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## Non-conventional uses of the Pluperfect in the Italian (and German) literary prose

(to appear in a collective volume)

### 1 Introduction

The ordinary interpretation of the Pluperfect (henceforth **PPF**) is straightforward.<sup>1</sup> Using Reichenbach's (1947) conventions, an event (**E**) expressed by the PPF occurs before the Speech Time (**S**), but after a contextually determined Reference Time (**R**). As has been pointed out (cf., e.g., Bertinetto 1986), the semantic representation of this tense refers to two structural levels: **TEMPORALITY**, inasmuch as it is coded as a past-tense, and **ASPECT**, inasmuch as it involves the subjective choice of a suitable **R**, as required by all perfect-tenses. Although the PPF is not to be found in the tense-system of all natural languages, whenever it appears it seems to exhibit, by and large, the same semantic representation – at least with reference to its prototypical uses – as well as a remarkable diachronic stability. Needless to say, the last statement should be read *cum grano salis*. Depending on the language, the PPF may marginally exhibit peculiar semantic properties;<sup>2</sup> besides, in some cases two competing tenses, with slightly

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<sup>1</sup> The reader should be aware of the conventions adopted in this paper. First, capital initials are used to designate the tenses belonging to language-specific grammatical descriptions. Thus, the “Present Perfect” to be found in the English tense-aspect system appears with capital initials, while no capital is used when the term “present-perfect” refers to the aspectual domain. Second, the word “tense” is restricted to grammar-specific designations, while the semantic domain frequently (and confusingly) referred to by the same term is called “temporality” in this paper (a possible alternative is “temporal reference”). The following ABBREVIATIONS are used throughout: Ant/PPF = anteriority Pluperfect; Aor/ PPF = aoristic Pluperfect; CP = Compound Past; GR = Gerund; IPF = Imperfect; PPF = Pluperfect; PPT = Past Participle; PRS = Present; PR-IPF = Progressive Imperfect; SJ... = Subjunctive ...; SP = Simple Past.

<sup>2</sup> One might recall, e.g., the counterfactual PPF to be found in English hypothetical protases, such as:

[i] *Had she been* more careful, the accident would not have happened.

different semantic properties, may fill in the PPF slot.<sup>3</sup> To the extent, however, that the above statement is true, it is in striking contrast with the situation to be found with another member of the perfect-tenses set, namely the Present Perfect, characterized by considerable diachronic instability, namely by its cross-linguistic tendency to shift from the domain of the perfect into the domain of pure perfectivity, or “aoristicity”.

Assuming the given background, this paper will address a somehow deviant usage of the PPF in Italian and (tentatively) German. The examples are taken from literary texts, for they offer a better illustration of the issue, but this should not be interpreted as entailing that the phenomenon at hand does not emerge in the colloquial registers.

The temporal architecture of all narrative texts – including the oral ones – rests on the so-called “propulsive” tenses, the ones that have the capacity of pushing forward, so to say, the thread-of-discourse. In literary narrative texts, in particular, the propulsive function is standardly – i.e., traditionally – assigned to aoristic pasts (cf. the Fr. *Passé Simple* or the It. *Passato Semplice*, traditionally called *Passato Remoto*), or at least tenses that may take on this interpretation although this is not their only reading (cf. the Eng. *Simple Past*). Occasionally, the propulsive function may be transferred to other tenses, like the “narrative” Present in the European literary tradition. In oral narratives, the use of the Present as a propulsive tense, in alternation with the perfective Past(s), is fairly frequent. Depending on the degree of involvement of the speaker, other possibilities may emerge, such as the alternation of Simple vs. Compound Past in Romance.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, many languages – most notably among

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This expansion into the domain of modality is obviously less viable, e.g., in Italian (where it is restricted to stylistically substandard usages) due to the division of labor between Indicative and Subjunctive PPF. Needless to say, the existence of PPF tenses in different moods is a highly interesting topic, which however this paper does not address. To the extent that Subjunctive Pluperfects will show up in the examples presented below, the analysis will be restricted to their temporal-aspectual meaning, while their modality component will not be discussed.

<sup>3</sup> A case in point is Italian, with two Pluperfects in the indicative mood (apart from the Subjunctive PPF), traditionally called *Trapassato Prossimo* and *Trapassato Remoto* (*Piucheperfetto* and *Trapassato* in Bertinetto 1986). The examples to be discussed in this paper are however limited to the most frequent (and semantically unconstrained) alternative, namely the PPF (*Piucheperfetto*). For a discussion of the structural differences between these two forms, see Bertinetto (1987).

<sup>4</sup> The use of the “narrative” Present in English oral narratives, and its strategic alternation with the Simple Past, has been extensively studied at least since Wolfson (1979), Schiffrin (1981) and Silva-Corvalán (1983). As for the alternation between Simple vs. Compound Past, the issue was dealt with at

those spoken in Africa – even dispose of a specific (set of) “narrative” tense(s), only to be used in this type of texts, traditionally produced in oral form. Apparently, this is not the case in the European languages, where the typically propulsive tenses have, to a lesser or larger extent, a wider usage potential. However, on close inspection it turns out that something of the sort may be detected even in the European literary tradition. Indeed, in literary narratives the propulsive function is fulfilled by tenses which, although far from unmarked in general, should be regarded as unmarked precisely in such contexts. The reason for this is straightforward, as noted by Fludernik (1993). The tense-aspect system underlying oral linguistic productions is anchored on the Speech Time, acting as the deictic pole of attraction. Thus, the Present is the unmarked tense in normal situations. In literary texts, by contrast, an imaginary “Speech Time” is conventionally adopted, ostensibly distinct from the *hic et nunc* of the act of writing and assumed to be localized in a fictional past, even when the author describes a future world (as is typical of science-fiction narratives). This fictional anchoring time, implicitly shared by the reader, produces a thorough reorientation of the time-axis, to the effect that the propulsive Past becomes, in such contexts, the unmarked tense around which the whole system recalibrates itself.

In recent times, several attempts have been made in different literary environments to renew the narrative strategies, by promoting to propulsive function tenses that were traditionally alien to it. The present author has demonstrated this with examples drawn from the Italian literature of the past few decades (Bertinetto 2001; 2003, ch. 2). One of the devices exploited to this effect is the use of the PPF as an alternative to the Simple Past. This study extends the analysis with further examples.

## 2 Anteriority Pluperfect vs. aoristic Pluperfect

Assuming Reichenbach’s (1947) classical proposal, the semantic representation of the PPF’s prototypical uses may be symbolized as in the following diagram. The localization of R can be explicit or implicit, as shown in [1]:

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length in Weinrich’s (1964) seminal work, although the conclusions arrived at appear to be rather aprioristic according to the present author.

*Prototypical structure of the PPF*

\_\_\_\_\_E\_\_\_\_\_R\_\_\_\_\_S\_\_\_\_\_

- [1] a. At 5 o'clock, Peter *had* already *left* [explicit R-localization]  
 b. Peter *had* already *left* at 5 o'clock. [implicit R-localization]

Although the linguistic material is the same in both cases, the informational content and its syntactic implementation (not discussed here) are radically different. The temporal adverbial *at 5 o'clock* plays a different role in the two sentences. In (a), it fulfills the R role, while the localization of E is left vague. In (b), instead, the adverbial explicitly localizes E, while R has to be recovered from the preceding context.<sup>5</sup> The two sentences are thus symmetric in terms of explicitness: (a) makes R explicit, while leaving E's localization vague; in (b) the contrary occurs. The double reading possibility of examples such as those in [1] was already noted by Reichenbach in his seminal work, with a slightly different interpretation. But whatever the interpretation of the adverbial (as either R or localizer of E), it is important to observe in this context that the aspectual structure of the PPF is the same in both cases.

The above structure is also to be found in other more specific, yet fairly traditional uses of the PPF, like the so-called 'explanatory' PPF. This is associated with sentences such as [2], where the natural sequence of the events is reversed (aniconical order) and the second clause provides an explanation for the unexpected situation depicted by the preceding one. Here the first clause plays the role of R, while E's localization remains vague:

- [2] It was completely dark. Somebody *had disconnected* the electricity.

An important fact to be retained from the above discussion is that, whenever a PPF is met, the hearer/reader starts the search for a suitable R in order to saturate this indispensable structural projection. Should the immediately previous context not provide a viable R, the search continues until saturation occurs, for this is strictly required by the aspectual nature of the ordinary PPF. Indeed, an abrupt story's

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<sup>5</sup> The reader can easily construe a plausible context with a little exercise of imagination. The two readings of the PPF in [1] were respectively called "perfect-in-the-past" and "past-in-the-past" by Comrie (1976: 56). Although in most languages they are conveyed by one and the same form, Squartini (1999) has shown that this is not always the case, with examples from Portuguese and Zürich German.

beginning such as *Mary had forgotten the car's key* immediately prompts the hearer/reader to locate R at a conventional point-in-time, to be identified with the current stage of the plot, such that the event of forgetting must have occurred at some undefined moment preceding the given temporal stage.

Despite the fairly robust stability of the PPF's representation, in some languages one observes a growing tendency of the PPF to be used in purely aoristic contexts, i.e. as an alternative to the purely perfective Past(s). This is notably the case as far as the propulsive function of literary narratives is concerned, but the same tendency may be observed in spontaneous oral usage. A number of examples will be provided below. This may be understood as a development subsequent – but connected to – the tendency of the present-perfect to invade the aorist's territory. This well-known drift, which might be called “Perfektschwund”,<sup>6</sup> has been pointed out for several unrelated languages and at different diachronic stages, and appears to be a sort of cognitive constant underlying the unstable relation opposing present-perfect and aorist. The delicate texture of the present-perfect, as indicating the “current relevance of a past event”, often tends to gradually shift into the (aspectually quite distinct) notion of “event concluded in the past”. Squartini & Bertinetto (2000) analyzed this diachronic process in the Romance languages, also pointing out alternative solutions (like the unusual division of labor between Simple vs. Compound Past in Portuguese). The point to be retained here is that the analogous, although less widespread, shift of the PPF into the aoristic-aspect area of pure perfectivity seems to be another instance of the general drift consisting in the loss of aspectual specificity by the perfect-tenses (aoristic-drift).<sup>7</sup>

From the structural-semantic point of view, this phenomenon corresponds to the loss of the R component. This applies to both the present-perfect and the PPF in their aoristic uses. The illustration in [3] is limited to the former tense, but the situation of the aoristic PPF is, *mutatis mutandis*, identical:

[3] a. John *has broken* his left arm while jumping over a fence.

<sup>6</sup> The inspiration stems from the term “Praeteritumschwund”, apparently introduced by Leo Spitzer (1929). See also Drinka (2004). Thanks are due to Mario Squartini for providing these references.

<sup>7</sup> Although the aoristic-drift is mainly known with reference to the shift from present-perfect to aorist (Perfektschwund), the analogous change concerning the PPF is more widespread than normally assumed. As Haverling (2005; 2008) shows, this process occurred in Late Latin, with forms such as *inventum fuerat* instead of Class. Lat. *inventum erat* ‘it had been found’.

- b. \* Last Tuesday, John *has broken* his left arm while jumping over a fence.
- c. Last Tuesday, John *broke* his left arm while jumping over a fence.
- d. Martedì scorso, Gianni *si è rotto / si rompe* il braccio sinistro saltando una siepe.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, a sentence such as (b) is ungrammatical in most English dialects, for the current relevance associated to the Present Perfect is incompatible with the concomitant localization of E within the same sentence (it might, though, be stated in a syntactically separate sentence). The Simple Past in (c) amends this fault, for its semantic representation does not presuppose the presence of the R component, at least in the approach proposed by Bertinetto (1982; 1986): the Eng. Simple Past merely implements a deictic relation between S and E and thus allows the explicit localization of the latter component. The reason why R and E cannot both be localized within the boundary of one and the same sentence (with, to the best of the present knowledge, only one very specific exception, as shown in Bertinetto 1982 and 1986) is a poorly understood fact, which this paper does not address. Suffice it to say that it is an observationally very robust datum and it will thus be taken for granted in what follows. Sentence (d) is the Italian translation of (c), with one notable difference: the sentence contains two alternatives, the Compound and the Simple Past (in this order), which in the given context turn out to be equivalent. The choice between the one and the other form is largely dependent on the language variety spoken by the individual speaker (Bertinetto & Squartini 1996). Needless to say, these two tenses are not equivalent in every context, but the point at issue here is that, given the appropriate context, they may turn out to be interchangeable. This shows that in at least some cases, and in the relevant language varieties, the It. Compound Past, by losing the R component, replaces the original semantic representation – that of the prototypical present-perfect – with the one pertaining to the aoristic (purely perfective) past, as shown in the following diagram:



Interestingly, in Ancient Italian a somehow opposite tendency was at work, for the Simple Past could often be used instead of a PPF. This can still be observed in modern

literature, although much less frequently. Example [4] shows this with the first two Simple Pasts, whose temporal localization is the same as that of the following PPF:<sup>8</sup>

[4] Renato Fucini, *All'aria aperta* (1887), Roma, Newton Compton 1978 (p.154)

Purtroppo il dottore non *sbagliò* SP-1 quando, dopo aver tentato ogni mezzo suggeritogli dalla sua scienza, *dichiarò* SP-2 incurabile il fanciullo e gravissime e irrimediabili le lesioni prodotte alla spina dalla caduta. « Forse vivrà, » *aveva detto* PPF il dottore, «vivrà per mezzo di cure speciali ed assidue, ma di una vita languida e dolorosa; e non potrà mai servirsi delle sue gambe ». E il presagio non *fallì* SP-3.

[Unfortunately, the doctor *did* not *make a mistake* SP-1 when... he *stated* SP-2 ... “Perhaps he will survive», the doctor *had said* PPF ... This prediction *came out true* SP-3.]

It would be farfetched to state that the above-mentioned Simple Pasts project an additional R component in their semantic representation. It is a fact, however, that the latent presence of this component may be reconstructed due to context redundancy.

Coming back to the issue of the aoristic PPF, it should be mentioned that Bertinetto & Squartini [1996], in a study devoted to the assessment of the Simple vs. Compound Past usage in a number of geographically-distinct varieties of Italian, sporadically collected unexpected examples of Aor/PPF in the questionnaire responses. This invariably occurred in contexts which forced an aoristic, rather than perfect, view. This confirms the impression that this marginal use of the PPF has found its way in the Italian colloquial register. This is not the only case in the Romance area: Cotte [1987:102] reports that French children frequently say *hier il avait plu* instead of *hier il a plu* ‘yesterday it rained’. Needless to say, the frequency with which the Aor/PPF shows up in the different types of text might dramatically differ, but this is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on literary texts.

Given this state of affairs, one might wonder whether the expansion of the PPF into an aspectual territory that used to be alien to it involves its eventual loss of semantic identity, similarly to what happened to the present-perfect in several languages (such as the Fr. *Passé Composé* or the South. Germ. *Perfekt*, at least as far as oral usage is

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<sup>8</sup> The English translations are merely suggestive and limited to the essential features. They should be regarded as a help to the reader unfamiliar with the original language. The reader should also be aware that the tenses' labels accompanying the English forms in some cases simply repeat the labels of the corresponding Italian forms for ease of the reader, rather than mirroring the actual grammatical value of the translation.

concerned). This issue will be addressed in the final section of this paper. For simplicity, the two competing readings of the PPF, the ordinary “anteriority PPF” and the “aoristic PPF” will from now on be indicated as **Ant/PPF** and **Aor/PPF**. To avoid misunderstanding, it should be kept in mind that the term “anteriority PPF” does not distinguish between the two readings of the PPF in [1], for they both correspond to the prototypical aspectual value of this tense.

### 3 “Aoristic” uses of the Pluperfect in modern Italian literary prose

The texts to be discussed in this section stem from literary texts written within the past 150 years approximately. One obvious reason for the choice of literary texts is their pragmatic richness, allowing a deeper understanding of the factors at play. Needless to say, the frequency with which the Aor/PPF presents itself in a given author, or in a given work by a given author, varies considerably; in this paper, however, only occasional mention will be devoted to these stylistic observations, while the focus will be on the single examples and their contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

The first excerpts stem from a once very popular author, active in the first half of the last century and celebrated for his writings conceived for the teen-agers’ readership. In his stylistically not very polished writings, the Aor/PPF is frequently found. Needless to say, in this example, like in all subsequent ones, a larger context would make things easier for the reader of this paper; however, the accompanying comments should hopefully clarify the most salient details. In [5], the first two PPFs ostensibly display the propulsive function, for they continue the temporal line initiated by the first Simple Past; by contrast, PPF-3 is a well-behaved Ant/PPF describing a previous event, after which the main thread-of-discourse resumes with another Simple Past. In example [6], one finds a similar situation: the first two Simple Pasts introduce the current point-in-time in the thread-of-discourse, to which PPFs-1/2 add a further development. In no possible way could the last two events precede the two previous ones, for they are their natural consequence (the bear could only shout and fall after being hit by the bullet). PPF-3, by contrast, is an Ant/PPF, selecting SP-3 as R. The interpretation of PPF-4 is a more delicate matter: since the event designated is the same as the one referred to by the preceding Simple Past (SP-4), it cannot by definition be anterior to the latter. One must thus assume that the thread-of-discourse continues to advance, so that one may understand PPF-4 as a comment addressing the just



mentioned event. This shows that the absence of an explicit R is no hindrance to understanding a PPF as an ordinary Ant/PPF. The inertial advancement of the narrative might be all the reader needs in order to construe a contextually suitable R:

[5] Salgari (*Avventure di prateria...*: 279)<sup>9</sup>

- Capitano, - *gridò* SP-1, - all'erta! Un orso si è introdotto nel nostro rifugio!

Il comandante, svegliato bruscamente da quelle grida, *s'era sbarazzato* PPF-1 prontamente della coperta e *aveva afferrato* PPF-2 il fucile che *s'era messo* PPF-3 al fianco.

- Dov'è, Torp ? - *chiese* SP-2.

[“Captain, alarm! – he *shouted* SP-1 – a bear has crept in!” The captain... *got* immediately *rid* PPF-1 of his blanket and *got hold* PPF-2 of his rifle, which he *had put* PPF-3 near him. “Where is Torp? – he *asked* SP-2.]

[6] Salgari (*Avventure di prateria...*: 334)

«Fuoco!», *gridai* SP-1.

Due spari *rimbombarono* SP-2 quasi istantaneamente. L'orso *aveva mandato* PPF-1 un urlo acuto ed *era caduto* PPF-2, avvoltolandosi fra la neve.

La femmina *era pure stata colpita* PPF-3, poiché la *vedemmo* SP-3 accostarsi al maschio, zoppicando.

«Sono nostri!», *gridai* SP-4, slanciandomi fuori della capanna. *Avevo però gridato* PPF-4 troppo presto vittoria!

[«Fire!» I *shouted* SP-1. Two shoots *thundered* SP-2 almost immediately. The bear *made* PPF-1 a resounding voice and *fell* PPF-2 ... The female bear *had been hit* PPF-3 too, because we *saw* SP-3 it... «We got them!» – I *shouted* SP-4 ... But I *had been* PPF-4 to hasty]

What strikes the imagination, in examples [5-6], is that a tense normally used to depict a temporally antecedent and backgrounded situation is used, instead, to propel the plot development. In this respect, the Aor/PPF might be regarded as equivalent to the traditional propulsive tense, i.e. the Simple Past. There is, however, an important difference. Due to a kind of residue of its prototypical meaning, the Aor/PPF conveys a

<sup>9</sup> In contradistinction to all other texts, the year of first publication is not indicated for Salgari's quotations. They derive from a collection of his short stories, published independently from one another towards the beginning of the last century.

pragmatic overtone of anteriority. Because of this, the Aor/PPFs in [5-6] suggest a sort of “immediate completion” of the event, producing an effect of sudden acceleration in the thread-of-discourse. It is as though the plot underwent, so to say, an abrupt forward-jump, such that the reader suddenly finds himself at a slightly more advanced stage than expected, based on the perceived speed of the previous course-of-events. In other words, the reader is biased, so to say, to detect a sort of temporally adjacent R, directly following the completion of the event. However, this is a merely pragmatic effect.

Needless, to say, the situation is not always as crystal clear as in the two above excerpts from Salgari. The following example shows a more ambiguous situation, for here the PPF might preserve its usual meaning of anteriority: the act of taking the other’s hand might easily be understood as referring to the immediately preceding stage in the thread-of-discourse, with the current point-in-time providing the required R. It is, however, also conceivable to view the given act as directly following the previous event of coming in front of each other. Thus, the point to be retained here is that, once the Aor/PPF has made its way into the repertoire of the Italian writers, the competent reader is in permanent doubt as for the actual interpretation of the dubious instances. To put it in abrupt terms: Once Aor/PPF, always Aor/PPF (at least as a latent possibility).

[7] Cassola (*La casa di via Valadier* (1956): 109)

Un uomo gli *veniva* IPF-1 incontro sul marciapiede e già a distanza *cominciò* SP-1 a sorridere e a far mostra di averlo riconosciuto. Anche a Leonardo *sembrò* SP-2 una faccia nota, ma non *riusciva* IPF-2 a raccapezzarsi. Ecco, *erano fermi* IPF-3 uno davanti all’altro, l’uomo gli *aveva preso* PPF la mano e gliela *stringeva* IPF-4 vigorosamente; poi gli *gettò* SP-3 addirittura le braccia al collo.

[A man *was coming* IPF-1 toward him... and *started* SP-1 to smile... Leonardo too *had the impression* SP-2 that he knew him, but he *could* IPF-2 not find out. Now they *were standing* IPF-3 in front of each other, the man *took* PPF his hand and *shook* IPF-4 it energetically; then he even *embraced* SP-3 him]

A similar condition of uncertainty may be detected in the following text. As the reader can verify, it is not at all impossible to interpret all PPFs as instances of Ant/PPF, with the first Simple Past (SP-1) providing the needed R to PPFs-1/2, and the second Simple Past (SP-2) providing analogous anchoring to PPFs-3/4. However, it is

equally likely to read all four PPFs as instances of Aor/PPF, inducing the pragmatic effect of plot-acceleration mentioned above. The reader is thus trapped into a kind of “temporal illusion”, similar to the well-known cases of visual illusion. Just as (in the most famous of such cases) the experiencer has to choose between two glasses or two profiles, unable as s/he is to see them both at the same time, in the case at hand the reader has to decide whether s/he wants to slow-down the course of events (Ant/PPFs) or accelerate it (Aor/PPFs):

[8] Lombardi (*Barcelona* (1963): 59-60)

«Ebbene,» *disse* SP-1 il controllore, «un istante, per favore.» *Aveva chiamato* PPF-1 un altro ferroviere che *aveva sfogliato* PPF-2 piú volte il biglietto. Giovanni *guardava* IPF davanti a sé restando immobile.

[...] «Infine...» *disse* SP-2. *Aveva alzato* PPF-3 una spalla, gli *aveva reso* PPF-4 il biglietto e *se ne era andato* PPF-5.

[«Well» *said* SP-1 the conductor «a moment please». He *called* PPF-1 a colleague of his who *examined* PPF-2 the ticket several times. Giovanni *was looking* IPF in front of himself without moving. [...] «Well well...» he *said* SP-2. He *lifted* PPF-3 a shoulder, *gave* PPF-4 him *back* the ticket and *left* PPF-5.]

The following excerpt yields a more difficult case. It must be underlined, to start with, that the first PPFs should not be directly interpreted as an obvious instances of Ant/PPF, for the preceding context (not reported here) does not provide any explicit R. By contrast, PPF-3 and PPF-6 are well-behaved cases of Ant/PPF; as such, they will not be further discussed. In order to interpret the text in [9], one must note that the episode consists of three successive temporal planes, as indicated in the text for ease of the reader. At stage (I), PPFs-1/2 present the reactions of the protagonist to a previous event. One is thus invited to read them as Aor/PPFs, for they obviously cannot indicate anteriority with respect to the events that triggered them; however, one cannot exclude the alternative Ant/PPF interpretation, whereby an implicit R is assumed (obviously posterior to the designated stage of the plot) with respect to which PPFs-1/2 are evaluated. This is therefore another instance of undecidable ambiguity. The beginning of stage (II) is marked by the underlined adverb *poi* ‘later on’. Here again, PPFs-4/8 (excepting PPF-6), alternating with the back-ground Imperfects, show the same sort of ambiguity. One possibility would be to anchor them all on the R provided by the

Simple Past to be found in stage (III); in this case, the events of stage (II) might be read as a kind of flash-back. Alternatively, the PPFs of stage (II) might be viewed as Aor/PPFs, without any required anchoring. The kind of oniric atmosphere characterizing stage (II) adds to the ambiguity of the whole. As may be seen, in modern Italian literature the stylistically aware writers readily exploit the range of semantic possibilities allowed by the PPF in order to create situations of relative uncertainty as for the temporal articulation of the plot:

[9] Tabucchi (*Piccoli equivoci senza importanza* (1985): 51-52)

(I) E questo *mi era sembrato* PPF-1 troppo, impossibile a pensarsi, ma non *avevo fatto obiezioni* PPF-2 perché l'occhio di Clelia *roteava* IPF-1 troppo vorticosamente, e la zia Ester mi *aveva raccomandato* PPF-3 di non contrariarla, le *faceva* IPF-2 male alla salute [...]; (II) però **poi** la notte non *ero riuscito* PPF-4 a dormire, *avevo sognato* PPF-5 lo zio Tullio vestito con un impermeabile che *comandava* IPF-3 un plotone di esecuzione, sulle labbra *aveva* IPF-4 il suo bel sorriso e dal colletto dell'impermeabile *sbucava* IPF-5 il papillon; e il condannato *era* IPF-6 lo zio Andrea, che però io non *avevo conosciuto* PPF-6 [...] però *capivo* IPF-7 che *era* IPF-8 lo zio Andrea perché *gridava* IPF-9: sono il papà di Clelia! Quel grido *mi aveva svegliato* PPF-7 in mezzo alla notte, il parco *era* IPF-10 pieno di grilli e la litoranea *era* IPF-11 completamente deserta, *ero rimasto* PPF-8 a sentire il rumore del mare non so per quanto tempo, forse fino all'alba. [...10 LINES... ]  
(III) Lo zio Tullio *arrivò* SP con un gattino.

[(I) This *appeared to be* PPF-1 too much to me... but I *did not object* PPF-2 because Clelia *was turning* IPF-1 her eyes... and aunt Ester *had told* PPF-3 me not to contradict her, it *was* IPF-2 bad for her health...; (II) **later on** however, during the night, I *did not manage* PPF-4 to sleep, I *dreamed* PPF-5 of uncle Tullio... *giving orders* IPF-3 to a firing party ... ; the convict *was* IPF-6 my uncle Andrea, whom I *had not got to know* PPF-6..., but I *realized* IPF-7 that it *was* IPF-8 uncle Andrea because he *shouted* IPF-9 ... That shout *woke me up* PPF-7 ... the park *was* IPF-10 full of crickets and the road *was* IPF-11 empty, I *had remained* PPF-8 there for who knows how long in order to listen... (III) Uncle Tullio *arrived* SP with a kitten.]

The following text needs some clarification. For ease of the reader, it is divided into two sections. In the first one, the figure of bishop Bascapé is introduced. The writer presents him as an intellectually and morally rigid person, arising an intense feeling of hatred in all those – the great majority – who do not bear his intolerant doctrine. This is depicted by means of a series of 11 Ant/PPFs (not all preserved in the quotation below), all anchored on the R provided by the current stage of the plot, which is made

explicit by the underlined adverb *ora* ‘now’. Section (I) ends at the point when Bascapé (whom the writer defines a “dead”, with reference to his pityless nature) is coming to visit the religious institutions of the town where the events take place, receiving the applause of a crowd of religious and believers. Section (II) introduces Antonia – the protagonist of the novel – as she is coming out of the church to meet the bishop. Antonia is, at the current point, a very young girl. She is supposed to recite a welcoming strophe to the visitor, but, as it happens, she will not be able to do so: the excitement makes her oblivious, to the uttermost disappointment of everybody around her. This is an emblematic episode, for it marks the beginning of Antonia’s tragic life. The point of interest, for the concern of this paper, is the series of Aor/PPFs beginning with PPF-7 and extending up to PPF-27, only excepting PPF-10 and PPF-28 which are ordinary Ant/PPFs. For the purpose at hand, this series of PPFs is doubly interesting. First, because of its unusual length; second, because this ordered series of events cannot be construed as anterior to any contextually anchored R, for they are all subsequent to the point-in-time set up by the adverb *now* at the end of section (I). The reader might have a slight hesitation with the first element of the series (PPF-7), but it soon becomes clear that this as well as all subsequent events designated by a PPF (with the two mentioned exceptions) belong to the main line of the plot. They necessarily act as propulsive tenses:

[10] Vassalli (*La chimera* (1990): 22-23)

(I) Gli atti, poi, *furono* SP-1 coerenti ed adeguati all’enormità dell’impresa [...]. In nemmeno cinque anni dacché era a Novara, Bascapé *aveva scomunicato* PPF-1 un podestà, tale Alessandro Lessona, e buona parte del clero, canonici inclusi; *s’era accapigliato* PPF-2 con il senato di Milano, con il governatore, con tutti gli ordini religiosi presenti in città e nella diocesi, con l’inquisitore Buelli del Sant’Uffizio, con i parroci [...]. E i suoi fedeli [...] *avevano cercato* PPF-3 di ripagarlo con la stessa moneta, ma senza successo: come si fa ad assassinare un defunto? *Ci avevano provato* PPF-4 con il veleno, due volte e poi con un colpo d’archibugio, e poi ancora *avevano cercato* PPF-5 di fargli cadere addosso il terrazzino d’una casa che lui *stava visitando*: inutilmente! Il corpo del defunto *era uscito* PPF-6 indenne da tutte quelle prove ed ora *se ne veniva* IPF-1 giù per la discesa, piano piano, in mezzo ai suoi seminaristi, ai suoi canonici, agli archibugieri del castellano spagnolo, agli esposti che *gridavano* IPF-2 senza più voce:  
«Evviva sua eccellenza monsignor vescovo! Evviva il vescovo Bascapé!»

(II) *Venendo fuori* GR dal buio della chiesa, Antonia *era rimasta* PPF-7 abbacinata dal sole, dalla folla, dal chiasso: senza quasi rendersene conto, *s’era ritrovata* PPF-8 sopra un palco, davanti al vescovo e ai canonici che la guardavano sorridendo in un certo modo («Sbrigati a recitare la tua poesia, - diceva l’espressione di quei visi, - e

facciamola finita»), con tutti gli occhi puntati su di lei; *aveva avuto* PPF-9 un primo smarrimento, forse a causa della levataccia o di quell'uovo che l'*avevano costretta* PPF-10 a bere contro volontà, le *era sembrato* PPF-11 che tutto si offuscasse e che tutto le girasse intorno: il palco, il vescovo, la Pia Casa, le mura di Novara. Riunendo tutte le sue forze, *aveva balbettato* PPF-12:

«Noi miserele plaudiamo. . . »

ed *era rimasta* PPF-13 là, ritta, con la bocca aperta, le mani che annaspavano. Sentiva suor Clelia che da dietro suggeriva, quasi gridando: «Al grande vescovo cristiano! Al grande vescovo cristiano! » ma non aveva la forza di dire niente. Poi tutto *era diventato* PPF-14 buio e lei *aveva perso* PPF-15 conoscenza, *s'era abbattuta* PPF-16 sulle assi del palco. Le ali *s'erano staccate* PPF-17 e anche l'aureola di cartone *era rotolata* PPF-18 fino ai piedi di monsignor Cavagna che, sforzandosi un poco per via della corporatura, *s'era chinato* PPF-19 a raccogliarla. Bascapè *aveva avuto* PPF-20 un gesto di disappunto, *aveva mormorato* PPF-21: «Chissà cosa le hanno fatto! Quelle stupide!» (Naturalmente, si riferiva alle suore). *S'era voltato* PPF-22 per scendere dal palco, *era entrato* PPF-23 in chiesa e tutti gli *erano andati* PPF-24 dietro: seminaristi, canonici, esposte e esposti ed anche alcuni fedeli lo *avevano seguito* PPF-25 fuori Porta Santa Croce, venendo dalla città. Dal gruppetto delle suore *s'era alzato* PPF-26 un grido:

«Evviva sua eccellenza monsignor vescovo! Evviva il vescovo Bascapè! »

Dopo pranzo, in segno di perdono, Antonia *era stata ammessa* PPF-27 nel refettorio delle monache per baciare l'anello di sua signoria il vescovo: che - le disse suor Clelia mentre l'accompagnava - *aveva voluto* PPF-28 dare a tutte loro questo esempio della sua carità [...]

[(I) The subsequent acts *were* SP-1 consistent ... In less than five year, bishop Bascapé *had excommunicated* PPF-1 ... *had had* PPF-2 a tough confrontation with... The believers *had attempted* PPF-3 to repay him with the same money... They *had tried* PPF-4 with poison... They *had tried* PPF-5 to kill him by causing the collapsing of a balcony... The dead's body *had come out* PPF-6 immune of all those attempts and **now** *was* slowly *coming* IPF-1 down, surrounded by his seminarists [...] who *were shouting* IPF-2 ...

[(II) *Coming out* GR of the church's darkness, Antonia *was dazzled* PPF-7 by the sun... she *found herself* PPF-8 on the stand... she *felt lost* PPF-9, perhaps because of that egg that they *had forced* PPF-10 her to drink, it *seemed* PPF-11 to her that the light went off...: she *stuttered* PPF-12 ... and *remained* PPF-13 there standing... Then everything *became dark* PPF-14 ... and she *fainted* PPF-15, she *fell* PPF-16 on the floor. The wings *fell apart* PPF-17 and the paper aureole *rolled* on the floor PPF-18 towards Monseigneur Cavagna who... *leaned down* PPF-19 to collect it. Bascapé *had* PPF-20 an expression of disappointment, he *whispered* PPF-21 ... He *turned* PPF-22 to get down from the stand, *entered* PPF-23 the church and everybody *followed* PPF-24/5 him... From the sisters

group a shout *came out* PPF-26 ... After lunch, Antonia *was admitted* PPF-27 ... the bishop who... *had wanted* PPF-28 to give this example...]

#### 4 Analysis of one case: Ugo Cornia's short stories

A book recently published by a young author provides good confirmation of the above observations. In the enjoyable collection of short stories by Ugo Cornia (*Le storie di mia zia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008), one finds abundant examples of the Aor/PPF, together with a fairly unconventional use of the tenses in general. In what follows the focus will be on the PPF use, while the other tenses will be mentioned only inasmuch as needed for the present concern. In particular, little attention will be devoted to the Imperfects, which are never used propulsively in the reported examples, although this possibility is not excluded (see the so-called “narrative Imperfect”). It should be noted that Cornia often uses the Compound Past, instead of the Simple Past, as a propulsive tense. As any competent reader immediately understands, this is a mimetic feature derived from Northern Italian colloquial usage, which gives the page a local coloring. In each of the following examples all temporal adverbs are underlined, in order to make the temporal texture emerge as neatly as possible. By contrast, some of the verbal forms are not italicized, for they depict minor, back-grounded details, irrelevant for the discussion.

In example [11], one might legitimately assume the temporal plane of the two final Compound Past as the R required by the preceding PPFs. However, as will soon become clear, the frequency with which the Aor/PPF shows up in these texts is such, that the reader soon finds her/himself in doubt as for the actual interpretation of the individual cases. The next example is a case in point. In [12], PPF-1 cannot be understood as anterior to the Progressive Imperfect (PR-IPF), for it is necessarily simultaneous with the latter event for obvious pragmatic reasons. No other contextual element suggests itself as a plausible R. PPF-2 is, instead, a fairly normal Ant/PPF anchored on PPF-1 (although in the English translation the Simple Past sounds more appropriate):

- [11] (p.49) Una domenica che avrò avuto sette o otto anni *erano venuti* PPF-1 in visita e a pranzo lo zio Santo, da Milano, la zia Fila, che invece stava a Modena in via Prampolini, e poi *c'era* IPF-1 la zia Maria, e loro avevano tutti già più di ottant'anni, [...] e dopo tutti i discorsi e i saluti e gli abbracci ci *eravamo messi* PPF-2 tutti a mangiare e *c'era* IPF-2 il solito clima allegro e un po' esaltato, ma a un certo punto a

me *era venuto* PPF-3 da fare pipì allora l'*avevo detto* PPF-4 a mia mamma che mi *ha detto* CP-1 di andare in bagno. Così *mi sono alzato* CP-2 [...]

[One Sunday when I was 7 or 8 year old... my uncle Santo... and my aunt Fila... *came* PPF-1 to visit us... and there *was* IPF-1 also aunt Maria... we *started* PPF-2 to eat and as usually there *was* IPF-2 a very happy atmosphere, but at some point I *felt* PPF-3 like making pipi and then I *said* PPF-4 it to my mother, who *told* CP-1 me... So I *stood up* CP-2...]

- [12] (p.89) A quell'epoca, verso i quindici o sedici anni, che *mi piacevano* IPF i cimiteri e le storie di cimiteri, io una volta *stavo parlando* PR-IPF con Sandro Magni, e lui mi *aveva raccontato* PPF-1 che verso il 1930 a Magreta *c'era stato* PPF-2 uno che era in giro di notte [...]

[At the time... when I *was fascinated* IPF by graveyards and stories about them... I *was one day talking* PR-IPF to Sandro Magni, and he *told* PPF-1 me that towards 1930, in Magreta, there *was* PPF-2 a man...]

The following are rather striking cases. For self-explaining pragmatic reasons, in [13] the act of asking must precede the act of answering: thus, if this were a traditionally structured narrative, one would expect the Ant/PPF for the former event and a suitably propulsive tense for the latter, or at least a propulsive tense for both events. Here, instead, an Aor/ PPF appears after an initial Compound Past. In [14], a dramatic episode is described, with a bull scaringly running among the crowd. The episode opens with a Simple Past, but in the most dynamic phase the writer makes use of the Aor/PPF, with two further modulations into the Compound Past and again into the Aor/PPF, to depict successive phases of achieved calm. In this example the accelerating effect sometimes attached to the Aor/PPF is quite prominent, just as in the Salgari's quotations discussed above. This stylistic-pragmatic effect is thus ostensibly tied to the abrupt appearance of the Aor/PPF in passages characterized by a heavily dramatic atmosphere and a perceived fast events development:

- [13] (p.96) E tra l'altro, visto che lui lo conosceva da di più, io una volta *ho chiesto* CP a Gianni come mai Kappa lo chiamavano tutti Kappa, e Gianni mi *aveva detto* PPF [...]

[... one day I *asked* CP Gianni... and Gianni *said* PPF]



[14] (p.11) In quel momento il terrore della gente *fu* SP oltremisura e tutti *scappavano* IPF da tutte le parti.

Ma poi dalla folla in fuga *era uscito* PPF-1 un bambino che avrà avuto al massimo dieci anni, e *aveva urlato* PPF-2 al toro “Basta, Dorando, calmati”, e il toro *si era fermato* PPF-3 all’istante, e allora il bambino gli *ha accarezzato* CP-1 il naso e tenendolo per l’anella, *ha riportato* CP-2 la bestia, tornata ormai mansueta, alla sua catena. Dopo, tutto *era tornato* PPF-4 a svolgersi tranquillo.

[At that point the people’s terror *was* SP at its maximum and everybody *was running* IPF away. But then a little *came out* PPF-1 ... and *shouted* PPF-2 ... The bull *stopped* PPF-3 at once... the boy *caressed* CP-1 its nose ... *brought back* CP-2 the animal... Later on, everything *was* PPF-4 quiet again]

The next series of examples shows a stylistic technique frequently employed by the writer. As it happens, Cornia often exploits the commutation from one propulsive tense to another in order to partition the text into different sections, more or less corresponding to the major turning-points of the plot. This is what Bertinetto (2001; 2003) called “chromatic” use of the tenses, whereby each section presents, so to say, its own color, more or less like in musical pieces a composer modulates from one tonality into another. Considering that the propulsive function, for Cornia, can be attributed not only to the Simple Past, as in traditional narratives, but to a larger array of tenses (Present, Compound Past, “narrative” Imperfect, PPF), the “chromatic” possibilities are sufficiently rich. In example [15], the first turning-point is right at the beginning, as suggested by the temporal adverbial. This triggers a brief section based on the Aor/PPF, followed by a new section announced by the second temporal adverbial and eventually implemented by the third one (*allora* ‘at that point’), bringing about the shift to the Compound Past (with PPF-4 in the traditional anteriority reading). Since the aim of these short stories is to create a subtly humoristic atmosphere, the main reason for using the PPF as a propulsive tense is to inject a dynamic effect in an otherwise unpretentious plot, where no really dramatic events occur. Excerpt [16] starts right at the beginning of the story, with the Compound Past as the initial propulsive tense. Immediately afterwards, the adverb *poi* ‘then’ marks the transition to the second section, where the aoristic PPF-1 is the only propulsive tense, while all other tenses depict previous events (PPFs-2/5) or back-grounded ones (the two Imperfects). Finally, with the turning-point marked by the new occurrence of *poi*, the writer shifts back to the Compound Past. Example [17] is fairly similar to the previous one. The brief section introduced by *poi* has PPF-1 in propulsive function,

with PPF-2 in the traditional anteriority function. The shift to the next section, indicated by *una sera* ‘one evening’, brings about the Compound Past, preceded by another instance of Ant/PPF (PPF-3):

[15] (p.39) [*the preceding text describes a static situation, with people suffering from hunger*] Un bel momento vicino a casa loro *avevano iniziato* PPF-1 a far le briglie nei torrenti e lui e Mangialastre per guadagnare due soldi *erano andati* PPF-2 a lavorare alle briglie. [...] Una volta, mentre Mangialastre lo *stava guardando* PR-IPF mangiare, l’ingegnere *aveva tirato fuori* PPF-3 dalla sua borsa una bevanda verdina. Allora Mangialastre, che non *aveva mai visto* PPF-4 una bevanda verdina, *ha chiesto* CP all’ingegnere che cos’era [...]

[At some point they *started* PPF-1 ... so that he and Mangialastre *went* PPF-2 to work... One day, as Mangialastre *was watching* PR-IPF him eating, the engineer, *took out* PPF-3 ... At that point Mangialastre, who *had never seen* PPF-4 ... *asked* CP the engineer...]

[16] (p.91) Mia zia Bruna *è stata* CP-1 agnostica fin da ragazza [...] a molte cose non riusciva a crederci.

Invece poi *si era sposata* PPF-1 con uno che si chiamava Renato [...]. Questo mio zio Renato, che *era diventato* PPF-2 funzionario del Ministero per l’Industria [...], *era stato mandato* PPF-3 per lavoro presso la Camera di Commercio di Modena, così a Modena *si era conosciuto* PPF-4 con mia zia e *si erano sposati* PPF-5. E visto che *era* IPF-1 così religioso, e in modo totalmente sincero, mia zia tutte le domeniche mattina lo *accompagnava* IPF-2 a messa per non fargli dispiacere.

Poi *è successa* CP-2 una cosa che gli *ha fatto* CP-3 completamente mettere in dubbio le sue credenze religiose. [...]

[My aunt Bruna *was* CP-1 agnostic... Nevertheless, she then *got married*... This uncle Renato of mine, who *had become* PPF-2 ... *had been sent* PPF-3 to... so that in Modena he *got to know* PPF-4 my aunt and they *got married* PPF-5. Since he *was* IPF-1 so religious... my aunt *accompanied* IPF-2 him to the mass every Sunday... All of a sudden, something *happened* CP-2 which *changed* CP-3 completely her religious attitude.]

[17] (p.110) E anzi, *era* IPF-1 contento che ogni tanto spendesse qualche soldo, così misurava il denaro anche nello spendere. Poi non *ci aveva pensato* PPF-1 più ai duecento euro che il figlio gli *aveva chiesto* PPF-2. Ma una sera, quando *era tornato* PPF-3 a casa dal lavoro in casa sua *c’era* IPF-2 tempesta, e la moglie gli *ha detto* CP di andare a chiarire tutto [...]

[On the contrary, he *was* IPF-1 happy that he would now and then spend some money, so as to measure its value. Then he *did not think* PPF-1 any more of the 200 euros that his son *had asked* him PPF-2. But one evening, after he *had come back* PPF-3 from the office, in his home there *was* IPF-2 a storm, and his wife *told* CP him ...]

Example [17] presents a more intricate intertwining of the tenses. PPFs-1/3 describe events occurring during a dream experienced by zia Bruna, the protagonist of the story. One might thus easily assume (although no explicit hint forces this interpretation) that they are viewed retrospectively, with R anchored on the moment when the oniric events are recalled. After this, one finds in rapid succession the following tenses, designating the propulsive events in the plot: Compound Past (CP-1), PPFs-4/5, Compound Past again (CP-2), PPF-7. The remaining PPFs (6 and 8) are normal instances of Ant/PPF. This alternation is too fast to follow the natural turning-points of the plot. In this case therefore – as is often found in modern Italian literature – the writer makes use of the range of choices offered by all conceivable propulsive tenses for specific stylistic reasons. As noted in Bertinetto (2001; 2003), the arbitrary alternation of different propulsive tenses is exploited in order to disorient the reader, who finds her/himself confronted with the simultaneous effects produced by conflicting aspectual perspectives. This might sound surprising, considering what was noted in sect. 2 with respect to the loss of the R component in the semantic representation of the Aor/PPF. However, one must consider the attrition produced by the persisting standard representation of the same tense, still perfectly rooted in everyday usage. Even the It. Compound Past, despite its frequent colloquial use as a competitor of the Simple Past, has retained traces of its original meaning as present-perfect, to the extent that its appearance in literary texts always brings about subtle stylistic overtones. This is also true about the use of the *Passé Composé* in French literature, despite the virtual disappearance of the *Passé Simple* from oral usage. One must indeed consider that in French literary narratives the dominance of the *Passé Simple* as prototypical propulsive tense remains unchallenged. Thus, despite the “promotion” of the Compound Past and the PPF to the role of propulsive tenses in Italian, they do not entirely reduce to mere analogues of the Simple Past, due to the persisting residue of their marginal (as for the Compound Past) or pervasive (as for the PPF) aspectual values as perfect tenses in the relevant contexts:

- [18] (p.126) [*in the middle of a dream*] [...] e lì, visto che *era* IPF in costume da bagno, *si era messa* PPF-1 a nuotare e *era stata* PPF-2 in acqua moltissimo, sempre nuotando. Poi *si era seduta* PPF-3 sul bordo con i piedi in acqua e verso le sei e mezzo di mattina *si è svegliata* CP-1 sudatissima, ma molto contenta.

Poi, per non disturbarlo, mia zia Bruna *aveva aspettato* PPF-4 fino alle sette e mezza e *aveva telefonato* PPF-5 al dottor D'Alema, che le *ha detto* CP-2 di non prendere più quel farmaco, che le *aveva indotto* PPF-6 qualcosa di simile a delle allucinazioni [...]. E quel giorno la zia *aveva detto* PPF-7 a mia madre che indubbiamente quella notte *era stata* PPF-8 l'esperienza più bella della sua vita [...]

[... as she *was wearing* IPF the swimming-cloth, she *started* PPF-1 to swim and *remained* PPF-2 a long time in the water, swimming. Then she *sat* PPF-3 on the edge... she *woke up* CP-1 ... Then, in order not to disturb him, my aunt Bruna *waited* PPF-4 until 7,30 a.m. and *called* PPF-5 doctor D'Alema, who *told* CP-2 her not to eat any more that pill that *had caused* PPF-6 the allucinations ... On that same day my aunt *told* PPF-7 my mother that this *had been* PPF-8 her best experience...]

The conclusions suggested above with respect to the attrition caused by persisting aspectual value of the PPF finds confirmation in [19], where (apart from the final modulation into the Compound Past) the Aor/PPF (PPFs-3/7 and PPF-9) alternates with the Ant/PPF (PPFs-1/2 and PPF-8). This phenomenon is not rare, for it was repeatedly noted in the various examples examined. It is specifically focused upon here to stress the fact that the Aor/PPF coexists, in tight contact, with the ordinary Ant/PPF, so that the reader might be continually misled as for the actual interpretation of the individual PPF form. This adds to the subtle network of conflicting tensions with which modern writers often like to wrap their narratives:

- [19] (p.136) Un'estate *eravamo andati* PPF-1 in vacanza a Creta in tanta gente, circa dieci, e *avevamo affittato* PPF-2 una casa a Retimno. E una sera io e Dino Baldi *eravamo usciti* PPF-3 da soli e *eravamo andati* PPF-4 verso il molo, perché questa cittadina di Retimno aveva uno splendido piccolo porto veneziano, e noi *avevamo comprato* PPF-5 delle bottigliette di ouzo [...], e dopo chiacchierando *eravamo andati* PPF-6 a finire su un braccio del molo e lì *ci eravamo sdraiati* PPF-7 per terra sul molo continuando a chiacchierare.

[...] *avevamo indossato* PPF-8 delle braghette corte e la canottiera e ogni tanto ci veniva da toccarci le gambe come se qualcosa ti sfiorasse e ti facesse un attimo di prurito, e allora *ci eravamo accorti* PPF-9 che dove *c'eravamo sdraiati* PPF-10 era una zona di gran traffico di scarafaggi [...]. Allora *ci siamo spostati* CP più in là due metri [...]

[one Summer we *went* PPF-1 for holidays ... we *rented* PPF-2 a house ... one evening I and Dino Baldi *went out* PPF-3 alone and *directed* PPF-4 ourselves to the pier... we *had bought* PPF-5... we *found ourselves* PPF-6... we *lied down* PPF-7 ... we *were wearing* PPF-8 ... then we *realized* PPF-9 that where we *had lied down* PPF-10 ... Then we *moved* CP two meters further...]

## 5 The aoristic Pluperfect in German

This section addresses the presence of the Aor/PPF in another literary tradition, namely German, with some examples stemming from the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard. As observed by Rohrbacher (1998), Bernhard presents many instances of the phenomenon at hand in his writings. Considering the virtual absence of the Simple Past in Austrian German oral usage (apart from *sein*, *haben* and the modal verbs), and the occasional presence of supercompound tenses, this is not particularly surprising. As it happens, the Southern varieties of German have undergone a structural evolution, such that the present-perfect has become the actual aoristic tense, while the supercompound Perkekt, although still relatively marginal, tends to replace the present-perfect. The examples to be discussed here are taken from the collection of short stories *Der Stimmenimitator* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1978), a good illustration of Bernhard's sarcastic view of human matters. In contradistinction to all examples so far discussed, the following ones are exhaustive quotations, due to the tiny size of the individual stories.

The first text is paradoxically apt to celebrate the place of the meeting where this paper was first presented (Birmingham). In this example, Bernhard substantially reverses the expected distribution of the tenses, very much in line with his own constant attempt to break any social convention. According to the traditional temporal “logic”, the first two verb forms might rather have been Ant/PPFs, for they describe the preceding phase with respect to the episode's climax, while PPF-1 might easily have been a Simple Past. Here the contrary occurs. Admittedly, PPF-1 might also be understood as anterior to the two immediately following Simple Pasts, so that one is not forced to interpret it as an Aor/PPF. It should however be noted that PPF-2, which opens the next phase of the plot, is a good candidate for the aoristic reading (in contrast to the following Subjunctive Ant/PPF), so that it might possibly exert a backward effect on the reading of PPF-1:

- [20] *Enttäuschte Engländer* (p. 51) Mehrere Engländer, die auf einen Osttiroler Bergführer *hereingefallen sind* CP-1 und mit diesem auf die Drei Zinnen *gestiegen sind* CP-2, *waren*, auf dem höchsten der drei Gipfel *angelangt* PPT, über das auf diesem Giepfel von der Natur Gebotene derartig *enttäuscht gewesen* PPF-1, dass sie den Bergführer, einen Familienvater mit drei Kindern und einer, wie es heisst, tauben Frau, kurzerhand auf dem Gipfel *erschlungen* SP-1. Wie ihnen aber zu Bewusstsein *gekommen ist* CP-3, was sie tatsächlich *getan haben* CP-4, *stürzten sie sich* SP-2 nacheinander in die Tiefe. Eine Zeitung in Birmingham *hatte* daraufhin *geschrieben* PPF-2, Birmingham *hätte* seine

hervorragendsten Zeitungsverleger, seinen ausserordentlichsten Bankdirektor und seinen tüchtigsten Leichenbestatter *verloren* SJ-PPF.

[*Disappointed Englishmen.* Several Englishmen, who *had made a deal* CP-1 with a guide from East Tirol and *had climbed* CP-2 with him the Three Summits, once they *reached* PPT the highest of these summits, they *were* so *disappointed* PPF-1 by the sight from up there, that they *killed erschlungen* SP-1 the guide on the spot... But as soon as they *realized* CP-3 what they *had done* CP-4, they *threw* SP-2 themselves headlong one after the other. A Birmingham newspaper *wrote* PPF-2 about this that Birmingham *had lost* SJ-PPF the most distinguished newspaper publisher, the most extraordinary bank director, and the most clever grave-digger]

The next example provides further evidence. Here again, some PPFs (n. 2 and 5 to 8) are well-behaved instances of Ant/PPF. PPF-1 might also be interpreted in the same way, except that the event referred to belongs to the same temporal plane as the first Compound Past. But what about PPFs-3/4, situated as they are along the main line of the plot? One possibility is to treat them as anchored on the first Compound Past; this would imply that the vantage-point of the whole episode is the moment when the sentence is announced. While this is perfectly logical, the alternative aoristic reading of PPF-1 and PPFs-3/4 is a plausible option, considering the “once Aor/PPF, always Aor/PPF” principle stated above:

[21] *Angst* (p. 18) Im Juni des vorigen Jahres *war* ein Tiroler vor Gericht *gestanden* PPF-1, der wegen Mordes an einem Imster Schulkind *angeklagt gewesen war* PPF-2 und zu lebenslänglichem Kerker *verurteilt worden ist* CP-1. Der Tiroler, von Beruf Schriftsetzer und seit drei Jahrzehnten zur Zufriedenheit der Besitzer, in einer Innsbrucker Druckerei beschäftigt, *hatte sich* dahingehend *verantwortet* PPF-3, dass er vor dem Imster Schulkind *Angst gebabt habe* SJ-CP, was ihm von den Geschworenen aber nicht *geglaubt worden war* PPF-4, denn der Schriftsetzer, der tatsächlich aus Schwaz gebürtig *gewesen ist* CP-2 und dessen Vater als Innungsmeister der Tiroler Fleischhauer in Tirol zu höchstem Ansehen *gekommen war* PPF-5, *hatte* SP eine Körpergrösse von einsneunzig und *war*, wie die Geschworenen sich im Gerichtssaal *überzeugen hatten lassen* PPF-6, *imstande gewesen* PPF-7, eine aus Eisen gegossene hundertfünfzig Kilogramm schwere Kugel auf zwei Meter Höhe zu heben, ohne zu scheitern. Der Tiroler *hatte* das Imster Schulkind mit einem sogenannten ‘Maurerfäustl’ *erschlagen* PPF-8.

[*Fear.* Last year in June a man from Tirol *appeared* PPF-1 in trial... who *had been charged* PPF-2 for murder ... and *was condemned* CP-1 to life prison... He *claimed* PPF-

3that he *had been afraid* SJ-CP of the Imst school boy, but the jury *did not believe* PPF-4 him, because the man, who *had actually been born* CP-2 in Schwaz and whose father *had obtained* PPF-5 the highest reputation... *was* SP very tall and *was able* PPF-7 to lift without hesitation... , as the jury members themselves *had witnessed* PPF-6. The man from Tirol *had killed* PPF-8 the school boy with a so-called bricklayer's hammer]

The final example is admirably concise. Here one only finds a sequence of three PPFs: admittedly, a definitely unconventional situation. PPF-1, and possibly (but not necessarily) PPF-3 are instances of Ant/PPF; but this could hardly be proposed for PPF-2. Whatever the case, the complete lack of contextual hints as for the possible identification of R forces the aoristic reading of at least one, if not all, the PPF occurrences:

[22] *Post* (p. 57) Noch Jahre, nachdem unsere Mutter *gestorben war* PPF-1, *hatte* die Post an sie adressierte Briefe *zugestellt* PPF-2. Die Post *hatte* ihren Tod nicht zur Kenntnis *genommen* PPF-3.

[*Post*. Many years after our mother *had died* PPF-1, the Post still *delivered* PPF-2 letters addressed to her. The Post *had not taken notice* PPF-3 of her death]

## 6 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to show that in some European languages a recent development has taken place, to the effect of widening the semantic scope of the PPF. Besides the ordinary meaning of anteriority, which defines the PPF within the perfectal aspect domain, a new possibility has arisen, whereby the PPF is used as an aoristic tense, endowed with propulsive capacities. Although the illustration provided stems from literary texts, this development must have originated in oral usage. In any case, once this has become a tool in the hands of sophisticated writers, it has offered itself for intriguing stylistic exploitations, aiming at creating a pervasive atmosphere of temporal and aspectual ambiguity.

The illustrations presented in the paper were taken from Italian and, in part, German texts. But there is no doubt that this phenomenon also exists in other languages (and literary traditions). As a matter of fact, it has been pointed out in French colloquial usage. It is interesting to observe that all the languages mentioned have one feature in common: namely, the more or less advanced stage of the

“Perkekschwund”, concerning the shift of the present-perfect to a purely perfective (aoristic) tense. As far as German is concerned, this is certainly true about the Southern varieties, like the Austrian one used by Thomas Bernhard. The question that immediately suggests itself is whether this development is also to be observed in languages like English, which so far appear to have been practically immune from the “Perkekschwund” drift. The prediction that one is invited to put forth is that languages like English might not be equally prone to undergo such a development. It is to be hoped that this question will soon receive an answer.



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