return me the money, what an idiot, and after that he didn’t see me anymore at his counter;-)”

[balla chi a mei non mi frigat ne su "potecariu" cun is ‘mixinas,’ ne ‘conca'e zirogna’ cun su pisci a scarara... deu bollu pisci friscu a su pretzu giustu... pisci friscu de mari e non carina e spirritu pascias cun su pappai fattu cun sa petza de pudda... mellus sa sparedda e su giarrettu friscu arrustiu chi cudda carina a sabori de pudda. Conca'e zirogna una borta m'iat frigau cun lissa a sabori de nafta... ma gi mi d'iat torrau su dinai, balossu chi non est atru, e pustis non m'at biu prus ;-)] (Danix’s e-mail comment on “<sa-Limba@uni-koeln.de>” Listserv, 11 Feb 2002).

Certainly, freshness has a capital role in the establishment of price in the markets of Cagliari (but the sense of freshness is contextually defined. When Attimo visited the fish markets in New York City, he was disappointed and defined them altogether as putrescent). Even a beautiful dentex loses value in a short time, finally dropping out of its commodity status when it becomes old. Nevertheless, people like *The Chemist* are particularly reluctant to take into consideration the time/value parameter, and avoid letting their fish go at the market price. Sellers of fish are expert in presenting their goods under the best light and before the massive importations, when sales were slower and fish was less plentiful, sellers engaged in all sorts of tricks to make their goods appear fresh; then, preparation of the fish for sale had an artisanship quality. A seller might ask a butcher friend to use some animal blood to make up in brilliant red some sepia or octopus that had acquired a brownish hue, or to color up putrescent gills. By these tricks, the signs of time are hidden, and the fish can pass for fresh for a longer time. Fish that was bony and emptied by sea fleas could be reshaped and refilled with newspapers that the buyer would only notice much later, when he had left the market and could not do anything about it. Among the many tricks, the most celebrated in market dwellers' stories is "the operation of the eye," which was a sort camouflage to make old fish look fresh. Since the eye is the first part of the fish to betray decay, vendors would extract eyes from any cheap fish, from an occhione for instance, provided that it had transparent glassy eyes (a sign of freshness) and insert them in the ocular cavities of expensive but old fish that had remained unsold, often a "pagaro" [pagrus pagrus] or a dentex. Thus, the fish had another chance to live in the market.



Yet, the purpose of these tricks is unsettled in the fish market, as sellers do not agree on the purpose of their tricks, when, for fun and pride, they recount their stories. According to some, the operations were performed to trick the buyer and make some money out of nothing; for some others, tricks were only meant for play and laugh, and the player had no intention of taking advantage of a client; most probably, both play and gains were involved. Nowadays, this attitude toward the manipulation of value has ceased and is seen as childish and certainly it belongs to a market in which time, space and the flow of goods were of a different kind. Even in the stalls where business is poor and time abounds, such complicated tricks are abandoned, and only sprinkling fish, washing it in water and moving boxes in ways that mimic fish leaping help rejuvenate fish. In addition, the increased control by the State on the sales and the risk of fines is a deterrent against tricking. Because of better transportation, better standards of living and the diffusion of fish demand, retailers from the villages have now become good clients in the wholesale fish market of Cagliari, coming to buy on regular basis. In these new circumstances, trustworthy relationships between buyers and sellers have developed. In the hope of increasingly long-term business relationships, many sellers consider it unwise to trick.²⁰ As the cosmetic operations of the fish occurred quite often, however, it is surprising that for people of the market they did not become a stale joke. Instead, they were ceaselessly repeated and perhaps, from the seller's point of view, the operation, as a compulsion to repeat, also aimed to master the difficult concept of value and its disappearance by resorting to an artificial

²⁰ In his book *Trust* Gambetta remarks that trusting relationships tend to develop when partners in business see that there are long-term advantages to be pursued in their relation. Instead, if they do not mean to do business over time, then they might have less interest in promoting trust and might consider cheating (Gambetta 1988: 37).



manipulation of the signs of aging. In the same way, the repetitions of the *fort-da* game allowed Freud's nephew to master his mother's disappearance: by playing with a yo-yo-like string, he was able to represent and master her appearance and her traumatic disappearance (Freud 1962: 14).

Marketgoers have different opinions regarding the meaning of the operation and have applied it with different purposes. For instance, the retailer The Cat employed cosmetic tricks for pure fun, and did not intend to trick anyone. Instead, Attimo admits to having employed these tricks for gain, deceiving his clients. The position in which Attimo and The Cat stand vis-à-vis their altered fish reminds one, in many respects, of Danto's discussion of the difference between "representation" and "imitation" which he highlights when discussing, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the nature of the work of art. For Plato, Danto claims, art is imitation. As imitation, art mimics the real (particularly the beautiful) in a way that tends to obliterate the means of production. The latter allows the spectator to forget its nature as simulacrum, perceiving the object almost as real, as it produces in the senses the same sensations as did the original: "If illusion is to occur, the viewer cannot be conscious of any properties that really belong to the medium, for to the degree that we perceive that it is a medium, illusion is effectively aborted" (Danto 1994: 151). In imitation, as well as in illusionism, the artist delivers a message while hiding his medium: "so art is the message and the medium is nothingness, much in the way in which consciousness is held, by Sartre for instance, to be a kind of nothingness. It is not part of the world but that through which the world is given, not being given itself" (Danto 1994: 152). In modern times, when, according to Danto, a strong sense of reality develops, mimesis

loses its primacy in art to give way to representation. The latter's purpose is the conscious exploration of the boundaries between art, philosophy and the world. Then art, instead of reproducing the real by mirroring, duplicating and denoting an object, consciously and pleasurably plays in the gap between reality and something else that contrasts with it (Danto 1994: 79), being not only a content, but showing something about that content, thus bringing into light a possible discussion of the medium (Danto 1994: 148).

If we look at the altered fish from Danto's perspective, Attimo seems to operate according to the parameters of illusionism, as Attimo, in his fish operation, used to collapse the old valueless denetex with the fresh valueless occhione and by their combination, with the re-contextualization of the eye, was able to create a counterfeit "fresh expensive fish." In his operation, he would hide his maneuvers and deliver a product whose value was a fake. Neither the old valueless eye nor the body of the cheap fresh fish survived the operation, as only their forgetting and concealment allowed for the appearance (or counterfeiting) of value.

Attimo's production, by defying the natural law of temporality, bringing 'alive' a dead fish and putting value where there is none, marks his omnipotence. Yet, it is also a sign of powerlessness as he uses make-belief and trickery to promote what in the end can only be an illusion. However, it is an illusion that pays and allows the fish to circulate toward consumption, as Attimo is able to produce value out of putrefaction. The Cat's case is more complicated, as his art seems more at the service of philosophy and self-reflection than commerce. If we believe what he says, that when performing the operation of the eye, people were invited to spot his trick and enjoy it, his playful



fish was not a trick to promote the sale but functioned as a pun and as such it demanded to be discovered and laughed about, not to be hidden, like Attimo's fish. Unlike Attimo, who uses the time of work to deceive the work of time, The Cat misuses his time of work to bring attention to the process of the unfolding of time and its manipulable signs of value. While Attimo hid the medium to deliver a message of illusion, The Cat brought into light the play with the medium and the illusion of value. It would seem that The Cat's fish operation was not meant to create illusion for gain, but was a metaphor.

In the operation of the fish, each item is in dynamic transformation. A valuable expensive fish, such as a fresh dentex, is only a remembrance or a wish at the moment of the play. Then, the fish seller has to enchant reality, fetishizing and transforming the nothingness he possesses into the valuable object of his desire. His dentex, which was valuable once, having a sign of freshness in its glassy and vivid eye (+e), now presents a reddish eye (-e) that marks it as old and valueless. However, besides its eye, the old dentex's body could pass for fresh and valuable (+b) as the signs of time in its body make a late appearance. Then, the eye, marking alone its un/freshness (-e,+e), can become a valuable object in the manipulation of value. Thus, a fresh eye taken from a valueless fish, such as an occhione, can denote freshness and value when it is re-contextualized in the old dentex's body:

$V = (+bD + eD) =$	\$\$\$	\$D Fresh valuable dentex (past and wish)
$-V = (+bD - eD) =$	0	0D Old valueless dentex (harsh reality)
$-V = (-bO - eO) =$	0	0O Fresh but valueless body and eye of

occhione (harsh reality)

Attimo collapses the boundaries of reality and wish in a single formula:

$$V = (+bD + eD) = (+bD \pm eO) = \$\$\21$

While Attimo proceeds “economically,” yielding to the imperatives of the market, The Cat complicates the picture in a profusion of metaphors in which language and reality play; valueless and valuable remain suspended in an unceasing species-crossing, as the altered fish is neither one fish nor another, it stands as a third fish which has not forgotten its origins. It is “a valueless dentex as a valueless occhione as a worthy mongrel as a worthy dentex.” Each metaphor keeps its identity and enlightens the others. For the altered fish, to be *and* not to be, that is the question.

When discussing paintings depicting Napoleon in Roman attire, Danto makes a similar case. In these paintings, the identity of the model and the subject are not collapsed and their combination powerfully sums up the attributes of the other, without exchanging identity. Thus, Napoleon remains Napoleon and gains the attributes of power and grandiosity of the Roman Empire. The result is a “transfiguration rather

²¹ Puns like “Famillionaire,” “Lard militaire” and “Merdecine,” that have in their bodies the kernel belonging to another realm that transforms them, present similarities with the altered fish. In fact, both these puns and the altered fish have an intact “body” in which a particle is inserted. This particle has the power of transformation and transvaluation. Thus, the decontextualized eye corresponds to the excessive “million,” that transforms the generous but presumptuous Rockefeller’s manners from familiar to familonar, while the military arts are transformed, by a “d,” into military fat. By an “r” medicine becomes entangled with excrement.



than transformation: Napoleon does not turn into a Roman emperor, he merely bears the attributes of one” (Danto 1994: 168). What then do the fish gain in their metaphoric transfiguration? The surgery creates a slippage that brings attention to time, desire, exchange and the item of exchange as both a repository of value and a medium for its manipulation. The Cat’s fish lays bare the fact that value is ultimately not a content held in the fish. Instead, value lies in its surfaces; it is a play of signs, which people take for universal and real, forgetting how value is normative and relational. Thus, they can buy and eat a week-old fish and even be satisfied with it (as long as they do not realize the trick or get a stomachache);²² they would not buy an edible cheap occhione merely for socio-cultural dislike but its eye, put in an old dentex body, would bewitch them, inducing them to buy an old valueless fish. Thus, when people assess what is good, fresh and what constitutes a delicacy, they are only talking of simulacra, which the altered fish brings to the fore. If the operated fish now possesses a glassy and transparent eye, the buyer’s eye retains Saulian scales of blindness. The Cat’s fish is a fish about fish— metafish—a fish about language, value and time; it is not, primarily, an item for exchange. It is a metalinguistic device whose main purpose is not, like daily language and commerce, the circulation of goods and meanings though the effacement and forgetting of the medium. Rather, its primary task is, like Danto’s art, *aboutness* and self-reflection, doubling itself to unveil the processes of time, exchange and value. The Cat’s fish is a pun.

In *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Attardo offers a clear explanation of the linguistic structure of a pun which we can use to understand The Cat’s pun of the fish,

²² “Mmm! Martell is always Martell!” Attimo’s guest would knowledgeably exclaim, to his nodding and smiling host, as he sipped the precious drink. He did not know that he had been drinking all along a cheap imitation which Attimo would pour for him into an old Martell’s bottle.



even if the latter is made out of images and concepts rather than phonemes. Puns, Attardo claims, are effective because people have a general belief that language is not arbitrary and that from similarity of shape corresponds similarity of meaning and vice versa. The pun exploits language by bypassing its use and sense in the “normal” world by opening up to another dimension which, being incongruous and yet somewhat meaningful, brings laughter. Attardo goes at length through numerous examples and taxonomies but essentially, he defines a pun as a conscious linguistic construction and contamination in which two strings of words, phonemes or linguistic expressions of same or similar sound are brought together in such way that a relationship between their senses is attained. The pun can be announced explicitly or its meaning can be inferred, but it is important that both senses and their ambiguity be maintained (Attardo 1994: 130-134). The latter makes the interpreter perceive that “something is wrong with the text” and leads him not to trust it and entertain it with a *non-bona-fide* stance (Attardo 1994: 130). Mistrust is fundamental to proceeding backward vis-à-vis one’s first interpretation (S1) and to confronting it with a second one (S2). Thus, a connector and a disjunctive function in the texts to catch the critical attention of the listener who realizes his error of judgment and is enabled to grasp the intertextual allusion (Attardo 1994: 149). Thus, the context that generally dissolves language ambiguity is in the pun crafted to enable a suspension of two meanings, connecting two worlds and contexts and allowing for a space in which something can be and not be at the same time. After resolution, the two senses can appear unrelated,²³ S1 can force its connotation onto S2²⁴ or vice versa,²⁵ or both can coexist.²⁶

²³ Here is an example: “Why did the cookie cry? / Its mother had been away for so long. [a wafer]”



The Cat connects two fish with different value and age into one, but leaves their membership in a class ambiguous enough to address marketgoers' suspicion. The body of the old fish, the altered one, and the fresh fish are almost the same while the fresh eyes are like "homophones" in shape with very different meaning. In this complex pun, more than two strings of expressions are involved, and dis/connective clues are diffused in the punning fish, leaving its final membership suspended. In the same way as "metalanguage suspends the rules of the object language" (Attardo 1994: 168), so the fish pun blocks the sale, introducing an unreal space which might be only for fun but is meaningful, leaving all its meanings suspended in an oscillation which moves the object from gold to litter and vice versa. In the end it fails or renounces the possibility of eliciting the leap toward gain that Attimo, by contrast, is able to achieve.

The discovery of the trick in The Cat's fish (which perhaps for an excess of make-up was rendered a parody of Attimo's counterfeiting) allows for a dialogue between the different fish and brings merriment. Attimo forecloses the existence of the valueless fish to give priority only to a saleable fish that had the illusion of value. The Cat's fish is a parody both of time and the remedies that defeat the work of time. It is an attempt to play with value and to play with its signs, overriding the market's practical purpose.

(Attardo 1994: 128).

²⁴ "Newslitter" (Attardo 1994: 137).

²⁵ "Entre deux mots il faut toujours choisir le moindre" (Ibidem).

²⁶ "Bassompierre was a prisoner at the Bastille. While reading, he flipped the pages of his book hastily. The warden asked him what he was looking for, and Bassompierre replied: "I am looking for a passage, but I cannot find it" (Ibidem).



However, we cannot praise The Cat for his didactic intentions and accuse Attimo of dishonesty for breaking the laws of the market, because, ironically, the way in which Attimo produces value is similar to the process at work in the generation of value of any commodity, at least as it is envisaged by Keenan in his reading of Marx's *Capital*'s Chapter One. In "The Point is to (Ex)Change it: Reading 'Capital' Rhetorically," which I discuss in the Conclusion, Keenan explores Marx's analysis of the commodity, reaching the conclusion that the commodity, in order to be a thing that is first and foremost exchangeable, has to go beyond its use. Then, Value, becomes a placeholder, a ghost that for being shared by all commodities allows exchange. Only through this abstraction things that are utterly different can be exchanged, while abstraction both de- and re-animates exchange. Yet, this institutionalized process of exchange and substitution is imposed upon the matter, violating its nature—like an operation of the eye. This is what makes exchange possible while exchangers, unconcerned of the trick at its core, engage in it as if it were natural (Keenan 1997: 131-132). Therefore, Attimo's tricks should not be considered transgressive and deceitful; they rather mimic the principles of commodity exchange.

For The Cat's altered fish, there is no commodity exchange or creation of value and his attempts at restoring the fish's past only mark the impossibility of that move.²⁷

The latter recall the process of the *mémoire involontaire*. Carol Jacobs discusses Benjamin's reflections on the Proustian image, claiming that the *mémoire involontaire*

²⁷ Thus Jacobs presents Benjamin's writing of origins: "It is the performance of a dialectic in which the reader is bound to see double: both the gesture toward a restoration of what seems to have come before and, precisely within that move towards reestablishment, the incompleteness of that gesture. Singularity never arises in and of itself but only appears as a failure of a repetition that can never be brought about, at least not completely" (Jacobs 1999: 9).

does not restore a past in its plenitude, as there can never be coincidence and direct access to real life. Instead, the work of memory is akin to the work of forgetting, dream and non-coincidence. It allows for a gap of interpretation between image and life and brings the shock of a voided life, as the pairing and mirroring of aging and remembered youth does not facilitate a re-appropriation of the past, but loss of life (Jacobs 1999: 39-58). Benjamin uses the image of a sock from the laundry chest to describe the Proustian play of emptying the self; the sock with which children play appears as a bundle and a pouch, and children never get bored of this transformation. Jacobs comments on this image illuminate The Cat's play:

[...] The stocking contains nothing but its rolled-up self. The apparent contents do not exist; the outside surface only seemed to assure access to a full interior. The rolled-up stocking that function as a sign of its own fullness is now emptied of its apparent meaning: it has become an empty sign, signifying nothing beyond itself and serving no purpose. It is a mere ornament. But the frivolous nature of this sign does not surprise the children. For them, the reaching into the stocking is a game. They know from the start that the apparent container is empty. It is not their desire for a content which they have difficulty in satisfying: they are obsessed, rather, with the goal-less desire to repeat the game of transforming pocket and content into a stocking (Jacobs 1999: 44).

Both Attimo and The Cat are creators of a new fish; however, they take a different stance vis-à-vis their creation. Attimo denies paternity, and by erasing his authority and “quoting” the original (like in a performative), he creates the illusion of the past collapsing with the present: the original fish has revived and the old dentex has become a valuable fresh fish. Instead, The Cat does not take part in fraudulent exchange, focusing instead on the trickery of the fish seller's omnipotent engendering. He lays down his tricks and laughs about it, losing time, productivity and gain. Instead of taking advantage

of a system of signs which could make him richer, as Attimo does, The Cat takes a critical jocular distance, attempting to sabotage the system from its interior. To the linear time and circulation that Attimo exploits, The Cat substitutes a dead time of siren-like sounds, evoking Benjamin's Scherlinger, the protagonist of Benjamin's "Myslowitz-Braunschweig-Marseilles: The Story of a Hashish-*Rausch*"²⁸ (Benjamin 1972: 729-737).

It is said that Scherlinger was once close to making a million, but like The Cat, he lost his profit defying time and reality and pursuing language and its doubles.

"Myslowitz-Braunschweig-Marseilles" is a story of the renunciation of fortune and goods and of refraining from consumption. When wealth is within reach, it becomes valueless for the protagonist. The story describes the wanderings of Scherlinger in Marseille, who, after having inherited a discrete sum of money, leaves his Germany for France. His money remains deposited in a bank, where the junior director oversees his interests. If a profitable investment comes up, the director contacts him, and, by a telegram signed with a code name, Scherlinger can authorize the banker to act on his behalf. Choosing a codename for himself is the occasion of Scherlinger's first paralysis: "After all, it's not always that easy to just slip into a strange name, like a costume" (Benjamin 1972: 730)²⁹.

"Braunschweiger" is the chosen name and Scherlinger reflects on the consequences of naming, as words and worlds become connected and might produce unexpected effects. The story goes on with Scherlinger's whereabouts in the town of Marseille, showing his

²⁸ For this story was first published in November 1930 *Uhu*. I was not able to find an English version in paper. I am using James Thompson's translation, Internet edition, and can be found at <http://www.wbenjamin.org/story.html>. The German edition can be found in Benjamin's collected works: 1972. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV: 2: 729-737, Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser eds. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.

²⁹ Even though I am quoting the Internet English translation, I am also providing the page number of the quote in the German edition.

taste for explorations of boundaries, as “city boundaries are indeed the exception of the city, the terrain upon which the great decisive battle between city and country rages.” They are the place of contradiction in which “the warehouses, the quarters of the destitute, the scattered asylums of the poverty-stricken” coexist. The story is charged with correspondences and duplicities that intensify after Scherlinger eats his hashish. It is then that a dispatcher informs him that the bank director is waiting for his permission to purchase Royal Dutch. However, because of his intoxication, his mind wanders between a tendency toward the accomplishment of his errand to the post office, where he has to send an OK to the bank’s junior director with his codename, disappointment for being disturbed, and dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of his hashish. As he leaves the hotel for the post office, places are transfigured and duplicate themselves under the effect of the drug. Thus, wigs, toupees and powder boxes in a barber shop become piles of bonbons and cakes; he discovers he has a gift for physiognomy and sees places as they change relationally to the people inhabiting them. As binary structures assessing meaning and value blurs, all existing beings become doubtful and contaminated. While waiting for the opening of the bank, he orders a black coffee at the bar; silently, his brown hand holds the cup, and an illumination seizes him. “Braunschweiger,” his code name, finally reveals its appropriateness and necessity: It is brown and silent [German: braun and schweigend], like himself:

The ‘open sesame’ of this name which should conceal all riches in its interior had disclosed itself to me. There must have seemed no end to the compassion with which I was now smiling as I reflected for the first time on the Braunschweigers who live there in their little central German city without knowing anything of the



magical powers with which their name has been endowed. (Benjamin 1972: 737³⁰).

On a bench [German Bank], he waits and naps for the opening of the office and he wakes too late, at the news of the sudden rise of the Royal Dutch. By then, he had lost his occasion.

Both *The Cat* and Scherlinger lose themselves in the world of representation, doubling signs, and as a consequence they disempower them in the world. Scherlinger loses himself chasing his visual and linguistic puns, which both distract him from his real purpose and reproduce it symbolically, but not effectively. *The Cat's* play on time does not rush to reach time's speed and to recreate the qualities that time has unraveled in a rejuvenated old fish. Instead of blindly mimicking the illusion that the normative system offers, by doubling this illusion (becoming, as Attimo's fish, a shadow's shadow), *The Cat* reveals that illusion. Like Ulysses, both *The Cat* and Scherlinger could have bound themselves to the mast of reality and purposeful action, binding language to it; instead, they followed the sirens of language, and, for a while, lost themselves in it.

Scherlinger's intoxicated enlightenment follows an exploration of the contradictions of the city boundaries, with its warehouses full of goods and the poverty of its inhabitants. It also follows an astonishing apparition of commodities in the bazaars of

³⁰ See note 50 on page 172.

Marseille, which in their occurrence recall Marx and Keenan's description of capital as "a monstrous collection of commodities"³¹ (Keenan 1997: 103):

A mountain range of 'souvenirs' stretches all along the bazaars here from one end of the port to the other. Seismic forces have heaped up this massif of glass flux, limestone and enamel where the ink-wells, steamships, anchors, mercury columns and sirens intermix. To me it was as if the pressure of a thousand atmospheres which this whole world of images was urging and convulsing and staggering beneath were the same force which tests itself in the firm hands of a sailor on women's thighs and women's breasts after a long voyage; the voluptuousness which urges a red or blue velvet heart from out of the mineral world of a shell pyx so that it may be pricked by pins or brooches; the same force which quakes the streets on payday (Benjamin 1972: 731³²).

Once Scherlinger had taken his poison, his motility becomes limited, and as paralysis overcomes him, he discovers that there is no need to hustle in the world to possess worldly treasures, as words are in themselves warehouses full of heaps of all kinds. Language becomes magic and a word like "Braunschweiger" can be his "open sesame." By this turn, paradoxically, the container becomes the contained, as in Benjamin's image of the sock, and heaps of goods and warehouses of commodities that contained a fortune are now contained in words of fortune. Scherlinger lets his economic riches go and lets himself be blessed with their linguistic remainders. So does The Cat, renouncing the selling of fish, paralyzing it in his stall and making it an object of contemplation and laughter instead of exchange. *The Chemist*, a wholesaler and commission agent holding sales at the wholesale fish market, relates to his fish sales in similar ways. He resists exchange and is not content to give up his fish to the client while keeping its remainder,

³¹ About Keenan's "monstrous collection of commodities," see note 144 on page 381.

³² See note 50 on page 172.

the money he would earn. For him, his fish is always more valuable than the market price. Thus, he refuses to sell as much as he can and hoards fish in his cells. He is willing to sell it at the asking price only when the fish is old. By then, his fish cannot retain its original price in the market. What *The Chemist* and *The Cat* resist is the idea that the fish has its value only in circulation. Outside of it, as when *The Chemist* keeps it stored in his warehouse for too long, it is dead matter. Thus, value (or shall say, the fetish?) lies in another sort of renunciation not in the abandonment of the worldly things for the warehouses of words, or in *The Chemist's* renunciation of exchange in a paralyzing grip on the object of exchange. Value lies in renunciation of the good toward exchange, and refusal to enter in the labyrinthine experience of the warehouse of words. Instead, words should be exchanged in communication and should be bound 'economically' to exchange. Attimo is a master of the latter and does not lose an opportunity to let the fish go, at the cost of making-it up for the client, as it is better to substitute the demanded fish with its material "synonym" or "homonym" or even a "catachresis,"³³ rather than avoid exchange at all. In the same way, Attimo does not lose himself in the word's warehouses, but only fetches from the linguistic warehouse what best suits him in furthering communication and gain. Words are not, as they are for Scherlinger, warehouses in themselves, but, as we will see in Chapter 9, they can be mobilized actively as symbolic capital for furthering exchange and building a reputation,

³³ In *the American Heritage Talking Dictionary* (CD-Rom from Smart Saver) we read: cat·a·chre·sis (k²t²...-kr²['s's] n., pl. cat·a·chre·ses (-s²z). 1.a. Strained use of a word or phrase, as for rhetorical effect. b. A deliberately paradoxical figure of speech. 2. The improper use of a word or phrase, especially in application to something it does not denote, as the use of *blatant* to mean "flagrant." [Latin *catachr²sis*, improper use of a word, from Greek *katachr²sis*, excessive use, from *katachr²sthai*, to misuse : *kata-*, completely [...].

or when a “phonological context³⁴” allows a (symbolically and economically) profitable change of context.

The Cat and *The Chemist* are often blind to these linguistic and economic possibilities, yet, Attimo’s stance, which is often so attentive and swift in exploiting symbolic possibilities, has its own blindness. Sometimes, for him the linguistic material fails to bring together the reality it should evoke. Mechanically, he makes jokes against his will, stranded as he is in his obsessions about fish, time and exchange. Then words and things are not anymore the manifold storage of all meanings, but inversely, all words and things have become fish as he tries to seek profit for his business everywhere. Therefore, Attimo seems to be interrupting the game with Benjamin’s sock and its ceaseless play of meaning and form. It was mid August and we were getting in the car to go to the wholesale fish market. It was before dawn and falling stars stormed the sky, but all Attimo could see and think of was fish and his business. He could barely hear me when I was pointing to the falling stars above us:

“Daddy, daddy, look at the *stelle* [stars]! How many *stelle* there are today!”

“*Arselle* [clams] ? *Arselle* ? Yes, Yes, there are plenty today in the *celle* [fridge]. Now get in the car, it’s late.”

“Papà, papà, hai visto le stelle? Guarda quante stelle ci sono oggi!”

“*Arselle*? *Arselle*? Sì, sì, oggi ce ne sono tante nelle celle. Su sali in macchina che è tardi!” (Journal, 11 August 1998)

³⁴ I borrow his expression from Robert Fitzgerald who, while discussing the *Odyssey* in his “Postscript,” remarks that the storyteller fashions his action and dialogue by inspiration, formulaic lines and also by phonological context. The context, through its meter, rhyme and sounds, allow certain words to be used and certain scenarios and stories to develop (Fitzgerald 2000: 487).



at the conclusion I could put the Chinese story of the fish-bird. A fish that flight
and with great exertion is like he stays where he was. Berger Redeeming laughter
40

ambivalent fascination of the comic 65 like magic and religion

It was proposed earlier that the comic should be understood as a form of magic.
The comic, like magic , brings about a sudden and rationally inexplicable shift in
the sense of reality 117