

Morandi, Relationships, Fascism, Still Life

By William Eaton

Zeteo is Looking and Listening, November 2015

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Living with the objects, they became his family, his neighbors, his friends.

— Janet Abramowicz, former assistant to Morandi

You don't have to paint a figure to express human feelings.

— Robert Motherwell¹

(1)

For what, in the past year, have been revealed to be psychological reasons, I have long been drawn to the still lifes of the twentieth-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, one of the great still-life painters, etchers, and watercolorists. There is a dominant interpretation of Morandi's work, and the primary purpose of the present set of notes is to bring out of the shadows quite another interpretation. Subsequently and, in a sense, challenging the interpretation I am about to advance, I will discuss Morandi's connections to Italian fascism and how these connections may lead us to interpret or see the work in yet other ways.

There may be those who wish for one of these three interpretations to be the right one. In fact, we are here only scratching the surface; it is easy enough, for example, to see a great deal of Morandi's paintings—still lifes and landscapes—as being of walls, or of buildings and architecture more generally. As for right or best, I will say, rather, that,

¹ Abramowicz made this statement at a discussion at the [Center for Italian Modern Art](#), 7 November 2015. More from this discussion soon to come. I have not been able to track down the source of the Motherwell statement. It is all over the Web and, as with the Motherwell statement in a later footnote, it is quoted in *Peggy Guggenheim: Art Addict*, a 2015 American documentary film directed by Lisa Immordino Vreeland.

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cognizant of all these possibilities, we can see more in Morandi's work and in individual pieces than we might without such a range. In harmony with the ideas Oscar Wilde championed in *The Critic as Artist*, I would say that the richness of an artist's work is—to a rather greater extent than we realize or would like to admit—a function of the richness of the interpretations that curators, critics, and historians are able to offer. (The art market and the self-interests of academia obviously playing large roles here.)

We will get to Morandi right below, after these wise and beautiful words from Wilde. Thanks to great critics, he proposes, a

picture becomes more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing, and the music of the mystical prose is as sweet in our ears as was that flute-player's music that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves. Do you ask me what Lionardo would have said had any one told him of this picture that 'all the thoughts and experience of the world had etched and moulded therein that which they had of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the Middle Age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias?' He would probably have answered that he had contemplated none of these things, but had concerned himself simply with certain arrangements of lines and masses, and with new and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green.

And it is for this very reason that the criticism which I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind. It treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvellous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive.²

² Wilde, *The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks upon the Importance of Doing Nothing*; A Dialogue. This work was published in 1891 in Wilde's collection *Intentions*, which is now available thanks to [Forgotten Books' Classic Reprint Series](#). The quotation appears on page 140 of that edition. [The dialogue has also been available online](#). Note that I have broken the original text into two paragraphs to facilitate reading.

(2)

The dominant interpretation is that Morandi's work is pure painting, art for art's sake, the beauty of light, color, and form which refers to or represents nothing but light, color, and form. In October, on a wall at a Morandi exhibition at MAMbo (Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna), I found the kind of curatorial observation one finds routinely at Morandi exhibitions: For Morandi "[s]till lifes and landscapes merely constituted ways to break down the depiction of the subjects and instead focus on the practice of painting itself."³ And the press release for the 2015 Morandi show at the David Zwirner gallery quoted from a translation of one Morandi's post-World-War-II letters: "The only interest the visible world awakens in me concerns space, light, color, and form." (Pair this with the unforgettable line from Morandi's very brief, 1928 autobiography: "Ebbi molta fede nel Fascismo fin dai primi accenni, fede che non mi venne mai meno, neppure nei giorni più grigi e tempestosi." The great faith I have had in Fascism from the outset has remained intact even in the darkest and stormiest days.⁴)

Parts (6) and (7) of the present piece will discuss Morandi and fascism. What I wish, nonetheless, to say first and foremost is that the most engaging and evocative of Morandi's works—for all their ostensible subjects are a limited range of bottles, tin boxes, and so forth—speak, however noiselessly, about a particular set of human relationships (and these are not the kinds of relationships we usually associate with fascism). Morandi's object-subjects may be seen as family members or, say, as a few neighbors or strangers in a store or at a bus stop.

Further, the paintings—independently of the artist's conscious intentions, I presume—focus on two particular aspects of human relationships. One is the distance—physically minimal but psychologically unbridgeable—between an "I" and others. The second is how in small groups we take our positions and poses, play our roles, in response to or in dialogue with the positions, poses, and roles of others nearby. (For instance, one person's height or beauty may lead others to feel less tall or less beautiful and to "position" themselves in relation to this other person's outstanding feature, so that, for example, I might feel belittled in a tall man's company, or I might feel defiant—sticking my chest or chin out, turning my back, laughing loudly.) Nowadays such posturing is perhaps most often

³ In addition to the still life paintings of objects for which he is currently most famous, Morandi also did: some paintings of flowers in vases; landscape paintings most notable for their lack of human beings or human elements besides walls; exquisite etchings of the same objects (and relationships) as in his paintings; many drawings; and watercolors. I do not know if there has ever been an exhibit devoted entirely to these latter works. I certainly look forward to one, as the Morandi watercolors I have seen here and there appear to be, as I have previously written, among the most exquisite art works of the twentieth century. I would also note here how prolific Morandi was. He lived from 1890 to 1964, and left the world about 1,500 oil paintings, 300 watercolors, and 150 engravings, plus the drawings.

MAMbo's exhibition was a temporary installation pending the renovation of the [Museo Morandi](#) in Bologna, which renovation, I believe, is now complete. In Bologna, it is now also possible to visit, by pre-arrangement, [Morandi's former bedroom-studio in Bologna](#).

⁴ Giorgio Morandi, "Autobiografia," *L'Assalto*, Bologna, 31 December 1928.

observed in the many meetings of contemporary office life, but, again, Morandi's work seems more concerned with other gatherings.

The 1957 still life pictured at right [see zeteojournal.com for images] offers a simple example.⁵ It is important to note that the light in Morandi's studio was not bright and that his paintings do not depict the light and shadows related to particular objects placed in a particular way or in a particular relationship to light sources. We might think of the shadows as being as much subjects of the paintings as the bottles are. And, with the 1957 painting, one of the first things we notice, in addition to the simplicity of the scene and the varying heights of the objects, is how the shadow of the smaller white bottle curves, neck-like, along the side of the larger bottle. Some kind of allegiance or subordination may be felt here. Whereas the red cylinder, although diminutive, feels more autonomous (both because of its different color and because its shadow is independent of the larger bottle's). To me this scene evokes—which is not the same as portrays—one particular kind of small family, one in which one parent (who may well be the mother) dominates the other parent, while also, in a mother-hen sort of way, providing sufficient support and nurture to the child for the child to be able to have her own life.

Long ago—watching the *Johnny Carson Show*, I believe it was—I heard a woman speak about her life as a potato-chip inspector, at the end of a production line in a potato-chip factory. Her job was to remove from a conveyor belt, before the chips were bagged, any unattractive chips. Day after day, looking at these objects, they began to be more than potato chips. The woman began, for example, to see some of them as animals, or as sculptures of animals. I believe she started a potato-chip museum.

My adventures with and writing about Morandi's work have brought back this memory. If we look at some (hardly all) of the paintings long enough—if, as we rarely do and are rarely encouraged to do, we spend a good deal of time with a single work—and if we give our imagination free rein, Morandi's objects transmogrify. I would stress that I do not end up seeing these objects as people (or animals). Rather, I come to see the scene as a human scene and to feel the relationships between the objects as human relationships. And then, subsequently, I can deduce from this feeling ideas about the human roles the objects *may* be seen as playing.

(3)

I have written “bring out of the shadows” because I am not the only person to see such relationships within Morandi's still lifes. Earlier this month I attended a discussion about Morandi held at the New York Center for Italian Modern Art. The discussion featured Janet Abramowicz, an American who in her youth, in the 1950s, was Morandi's teaching assistant at the Accademia di belle arti in Bologna. At one point during the discussion she made a

⁵ This painting is currently on view at the David Zwirner gallery in New York City, and a similar, yet simpler version—with just two objects—is on view at the New York [Center for Italian Modern Art](http://www.cimamuseum.org).

comment about one of the paintings that could be seen in the room in which she was speaking (and which is now reproduced at right [see zeteojournal.com for images]). As can be seen, the painting, on a chocolate brown background, is of four objects. (There are in fact several Morandi paintings like this: of four objects, one taller and straighter than the rest. They may bring to mind Morandi and his three sisters.) In the present case, the objects are not close but rather evenly spaced and tending, let's call it, toward the right side of the painting, along a light brown path. We feel this tending in the angle of the shell's "back" and in the increasing heights of the objects as the painting moves rightward. And, unusually for Morandi, three of the objects are connected by an extra element: the lighter brush strokes, like thick dashes. Abramowicz remarked that when she looked at this painting—"It's almost like a group of people trudging along a road."⁶ When, afterward, I looked again at the painting and now with Abramowicz's reading in mind, I could "see"—or think of, I'd rather say—people heading home from work or from a market. They were not close enough for conversation. What they shared was the same route.

After the discussion, I was speaking with Laura Mattioli, who founded the Center and whose father was a Milan cotton merchant and an art collector, to include of Morandi's work. I mentioned my interest in Abramowicz's comment about the people along the road, and Mattioli said, yes, her father had often remarked about another painting that it looked to him like people coming out of a theater.

I would also mention that, according to Ms. Mattioli, when businessmen used to come to her father's house, and they would see the Morandis there, many of them had a seemingly odd question: Were the bottles empty or full? To which question Ms. Mattioli, having visited Morandi's studio, has an answer: The bottles were full of junk—wads of paper, sugar packets, chestnuts. This speaks to another relationship: between the painter and his subjects (or "models"). At another moment, when the discussion turned very briefly to what Morandi's sexual or romantic life may have been, Mattioli expressed an opinion, with which I happen to agree: "the bottles are the lovers of Morandi." (And, it might be added, the bottles and Morandi shared a bedroom for many years.)

We have from psychoanalysis the idea of cathexis: of erotic energy flowing like electricity between the positive pole of the desiring and the negative pole of the desired. Morandi's silent eroticism has nothing energetic or electric about it; it might be said to predate the Industrial Revolution and also sexual maturity, sexual intercourse. Morandi's eroticism involves seeing, positioning, and posturing; it involves surfaces, including walls, the concavities of bowls and vases, and the throats of bottles; and it involves stuffing junk in those throats. It is not for nothing that Abramowicz's book about Morandi is subtitled "The Art of Silence."

⁶ The New York City [Center for Italian Modern Art](#)'s small show of Morandi's work is up through June 25, 2016. Visits are by appointment.

(4)

Among the meta-questions that come to mind: Why might *Zeteo* or its readers care whether this one painter's still lifes are, as one art historian put it, "resolutely about nothing save the beauty of the brush," or about relationships, or influenced by the role fascism played in Morandi's career?⁷ I have been urging a prospective *Zeteo* writer to think of readers as wanting to be given something—for example, a new and unexpected way of looking at their own lives and the world around them. From this perspective, what difference can it make how I interpret the work of one great painter? In Chekhov's *Three Sisters* there is a duel, a baron is killed. A phlegmatic character comments, "One baron more, one baron less . . ." One great painter, one particular interpretation . . .

Perhaps it is enough to be able to be reminded by—and to feel in—Morandi's work one rather large aspect of our experience: our life in families, in small groups. How we come to take poses and roles; how we may be quite close, even too close, to others and still feel—or feel all the more—the distance, the gap. Perhaps, too, there is insight in realizing how, in the twentieth century and since, one thing we have sought in art is *seeming* purity, *seeming* nonrepresentationality. (Seeming meaninglessness or seeming disconnection, might we call this?⁸) And I assume that Morandi, too, sought something like these seemings, and over decades—painting the same objects day after day in his dusty, not particularly well lit bedroom studio.

By some measures the twentieth century was a time of extraordinary, if also dizzying human achievements—airplanes, computers, penicillin, etc. By other measures, and across killing fields both far from and quite near to Bologna, it also seems to have been one of the most savage centuries on record. One Leftwing Italian writer has criticized Morandi's paintings as being about "fear of reality."⁹ This phrase might be used to characterize abstract art more generally. It is not for nothing that the David Zwirner gallery in New York is

⁷ Emily Braun, "Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi's Still Lifes and the Cultural Politics of *Strapaese*," *Modernism/modernity* 2, No. 3 (September 1995): 89–116. *N.B.*: With the phrase "resolutely about nothing" Braun was not stating her own view of the paintings, but rather characterizing the standard view.

⁸ As I noted in an [earlier piece on Morandi](#), at a recent large survey of his work, at Rome's Complesso del Vittoriano, the curator, following an old lead of Morandi's, sought to connect Morandi's project to Galileo's. The walls included this: "As Galileo recalled in his book of philosophy, the book of nature is written in characters that are not those of our alphabet. These characters are triangles, squares, circles, spheres, pyramids, cones and other geometrical figures." This could lead us, in the present context, to ask to what extent modern science, too, has involved disconnection, an attempt to escape the human and to move away from what we could call a more representational science?

⁹ Giorgio Bassani, Italian writer best known for his novel (become film) about fascist anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis). "The fear of reality, the terror," Bassani writes, "that's what those sweet flowers of Morandi are all about." As quoted by Abramowicz, *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence* (Yale University Press, 2004), 193. *Cf.* Robert Motherwell, "The function of abstraction is to get rid of a lot of reality. You start with as much richness as you want, and subtract, and then you arrive at the residue of essences that you're interested in"

In his *Giorgio Morandi* (Edizioni del Milione, 1964), the Italian writer Francesco Arcangeli compares the vision and objects of Morandi's work, inter alia, to those of T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land."

currently pairing several rooms of Morandi's work with several rooms of Donald Judd's sculptures, which latter seem to hold emptiness for us, and to hold it with such an extraordinary elegance and craftsmanship as to give emptiness a very good name.¹⁰ (Or should I revise this: Like an elegant, silently seductive woman—Luis Buñuel's *oscuro objeto del deseo* (obscure object of desire) comes to mind—Judd's boxes draw us into emptiness? And perhaps at this Judd didn't have to work that hard—emptiness has always been seductive?)

In any case, I have nothing against art works that are about fear of reality or emptiness or seduction, because I think these are among the major aspects of human existence, and certainly of human existence in our times. But, or additionally, Morandi's and Judd's work is obsessive-compulsive work, and we feel this—however subconsciously—in looking at the paintings and sculptures. We feel that something—many things or perhaps one big thing—is being avoided, and we may find ourselves also drawn (however unconsciously) to wondering what these avoided things could be?

Abramowicz's book about Morandi's "art of silence," along with the silences of the work itself, have led my psyche to ruminations about incest—silence and silencing being a major feature of incest.¹¹ I certainly do *not* wish to suggest that Morandi was involved physically in incestuous relationships. What I do wish to stress is that both Morandi's and Judd's work is about the unspeakable, which unspeakability may have its roots in personal or political life or both. Further, I am proposing that it is not the purities that draw us to this kind of work, but the obsessiveness and impurities—a bit in the work and yet more in ourselves—the unspeakabilities, the emptiness and fear of reality.

(5)

Next not: I am *not* saying there isn't a way of viewing Morandi's work as being pure painting or, say, about the nature of beauty. And I certainly do not wish to deny that he had an exquisite eye for color. I *am* saying that if the work were only this, we would not find it so engaging. (An interesting corollary: I have found that the paintings in which the colors are most remarkable do not work as "relationship" paintings. We are too conscious not only of being in the presence of beauty, but also of the hand of the artist. The great relationship paintings pull us into the works, their scene and dynamics, so that we can—if we pay attention—feel the relationships. The more exquisitely colored paintings keep us at an admiring distance; we see nothing but beauty and talent—Morandi's.)

At the Zwirner show, an art-historian companion and I spent quite a good deal of time looking closely at a still life in which the objects were pressed close together and right to the edge of a table. But not in the least over the edge. Most interestingly, the plane of the

¹⁰ Both the Judd and [Morandi show](#)s will be up at the Zwirner gallery through 19 December 2015.

¹¹ *Giorgio Morandi: The Art of Silence* (Yale University Press, 2004). My Morandi-related incest ruminations may be found in "[Morandi, Bonnard, and Silences Within](#)."

space beyond the edge had been rotated so that it was not, as in “real life,” a space to the side and beyond a table; rather this colored plane seemed a wall, coming out along the side of the table, not so much keeping the objects from falling off the table as blocking them. Without this wall and the fact that one side of the painting, of the table, contained no object, the painted objects would not have seemed to be huddled together. Certainly a tremendous amount of “art” had gone into this painting—the positioning and rendering of these objects; the roles and context they were given—all this work and genius allowed the painting to speak so silently about a particular, recurring moment of human social life: our huddlings.

(6)

Statements that Morandi made in later life, after the Second World War, have been embraced by artists, historians, and critics in order to solidify a narrow (“fear of reality”?) interpretation of Morandi’s work. This embrace has accorded with how, to an extreme degree, Morandi sought in later life to alter and control his public image, to include by rather successfully developing a false idea: that he was an isolate, working alone, connected to no movements, artistic or otherwise, and indeed to few humans besides his mother and sisters, with whom he shared an apartment. Likely this re-presenting was an attempt, after the War and the Holocaust, to divert attention from his previous connection to Italian fascism and the fascist elite (e.g. to whom he gave or sold his paintings). As part of this re-presenting, Morandi promoted the pure-painter idea that exhibition curators and many late twentieth-century artists, perhaps Robert Irwin most notably, responded to.¹² (I do not wish to say that Irwin, for example, was fooled. I wish to say that he and many others have responded above all to one aspect of Morandi’s work.)

We will get to fascism in the next segment. For the moment—oversimplifying! separating what cannot be entirely separated—I note that, if we are interested in paintings rather than in a painter’s biography, it is not necessary for us to put much stock in how an artist has described his own work or what he or she was trying to do. Such comments can be fascinating and insightful and misleading; but, again, it is the work not the worker that we are, in this case, trying to see. And, in Freud’s wake we can certainly make room for the possibility of unconscious elements and for an artist’s work to be quite other than how he has described or imagined it.

¹² A comment Irwin made to a [Los Angeles Times](#) reporter in 2008: Morandi’s still lifes “are about painting—the figure-ground relationship, structure and organization. Morandi’s were paintings in the purest sense of the word. They were like a mantra, repeated over and over until it was divorced from words and became pure sounds.” The press release for the 2015 Zwirner Morandi show included this phrase—“the logic of differentiated repetition”—which made a bridge from Morandi to Minimalism..

Highly recommended: Lawrence Weschler’s book about Irwin, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* (University of California Press, 1982). Pages 56–57 have some of Irwin’s observations about Morandi as an abstract painter, *avant la lettre*.

(7)

I have not read or heard that Morandi was a fascist in the sense of physically attacking or killing people or identifying Jews to be taken from their homes and disposed of. Morandi was not a part of Mussolini's *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*—Voluntary Militia for National Security (“Blackshirts”). And, in the beginning, before entering into an alliance with the Nazis in the late 1930s and beginning to do the Germans’ bidding, Mussolini’s fascism did not—internally, within Italy—have the genocidal and racist features of its German offshoot. Mussolini spoke publicly and disparagingly in opposition to the Nazi idea of a German race or of pure races more generally.¹³ Italian fascist violence was directed internally against opponents of Mussolini’s regime and externally against Africans, particularly in Ethiopia (7 per cent of the population of which was killed by Mussolini’s forces).¹⁴

Morandi’s connection to fascism seems to have been motivated, above all, by a desire to advance his art career and, most particularly, to secure for himself a good and stable living as the chair of the etching department at the *Accademia di belle arti* in Bologna. As Abramowicz has put it, during the fascist period in Italy (1922-1943), “in order to teach [e.g. at an art institute] you had to be a member of the party; in order to exhibit you had to be part of an artists’ union formed by Mussolini.”¹⁵ Morandi (who “liked important people”) went beyond this, currying favor and friendships with art critics and others close to the Mussolini regime and getting his *Accademia* job and rising to prominence as an Italian artist thanks to these connections.

Some art critics and historians have sought to excuse Morandi’s publicly professed allegiance to fascism (made in 1928 and quoted in section 2 above). Their argument: he was less fascist than careerist. I understand this excuse, but for me it’s a double-edged sword and too much of a reminder of how often human beings, in order to get ahead of others or to secure a comfortable living for themselves, are willing to swear allegiance to any number of vicious and misguided regimes, be these national in scale or among the many smaller regimes that take hold of organizations and parts of organizations. Morandi’s work can appear very elegant; his colors can be very elegant; his public persona may have been elegant. His careerism was not elegant at all.

¹³ From a speech given by Mussolini in Bari, Italy in 1934: Thirty centuries of history allow us to look with supreme pity on certain doctrines which are preached beyond the Alps by the descendants of those who were illiterate when Rome had Caesar, Virgil, and Augustus.

¹⁴ While this 7 percent figure does not approach the percentages of Eastern European populations killed by the Nazis and Soviets during the Second World War, it remains frighteningly extraordinary. For example, perhaps as much as 3 percent of the Vietnamese population was killed, by forces on all sides, during the two-decade-long Vietnamese proxy war (or Second Indochina War) in which the United States was so involved.

¹⁵ Comment made at discussion at the Center for Italian Modern Art, 7 November 2015. Phrase about liking important people is also from Abramowicz’s comments at this event.

And, it must be added, this careerism, this favor-currying, may have been essential to the development of Morandi's art, or to his becoming much of an artist at all. As, at the discussion at the Center, Abramowicz described the matter: before Morandi got his Accademia job, he was earning his living from a tiring and time-consuming job as a kind of itinerant teacher to school children. Many of us who have worked at similar jobs, and have perhaps appreciated them in various ways, also know that it is hard to concentrate on one's own artmaking, writing, acting, etc., when one is so intensively employed.

(8)

How much, if any, of all this can be seen in Morandi's work itself? Is it part of the "unsaid" aspect of the still lifes, the vital passions they speak about with lips pressed closed?¹⁶ As regards Morandi's Fascist connections I have read articles by two art historians who have done extensive work in this field: Emily Braun and Mariana Aguirre.¹⁷ They connect Morandi particularly to one of Italian fascism's several factions: *Strapaese* (i.e. supercountry; a championing of putatively rural, small-town values, of regional differences and autonomy. This as opposed to *Stracittà*'s urban, industrialist, centralizing, neoclassical values).¹⁸ And the historians further propose that, during the fascist period, Morandi sought to have his work reflect *Strapaese* values, in particular through what became a lifelong predilection for earth tones. Braun goes further: Morandi's "canvases and etchings served as a metaphoric screen of nostalgia through which to view simple and enduring things."

¹⁶ See my ["The Unsaid," Agni 79](#).

¹⁷ Braun, "Speaking Volumes," *op. cit.* Mariana Aguirre, ["Giorgio Morandi, ardengo soffici and strapaese: Modern Italian Landscapes between the Wars,"](#) *Sincronía* (Revista de Filosofía y Letras). Accessed via the Web, October 2015. See also Aguirre, "Giorgio Morandi and the "Return to Order": From Pittura Metafisica to Regionalism, 1917–1928," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas [Mexico]* XXXV, No. 102, (2013): 93–124.

¹⁸ As regards the pluralism of Italian fascism, this from Braun, "Speaking Volumes," *op. cit.*:

[U]nlike Nazi Germany, which it preceded in power by a decade, Fascist Italy was not totalitarian in its cultural controls and it supported styles as diverse as pure geometric abstraction, expressionism, and academic neoclassicism. Because of this beguiling margin of creative freedom, the large majority of artists and intellectuals coexisted with, if not openly supported, the regime, at least until the anti-Semitic laws of 1938.

Note that Mussolini championed the idea that art and politics go hand in hand (as indeed they do). Fascism was to him a total work of art, and he spoke of politicians creating art through their decisions.

La creazione 'politica' come quella artistica è una elaborazione lenta e una divinazione subitanea. A un certo mod l'artista crea colla ispirazione, il politico colla decisione." (The "political" creation, as the artistic one, is a slow elaboration and a sudden divination. In a certain sense, the artist creates with inspiration, the politician with decision.)

Benito Mussolini, "Il Novecento," *Il popolo d'Italia* (15 February 1923). From a text of the speech reprinted in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, edited by Edoardo and Duilio Susmil (Florence, 1951–1963), vol. 19. Italian and English from Mariana Aguirre, "Giorgio Morandi, ardengo soffici and strapaese," *op. cit.*

In modern bureaucratic life, as in past forms of human social organization, not only do careerists curry favor with people in power, but people in power seek to promote their friends and favorites. Thus, for example, not only might an artist adapt his work so that it accords with the reigning values (or nostalgias), but his promoters may make much of how this artist's work does indeed conform—this then being a justification for exhibiting the artist's work at major exhibitions and giving the artist a plum job.¹⁹ One *Strapaese* writer praised Morandi as “strapaesano” born and bred; his painting free from trickery, genuine, home-made like bread with oil. For another Morandi's art had deep roots in Italy's most genuine tradition and was nourished by the same vital lymphs that gave us the world and can only return it to us.²⁰

To this I would add three things. One is quite simple: Like Mussolini and other twentieth-century rulers, Morandi had a need to control everything; a need that, in his case, ruled over his art. Secondly, insofar as Morandi's still lifes portray small groupings (be these of objects alone or of objects that speak of human beings or roles), this may be a reflection of the *Strapaese* world view, of small-town life and autonomy. It is also far from our standard image of fascism—the world of mass spectacles, father figures, imposing, expressionless buildings, guns, and armies, long shadows.

Thirdly, Morandi's still lifes—like the work of many painters and sculptors of later generations—is striking not only for its obsessive-compulsive (or simply repetitive) aspects, but also for the absence of human beings and of organic life more generally. (Or, alternatively, we might say that the human is reduced to or concentrated in the sense that the objects have been carefully arranged and in the brushstrokes. As if, on another planet or after devastation, there remained just this evidence that a being with intentions, technique, and feelings had been here, in this scene.)

I note the word “life” in “still life.” It's “natura” in the Italian *natura morta*. Traditional still lifes feature recently killed animals, flowers, or fruit. Morandi occasionally painted a seashell, and seashells are organic; made from the exoskeletons of sea creatures. Otherwise—the bottles, boxes, jars, jugs, and vases—are inorganic, human-made; they have never lived in the traditional sense of this word.²¹ This feature of Morandi's work can be directly connected to the age that gave birth to fascism, abstract art, and many another phenomenon in which—so far, say, from Rembrandt—the warmth and complexity of the

¹⁹ For example, starting in 1928 Morandi's work began to be exhibited at the Venice Biennale. And this gives me an opportunity to note a reaction I had to this year's—2015's—Venice Biennale. Much of the work followed about three of the currently reigning fashions of what I will call “ostensibly political art.” And thus I found it difficult to see the work for whatever it was beyond expressions of conformism and careerism.

²⁰ The writers are Leo Longanesi and Mino Maccari, respectively. These lines, translations, appear in Aguirre, “Giorgio Morandi, ardengo soffici and strapaese,” *op. cit.*

²¹ N.B.: Morandi was hardly the first person to paint such paintings. One might see, for example, from seventeenth century Spain, Francisco de Zurbarán's *Bodegón* (or *Still Life with Pottery Jars*), or wider-ranging examples of paintings of musical instruments and music, of letters and writing instruments, or, say, Fernand Léger's 1921 *Nature morte à la chope* (*Still Life with a Beer Mug*).

individual human and of our individual faces, characters, and lives are absent and indeed denied.

I recently saw a production of Arthur Miller's play about the Holocaust, *Incident at Vichy*.²² A German Major, a disabled veteran, entrapped against his will within the Nazi chain of command, gives a speech in which he argues that helping Jewish detainees escape would be irrelevant because detainees and detainers would be quickly replaced by others to be killed and do the killing. "There are no persons anymore," he says. "There will never be persons again." See Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile's 1932 foundational text: *La dottrina del fascismo* (*Doctrine of Fascism*):

per il fascista, tutto è nello Stato, e nulla di umano o spirituale esiste, e tanto meno ha valore, fuori dello Stato.²³

for the fascist, the state is everything, and no human or spiritual thing exists, or has any sort of value, outside the state.

All this may be seen as working against my initial effort to bring out of the shadows a more human view of Morandi's work, my championing of how it evokes rather intimate human relationships. But certainly one might propose that this death of the person in the midst of fascism, and of twentieth-century bureaucracy and mass society more generally, is reflected in Morandi's still lifes and landscape paintings. And, by this view, what seems to

²² **Signature Theater**, New York; directed by Michael Wilson. As of mid-November, this production's run had been extended through 20 December 2015.

²³ "**La Dottrina del fascismo**," part 1: "Idee fondamentali," point 7. A range of English translations exist, including the first authorized (and partial) one, by Jane Soames, which was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, London in 1933 (title: Benito Mussolini, "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism").

Given the earlier brief discussion of emptiness, I would also note Westerners' enthusiasm, these past many decades, for some Buddhist teachings, some Zen teachings in particular. There is certainly a way of looking at Donald Judd's work, and there may be a way of looking at Morandi's still lifes, that accords, for example, with the following lines—which, in the 1970s, so many of us were excited to find in D.T. Suzuki's writings—

Abide not with dualism
Carefully avoid pursuing it;
As soon as you have right and wrong,
Confusion ensues, and Mind is lost.
The two exist because of the One,
But hold not even to this One;
When a mind is not disturbed,
The ten thousand things offer no offence.
No offence offered, and no ten thousand things;
No disturbance going, and no mind set up to work;
The subject is quieted when the object ceases,
The object ceases when the subject is quieted.

Those words are from Suzuki's translation of one of the earliest and most influential Zen texts, which comes from Jianzhi Sengcan (died 606 C.E.), known as the third patriarch of Zen (or Chan) Buddhism. The standard transliteration of the Chinese title is "Hsin-hsin Ming." Many English titles have been given to translations of this text; Suzuki used "On Believing in Mind."

have died in Morandi is more than just the person; it is nature itself. With him even the human is bloodless and has no face.²⁴ Life has no fruits; in Morandi we have gone beyond killing to a world without death because without life. (A subsequent variation: the current Silicon Valley vision of a future in which our genetic codons and the computer coding that they engender may live forever and on most any planet?)

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Given my tremendous interest in and admiration for Morandi's work, and given my sense that it has a great deal to do with human relationships, I cannot close on that note. And thus I would note, rather, another way that Morandi's still lifes have reached me personally: they played a major role in my re-taking up drawing. (I do not wish to suggest that this has led to my becoming a visual artist, to my producing anything more than amateur drawings, and not even very many of those.) On one, naive level the inspiration was simple: I felt like bottles were something that I, too, could draw. They were not so challenging as faces and a model was not needed.

As Morandi worked in his bedroom, I worked in my bed, at night. Much to my chagrin (to put it mildly!), my second marriage was breaking up—my wife deciding that to survive, in some sense, she had to have her own apartment, “a place where I can be me,” as a female mouse in a children's book put it. I was reading a lot of children's books then, because my wife and I had a young son.

In addition to books, Jonah had a vast collection of stuffed animals, and I began drawing these instead of containers. One evening, with some colored grease pencils, I produced a drawing using three of these animals. A decade later the drawing remains “on view” (to me) in my bedroom. It includes a blue, half-sad, half-aghast gorilla; a red kangaroo, clearly female and curving away, yet paying attention, very much part of the picture; and a yellow-green rabbit, in middle of the background between the two other animals, one foot resting on the gorilla's shoulder. I have always understood that this was a drawing of my family at that particular moment in time.

In thinking about Morandi's work I was also greatly aided by a particular work seen at the Morandi exhibition at MAMbo in Bologna. This was a 1953 painting by one Mike Bidio. The painting is called *Not Morandi*. It is a still life of the kinds of objects that Morandi painted, and it uses colors that we may see in Morandi's still lifes. And yet—surprise, surprise—we immediately feel that this painting is not one of Morandi's works, and we may

²⁴ In a [previous essay I paired Morandi and Bonnard](#). In many of Bonnard's most intimate paintings of his model, lover, and eventual wife, Marthe de Meligny, Marthe's face is obscured, indistinct, or not shown. In that previous piece, I suggested links to incest and shame; one might also write of the facelessness of twentieth-century mass society and particularly in its most Fascist and most bureaucratic moments.

ask ourselves why not. Above all, *Not Morandi* is just objects; the relationship between them feels arbitrary.

The placement and relationship of objects in Morandi's most powerful still lifes never feels the least bit arbitrary. Quite the contrary, we feel—or may feel, if we keep looking—that the choice, placement, and relationships of these objects is, somehow, vitally important, and is trying—without words, without faces—to tell us something. Something about how we relate to one another and how it feels to be autonomous, or semi-autonomous, both as human beings, as a particular, peculiar species, and also in our particular, peculiar day and age.

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