“Noi stasserà danzeremo, e nel vino affogheremo”:

The Ideology of Food and Drink in Three Works of *Scapigliatura*

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I. The *Scapigliati*: The Starving Artists of United Italy’s New Cultural Capital

Italy, united by a series of serendipitous events from 1859–61, was at the time a land in which food production remained a monumental challenge. Although predominantly an agrarian society where, as historian Christopher Duggan notes, some 60% of the labour force worked in agriculture (147), primitive farming techniques, poor soil quality, over cultivation, and meager pasturelands made subsistence a struggle for the majority of Italians. Christopher Seton-Watson, another historian, points out that Italy’s crop yield at this time was extremely low relative to its European neighbours in food production: “[While] Italy had the highest wheat acreage in Europe, in proportion to size, [it had] the lowest wheat yield per acre outside Russia” (18). Famines were a chronic plague in all corners of Italy before and after unification (Duggan 16–18), with particularly difficult conditions persisting in the interior regions for generations (Seton-Watson 18). While the cities were generally better fed than the hinterlands, the years before unification were not much kinder to Milan than elsewhere. Indeed, the Lombard capital, which had been part of the crownlands restored to Austria following the Napoleonic Wars, was little better off than Manzoni’s depiction of the city and its seventeenth-century starving underclasses in his famous novel *I promessi sposi* (1840) when the new regime took root.

Once unification was achieved, however, things in Milan quickly (albeit unevenly) improved. As the country’s new metropolitan center, elegant cafés and restaurants began to spring up and expand—most notably those installed in the new Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the famous iron-and-glass shopping structure built between 1865 and 1867. Popular confectioneries
such as Biffi (which moved into the Galleria in 1867) and Cova, near the Teatro alla Scala, came to symbolise the city’s newfound bourgeois prosperity.

Milan also became the new nation’s cultural hub, not only home to the greatest Italian artists of the time (e.g. Manzoni, Hayez, and Verdi) but also a beacon which drew newly minted Italians from all over the peninsula and its surrounding islands to immerse themselves in the city’s heady intellectual climate. Salons such as that of Countess Maffei brought together intellectuals young and old, important publishing houses and periodicals began to cluster in the area, and the city’s famous Conservatory soon supplanted Naples’ as the school of choice for young Italian composers.

Among those from the younger generation that were attracted to Milan was a loose organization of intellectuals known as the scapigliati (literally “disheveled”), a name coined by one of the movement’s founding authors, Cletto Arrighi (1828–1906).¹ Reminiscent of the Parisian bohemians of prior decades, the scapigliati were radical in politics, unconventional in lifestyle, polemical, artistically experimental, and often financially distressed. Their works were macabre in nature, often exploring poverty, madness, death, and the occult. Among their ranks were artists from all walks of life, including painters, poets, novelists, composers, and even architects. True to their bohemian roots, the scapigliati tended to live hard and die young. In keeping with the themes of the University of Toronto Mississauga’s very stimulating weekend on the intersections of food, drink, and culture, the present study will focus on the scapigliatura movement’s strong connection to the themes of food and drink. A close examination of three

¹ For clarity, the movement’s adherents were called scapigliati whereas the movement itself is referred to as scapigliatura.
major texts of scapigliatura will demonstrate that food and drink in fact play a vital role in defining the movement’s poetics and ideology. Beginning with the poems of Emilio Praga’s collection *Tavoloza*, continuing with Iginio Ugo Tarchetti’s Gothic novel *Paolina*, and closing with Ferdinando Fontana and Giacomo Puccini’s lyric opera *Edgar*, I will demonstrate the centrality of food and drink in elaborating the key themes in each work. In short, food and drink constitute a nexus in these works by which their authors are able to highlight class injustice as well as eroticism, elements at the heart of scapigliatura’s artistic program.

II. Praga’s *Tavoloza*: The Proletariat Works and Drinks, the Bourgeoisie Eats

Emilio Praga (1839–75) led a relatively brief and very colorful life. A native Milanese from a reasonably well-to-do family, he was able to live for a time in Paris and there absorb contemporary artistic trends. Upon his return to Milan he joined the scapigliati and bounced between jobs, briefly teaching poetry at the Milan Conservatory in an ultimately futile attempt to eke out a living. Headstrong and prone to drink, alcoholism took him to an early grave at the age of forty-five.

While he was among the finest poets of the scapigliati, his first love was the paintbrush. His first volume of poems, the experimental *Tavoloza* (1862), in fact attempts to crystallise elements of painting in poetic form. The collection ranges from urban to rural settings and from high to low subjects. Throughout, food and drink feature consistently—in particular the latter. Alcohol, long the target of moralistic reproach in a land where Catholic appeals to temperance

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2 Praga’s title *Tavoloza* could be translated as *Palette*—that is, referring to the colours on a painter’s palette. Note that all translations provided in this paper, for both titles and quotations, are my own unless otherwise specified.
were the norm before the advent of the liberal regime, is exalted in *Tavolozza* as an escape for the underclasses, offering the poor an honest refuge from the trials of their alienated existence.

In the poem “Orgia,” for instance, Praga hammers home the liberating effects of drink with an opening refrain that hails “divine nectar” as the source of inspiration from the muses:

> Versate amici il nettare divino!
> Bruna è la notte, e la face scintilla:
> Spumeggi in cor coll’ispirato vino
> La musa brilla!  

(169)

In another poem, the erotic “La superstite,” Praga makes a gesture typical of his circle by connecting drink to sensuality. The poetic voice invites a maiden to partake in drink, an act that will apparently lead to carnal as well as social release:

> E stassera o mesta vergine,
> Noi stassera danzeremo,
> E nel vino affogheremo,
> Le mie ciance e il tuo dolor!  

(Praga 198)

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3 “Orgy.”

4 Pour, friends, the nectar divine!

Dark is the night, and the torch gleams:

The heart foaming with inspired wine

The muse beams!

5 “The Survivor.”

6 And tonight, o mournful virgin,
Praga also enlists food to advance political ideology in *Tavolozza*. The best example of this tendency is in an ode to humble fishermen, “I pescatori di notte,”\(^7\) in which Praga eulogises the somnolent work of this group. In lines evocative of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, Praga’s ballad praises the patient labour by which the fishermen convert their catch into sustenance:

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\begin{align*}
&E \text{ sulla tolda silenziosa e bruna} \\
&\text{Restan le lunghe notti ad aspettar:} \\
&\text{Ad aspettare sotto la fredda luna} \\
&\text{Che il pan dell’indomani apporti il mar!}^8 (28)
\end{align*}
\]

Later on in the poem, Praga exposes the exploitative nature of the fishermen’s work,\(^9\) lamenting that the profits of their labour earn them but little money. The section ends with praise for the fishermen’s generosity despite their straitened condition. Thus, Praga’s verses offer a

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Tonight we two shall dance,} \\
&\text{And in wine we two shall drown,} \\
&\text{My idle chatter and your sorrow!}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^7\) “The Night Fishermen.”

\(^8\) On the silent and dark deck,

They spend the long nights waiting:

Waiting under the cold moon

For the sea to bring tomorrow’s bread!

\(^9\) This criticism was famously taken up again in Giovanni Verga’s *I Malavoglia* (1881) and in Luchino Visconti’s neorealist film adaptation of the novel, *La terra trema* (1948).
compelling vision of solidarity towards these ennobled proletarians:

Il lucro è rame, povere
Monete, che dei pesci hanno l’odore.
Vegliarono tant’ore
Per pochi soldi appena,
Ed una scarsa cena!
Pur son felici, e al mendico cantore
Regalano, passando, un pesciolino.¹⁰ (34)

If food and drink nourish Praga’s poems in Tavolozza, one could say that Tarchetti overstuffs his reader to artistic effect in his novel Paolina.

III. Tarchetti’s Paolina: Food and Drink, the Aspects of Aristocratic Excess

One of the great novelists of the scapigliati was Iginio Ugo Tarchetti (1839–69), like Praga an outspoken figure whose targets were many in the milieu of post-unification Milanese society. Originally from Piedmont, Tarchetti joined the military after completing liceo and saw the aftermath of Italian independence firsthand throughout the peninsula. Military discipline was

¹⁰ The profit is copper, scanty
Coins, which carry the smell of fish.
They stayed awake so many hours
For but little money,
And a meagre supper!
Yet they are happy, and passing by,
They offer a small fish to a singing beggar!
a bad fit for an iconoclast who was ill at ease with convention, and so he ultimately parted ways with the army in 1865. He idolised Ugo Foscolo (going so far as to take the Romantic poet’s first name as his own middle name) and was among the first to translate Romantic and Gothic English literature into Italian. Also from a reasonably wealthy family, Tarchetti was nevertheless in constant financial distress and his poor living conditions ultimately led to his death from typhoid fever before his thirtieth birthday.

Tarchetti’s first novel, *Paolina* (1865) closely follows the plot of Manzoni’s aforementioned *I promessi sposi*. In both novels, a humble couple wishes to marry, only to have their plans thwarted by a malevolent aristocrat. In keeping with the scapigliati’s anti-establishment poetics, *Paolina*’s title heroine cannot escape her tormentor through divine intervention as in Manzoni. Instead she is raped, and dies soon after from the trauma. Tarchetti intends this “serious parody” of Manzoni as a broadside against aristocratic privilege and excess. His elaboration of this attack relies heavily upon food and drink.

During one of the first scenes in which the reader encounters the evil Marquis of B., Tarchetti’s villain, the Marquis participates in an orgiastic feast in his grotesquely opulent villa. The narrator goes to great lengths to bewail the scene for its “battaglia a zampilli di champagne da quindici franchi la bottiglia” and “spruzzi di vino del Reno per ogni direzione”¹¹ (Tarchetti 63). Tarchetti’s narrator, indulging in hyperbole characteristic of the novel’s rhetorical flair, says that the orgy outdoes even the ancient Romans:

> Ed era . . . un’orgia solenne, colossale, gigantesca, al cui confronto, le cene tanto famose

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¹¹ A “flowing fountain of fifteen-franc bottles of champagne” and “jets of Rhenish wine in every direction.” My integral English translation of *Paolina* will appear later in 2017 from Dante UP.
dei Romani, e le refezioni di Claudio e di Eliogabalo, erano merende da fanciulli, erano un passatempo scipito che non si riferiva che al senso del gusto; una di quelle orge . . . dove si profonde in un’ora quanto basta per nutrire in un lustro cento famiglie povere.\footnote{12}

This wasteful display is quickly contrasted with the bread-and-water destitution of the lower classes, who not only must eat poorly but also bear grave moral costs on account of this injustice:

Questa è la grande, la vera, la nobile esistenza, alla cui misura d'un giorno, contribuiscono per un anno mille braccia incallite nel lavoro, mille giovani creature, gracili, vaghe, soffrenti, rimuneree in ragione di cinquantacinque centesimi al giorno, nutrientisi di solo latte e di pane, e finalmente costrette a prostituirsi per vivere, giacché bisogna pur vivere.\footnote{13} (Tarchetti 60)

\footnote{12} It was . . . a solemn, colossal, gigantic orgy, which, when compared to the banquets of the Romans, those heralded reflections of Claudius and Heliogabalus, made the latter seem a child’s afternoon snack, like an insipid pastime involving only the sense of taste. It was one of those orgies . . . where in the space of an hour, enough to feed a hundred poor families for five years is dissipated.

\footnote{13} This is the great, the true, the noble existence, which in the span of one day consumes what a thousand work-hardened arms toil for over the year; the toil of a thousand graceful, beautiful, suffering girls, paid at a rate of fifty-five centesimi a day, who subsist solely on milk and bread, and who are ultimately forced into prostitution to live, since, after all, one must live.
The novel relentlessly criticises society for the moral repercussions of class injustice. Wanton gluttony trails the Marquis throughout the novel, and is nowhere more prominent than in the novel’s pivotal rape scene. Here, the Marquis has contrived to trick the titular heroine into a hidden love nest with him so as to complete his act of violence. However, he has taken great pains to lay out a sumptuous dinner ahead of time, which he offers to Paolina as a preamble to intercourse. Tarchetti’s choice to link economic excess to sexual violence is the culmination of his strident condemnation of the upper classes. Just as the door slams on Paolina and her fate is sealed, the Marquis makes her his offer as follows:

Via, asciugatevi gli occhi, avete degli occhi così belli, ed è peccato che li guastiate piangendo: vedete laggiù, nella seconda camera, abbiamo una cena suntuosa, dei pasticci stuzzicanti, delle frittole all'ungherese, e dei patés di Strasburgo: aggiungetevi delle confetture di Biffi squisitissime, e uno champagne legittimo di Lemour, che è il vino più generoso dell’universo. Voi non sapete, mia cara Paolina, che cosa sia la vita, e come bisogni trarne profitto; siete bella e lasciate avvizzire la vostra beltà senza un piacere, avete in voi stessa un tesoro, e mendicate l’esistenza giorno per giorno al lavoro . . . Via, accettate i miei suggerimenti, permettetemi anzi che ne tolga subito una ricompensa — e fece atto di abbracciarla.14 (Tarchetti 136–37)

14 “Come now, dry your eyes, for they are so beautiful, it would be such a pity to ruin them by weeping. Look over there, in the second room, a sumptuous dinner awaits us. Pies to awaken the senses, Hungarian fritters, Strasbourger pâté. After this, divine sweetmeats from Biffi, a genuine Limours champagne, the headiest wine the universe has to offer. You have no idea, my dear Paolina, of what life is, and how one must take advantage of
Fine food and drink therefore serve as the ultimate markers of aristocratic privilege and the class’s ultimate dominance over the proletariat as expressed through carnal violation. It is to another sort of carnal violation that we shall turn in the final work discussed here: the 1889 opera *Edgar* by Fontana and Puccini.

IV. Puccini’s *Edgar*: Late Scapigliatura, from Political Engagement towards Mysticism

Ferdinando Fontana (1850–1919), a few years younger than the first wave of scapigliati, came from a Milanese family of artists and gravitated towards drama at a young age. Several years the senior of Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), Fontana was a sought-after librettist for the largely forgotten generation of operatic composers of the 1870s and 1880s who attempted to fill the void left by Verdi’s semi-retirement. The Tuscan Puccini was lured to the northern metropolis by a scholarship to study at the Milan Conservatory, whose faculty was staffed by several eminent scapigliati, including Praga (although dead by the time Puccini enrolled) and Arrigo Boito, Puccini’s professor of composition and Verdi’s librettist for *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Thus it is no surprise that Puccini should engage a scapigliato the likes of Fontana to provide the text for his first opera, *Le Villi* (1883), written as part of a one-act opera contest organised by the impresario Sonzogno. Puccini once again turned to Fontana for *Edgar*, his first full-length opera to the winner, would make Puccini’s Conservatory roommate Mascagni the toast of the

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15 Sonzogno’s one-act opera contest, which offered a rich purse and a contract for a full-length opera to the winner, would make Puccini’s Conservatory roommate Mascagni the toast of the
melodrama. In spite of periodic tinkering, the maestro could not find the formula to make Edgar a success. Among Puccini’s least-produced works, the opera nonetheless offers compelling insights into the later works of scapigliatura and, for our purposes here, a good indicator of how food and drink in the texts of the later scapigliati become less interested in proto-socialist invective, focusing instead on the sensual side of eating and drinking and their metaphorical link to carnality.

The opera is set in Flanders in the remote Middle Ages and is a standard operatic love triangle: the titular tenor, a knight of renown, is torn between the virginal, appropriate object of his affections, the faithful but unalluring Fidelia (à la Micäela of Carmen), and a transgressive figure who is by far the opera’s most interesting character, the aptly named Tigrana. Tigrana, already mistress of the hapless knight when the curtain rises, fights an ultimately losing battle to keep Edgar under her sway. In the opera’s proto-verista conclusion, Tigrana stabs her rival Fidelia dead. At every turn, Edgar’s tortured attempts to escape the sensual Tigrana’s domination are framed by literal and figurative representations of eating and drinking.

Themes of eating and especially drinking drive the dramatic action of the opera’s second act at every turn. The act opens with a Tannhäuseresque drunken orgy as an illustration of Tigrana’s sensual mastery over her lover. Edgar, under Tigrana’s thrall, participates in the debauchery, marking this subjugation. Tigrana’s short solo section cuts through the texture of the chorus here, a clear signal of her domination over the hapless Edgar:

lyric stage with his Cavalleria rusticana in 1890, shortly after Edgar’s premiere.

16 I am analyzing the original text of the opera here because the food and drink references are most prominent in this version—a few of the scenes I cite were excised in subsequent revisions.
CORTIGIANE E CONVITATI: Evviva! Le coppe colmate!

TIGRANA: A me la mia coppa! Versate!

CORTIGIANE E CONVITATI: Versate, versate da ber!

TIGRANA: La coppa è simbolo della vita
   Essa all’ebbrezza, al gaudio invita!
   Ah! La stringe già la man.
   La coppa è l’immagin della vita,
   Ecco, la stringe già la mano,
   Ah! Non è il labbro lontan!

CORTIGIANE E CONVITATI: Godiam! Beviam!17 (Fontana 23–24)

Fontana and Puccini frame Edgar’s escape from Tigrana’s clutches later in the act in terms of a man who is “sated”—that is, who has had his fill of carnal pleasure. Edgar employs

17 COURTESANS AND GUESTS: Hurrah! Fill the goblets!

TIGRANA: Fetch me my goblet! Pour!

COURTESANS AND GUESTS: Pour, pour for her!

TIGRANA: The goblet is a symbol of life
   It invites intoxication, bliss!
   Ah! The hand already grabs it!
   The goblet is the picture of life,
   There, the hand already grabs it,
   Ah! The lips are not far behind!

COURTESANS AND GUESTS: Let us rejoice! Let us drink!
the metaphor of eating in the crucial moment when he decides to leave Tigrana and re-enlist with his contingent of knights errant. Sensing Edgar’s desire to leave, Tigrana entreats her lover to stay by likening her kisses to sustenance: “Ah, Edgar! / Dal labbro mio suggi l’oblio”\(^\text{18}\) (Fontana 26). In Edgar’s curt reply, kisses are no longer food, but poison: “Sazio son dei tuoi baci! / Più tentarmi non sa la tua bellezza! / Ogni parola tua stilla velen . . .”\(^\text{19}\) (26).

Drinking once again plays a crucial role when Edgar finally escapes from Tigrana shortly after. His fellow knight Frank happens by with a troop ready for action, and Edgar breaks the ice with this group by offering Frank a drink. Edgar, inspired by the knights’ appearance, calls to them: “Olà, soldati, sostate! / Una coppa di vino d’accettare vi piaccia? / Stringer voglio la mano al capitan!”\(^\text{20}\) (Fontana 28). From Tigrana’s profane goblet to the knights’ righteous one, Edgar relies entirely upon drinking and eating to explore its central theme of seduction.

V. Conclusion: Eating and Drinking among the Post-Scapigliati

As we have seen, food and drink play a critical role in defining the poetics of the scapigliati in works across several art forms. From the earthy digs of Tavolozza’s taverns to Paolina’s scenes of aristocratic excess to Edgar’s drunken orgies, the scapigliati used eating and drinking as a means of exploring the ideas that interested them most: class consciousness, antibourgeois aesthetics, and the connection between carnality and sensuality. While, as mentioned

\(^\text{18}\) “Ah, Edgar! Suck oblivion from my lips.”

\(^\text{19}\) “I am sated of your kisses! / Your beauty can no longer tempt me! / Poison drips from your every word. . . .”

\(^\text{20}\) “Ho, solders, halt! / Will it please you to accept a goblet of wine? / I wish to shake the captain’s hand!”
earlier, food and drink serve varying purposes at different stages of the movement’s existence, it is quite clear that the next generations of Italian writers, many of whom were directly exposed to the Milanese milieu dominated by the scapigliati, would carry on this usage in their own works. Without food and drink we can scarcely imagine the verismo movement, the Italian offshoot of naturalism that the Sicilians Giovanni Verga (1840–1922) and Luigi Capuana (1839–1915) led. Both men spent formative periods of their lives in the Lombard capital and counted the scapigliati among their friends and mentors. Their works, populated by starving Sicilian peasants, grotesque sand miners, and dissipated aristocrats, stand as a testament to the power that their northern mentors exerted in shaping their art. In the veristi’s world, food and the means of acquiring it are the only universal currency. In the case of Verga, one only need think of the eponymous anti-heroine of the celebrated short story “La lupa”21 (1880), a wanton seductress in a small Sicilian village, to witness the trend begun by the scapigliati passing on to the next generation. “Al villaggio la chiamavano la Lupa,” we read, “perché non era sazia giammai—di nulla. Le donne si facevano la croce quando la vedevano passare . . . con quell’andare randagio e sospettoso della lupa affamata; ed ella si spolpava i loro figliuoli e i loro mariti in un batter d’occhio”22 (Verga 143). Her victim in the story, the Edgar-like Nanni, trades his body for the actual food that the She-Wolf can provide. Clearly the connections that we have seen between

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21 “The She-Wolf.”

22 “In the village they called her the “She-Wolf,” because she was never satiated ever—by anything. The women made the sign of the cross when they saw her pass by . . . with that suspicious gait of a stray, hungry wolf; and she would strip the flesh off of their sons and husbands in the blink of an eye.”
food and class, and between eating, drinking, and lovemaking, would leave a clear imprint of
scapigliatura upon verismo and beyond.

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