

Introduction

Elemental Narratives

Break the pact, rewrite the agreement:
to begin with, dress yourself
in hard bark, resonant metal:
be vegetable and many animals.

Rompi il patto, riscrivi l'intesa:
per cominciare, vestiti
di dura corteccia, di sonoro metallo:
sii vegetale e molti animali.

—Ermanno Krumm, *Animali e uomini*

Understanding matter is necessary to comprehend the universe and ourselves.

Comprendere la materia è necessario per comprendere l'universo e noi stessi.

—Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*

Taking cues from specific chemical elements in Mendeleev's periodic table—from “Argon” to “Carbon,” passing through “Hydrogen,” “Nickel,” “Arsenic,” and so on—the twenty-one chapters forming Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* have been described as “encounters with matter, seen sometimes as mother and sometimes as enemy” (Levi 1984, back jacket; incontri con la materia, vista volta a volta come madre o come nemica).¹ Well-known outside of Italy especially for his novels about surviving the Holocaust, Levi was also a professional organic chemist who, in this later book, weaves together the story of his life,

2 one shared by an entire generation that resisted Nazi fascism and coped with World War II, and the story of the many challenges and satisfactions he derived from chemistry and writing.

As he imaginatively implies in the last chapter in the collection, “Carbon,” these two disciplines—writing and chemistry—are fundamentally connected at the biological and atomic levels.² They can offer a glimpse of the relationships between the universe and human beings and, by extension, of the interwoven physical, chemical, spiritual, and moral dimensions underpinning them. Most relevant to the objectives of my book, Levi muses on the real and metaphorical correlations between the elemental and the human sphere and on their more or less hidden analogies in terms of activities and creative potential. By doing so, he also implicitly suggests—well ahead of his time and recent theoretical elaborations—that forms of agency and expressivity are not prerogatives of human beings but are shared by the materials with which we interact and that, in turn, interact with us.

For instance, when we read in the chapter “Lead” that this “is a metal which feels fatigued, perhaps it’s tired of changing and no longer wishes to transform” (Levi 1984, 87; un metallo che senti stanco, forse stanco di trasformarsi e che non si vuole trasformare più) or, in “Mercury,” that a character (Hendrik) “seems to have turned into mercury, [the metal] running in his veins and leaking out his eyes” (104; sembrava diventato mercurio, che gli corresse per le vene e gli trapelasse dagli occhi), we are not merely confronted with colorful, metaphorical prose describing processes of anthropomorphism and objectification. What emerges from these lines is also Levi’s reconsideration of dualistic dichotomies and long-established boundaries and his desire to use his storytelling skills to convey the ontological proximity of the human and the nonhuman. As Jane Bennett puts it in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*—a work that provides essential support for my book’s conceptual framework—“In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture,’ anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphism” (2010, 99). In this sense, to self-servingly adapt the verses quoted in Krumm’s epigraph to these circumstances, Levi indeed contributes to imaginatively “break the pact, / rewrite the agreement” that has long privileged a traditional, dualistic (Cartesian), and anthropocentric worldview and rather inserts the human in a mutually constructive and revelatory dialogue with the nonhuman and the inhuman.³

Situated at the juncture of Italian studies and ecocriticism, *Elemental Narratives: Reading Environmental Entanglements in Modern Italy* takes *The*

Periodic Table as an initial source of structural, thematic, and philosophical inspiration. Namely, not only does each of its five chapters revolve around one (or two) specific substance(s), but it also shares Levi's original vision of a reality in which the encounter of matters, storytelling, and human beings has profound cognitive, ethical, and political implications.

I suggest that engaging with a selection of “narratives of entanglement” that speak of our simultaneous (co)existence in both imaginative and material universes does not just promise to generate new knowledge and more participative, affective responses to environmental issues. As this gesture aims at complementing quantitative, data-based information and fact-finding, it also hopes to induce the systemic changes needed to seriously address existing ecological crises. More concretely, along with the several scholars who codrafted the “Humanities for the Environment: A Manifesto for Research and Action,” I believe that insights from fiction and nonfiction, the arts, and other humanistic disciplines may modify perceptions and attitudes, increase our awareness and understanding, and in turn, incite at least some of us toward a more responsible, active, and “efficacious engagement with global environmental challenges” (Holm et al. 2015, 978).

Heeding the recent “turn to the material” in the environmental humanities and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's invitation to consider “matter not solely as it appears in texts, but as a text itself” (2014, 6), I too seek to literally engage with matter. Namely, I ask what stories it tells, and lets us tell, in the wake of increasingly troubling predictions about the health of global environments, of multidisciplinary challenges to both the limits and boundaries of humans and things, and of reassessments of the separate nature of mind, body, language, and place.⁴ Fully endorsing the view that matter is not just a background setting but a protagonist and an active agent in our becoming that “produces ongoing configurations of signs and meanings that can be interpreted as stories” (Oppermann 2017, 293), *Elemental Narratives* individuates and examines some of these stories as they emerge in different media, bodies, and places. It reflects not only on how human beings deal, and have historically dealt, with some of the substances that contribute to shaping their world but on how such materials, by interacting with human imagination, express their own stories and construct meaning, effecting changes in human aesthetic practices, knowledges, perspectives, and ways of being and behaving.

More specifically, my book addresses a selection of texts in an Italian-Mediterranean landscape—considered simultaneously in its cultural and

4 topological, semiotic, and geographical dimensions—in which the boundaries between what is human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic tend to become blurred and indistinct. As such, these texts ultimately delineate an ontological condition of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and relationality among materials, places, and living organisms. Echoing Iovino’s remarks about the appropriateness of considering the study of the dynamics of specific places “as generative of categories” that can be applied to understanding many other places, here Italy functions at once as territory and map, as a specific site of analysis and a cognitive instrument (2016a, 2–3). It is a fact that environmental issues and, by extension, ecocritical discourses do not have strict borders and ultimately are “travelling theories’ . . . irreducible to one geographical, national or methodological origin” (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 16). In this light, I consider Italy as a bioregional natural-cultural microcosm that despite its specific singularities (historical, cultural, geographic, and so on), still enlightens and is enlightened by the situation in the macrocosm of other places and collectives. Of course, as Erin James observes, “People around the world imagine, inhabit, and experience their environments differently,” and Italians, in certain aspects (given, for instance, their strong humanistic heritage and historical relationship with the notion of landscape), may do that even more “differently” than others.⁵ However, she also argues that “narratives, with their power to immerse readers in environments and environmental experiences different from their own, can reveal perceptual points of difference, clarify the interests of those who imagine and inhabit an environment in a specific way . . . they can open channels of communication . . . and encourage an environmental awareness that may help to craft more equitable, just, and nonpartisan environmental policies” (2015, 208).

If James’s remarks make perfect sense in the context of the internationally produced, geographically expansive, yet also ultimately anglophone postcolonial narratives she examines, they can be equally convincing if applied to some of the expanded narratives—material and linguistic, fictional and nonfictional, postcolonial or not—of a non-English-speaking Mediterranean country crucially positioned between the Global North and the Global South, which had, and continues to have, its own encounters with postcoloniality.⁶ In short, the multifaceted selection of Italian-produced, environmentally revealing material-discursive stories and/or “storyworlds” (James 2015) I intend to engage with does not pertain exclusively to Italian studies but promises to offer cross-cultural environmental insights as illuminating as any other. And similarly, these narratives are able to play a comparably relevant, correlative role in influencing

more sustainable worldviews and “enrich[ing] ecocritical discourse” (James 2015, 10)—not to mention thinking of Italian studies as not simply one of the provinces of modern languages.

Taking further inspiration from the still valid advice of Cheryll Glotfelty to aspiring ecocritical scholars to keep “one foot in literature and the other on land” (1996, xix), and complementing Iovino’s groundbreaking ecomaterialist readings of Italy as a text and “‘storied matter’ endowed with narrative power” (2016a, 9), in the pages that follow, I thus draw an additional, alternative aesthetic and topographic map of the *bel paese*. Touching different locations on this map, I investigate a number of imaginative and physical terrains in modern and contemporary Italy where the places, bodies, and substances that have marked the nation’s path toward modernity come to “meet” and interact. In particular, while striving to give equal weight to close readings (of fiction, nonfiction, visual works) and physical sites, all considered as texts rich with signs to be interpreted, I investigate the narrative eloquence and expressive energy of materials such as sulfur, petroleum, marble, concrete, asphalt, steel, and asbestos.

Building on the increasingly accepted idea of a decentralized agency that is shared among human and nonhuman entities, I reaffirm that these physical substances are not merely acted upon as inert stuff but rather crucially intertwined with human lives, corporalities, practices, meanings, and imaginative stories. As such, and as these materials interact and cooperate over time and space with human beings in shaping reality and effecting changes on the environment—just think of the material and discursive consequences of any ecocatastrophe—I argue that they necessarily contribute to making and, simultaneously, unmaking the country that is Italy today, affecting its socio-environmental health in multiple ways.

As the still relatively few but crucial contributions in the field demonstrate, the Italian-Mediterranean context offers a promising and still largely unexplored object for ecocritical analysis, especially if viewed as an essential component of the larger dynamics of the Global South. Important books such as Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall’s *Nature and History in Modern Italy* (2010), Monica Seger’s *Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (2015), Pasquale Verdicchio’s *Ecocritical Approaches to Italian Culture and Literature* (2016), Iovino’s *Ecocriticism and Italy* (2016), and *Italy and the Environmental Humanities* (2018), which I coedited with Iovino and Elena Past, have already stressed the fundamental point that in the past century, both the Italian landscape and the relationship of its inhabitants

6 to this landscape have undergone rapid changes as a result of industrial, agricultural, and technological innovation. This uneven and disruptive shift from a mostly rural society to a modern one and its implicit effects on the environment began slowly in the early twentieth century, then exploded in the years of reconstruction and economic boom following World War II (mid-1950s to early 1960s). The several industrial accidents that have dotted the Italian territory since then—most memorably, the ones in Seveso (1976) and the incident at the Farmoplant plant in Massa Carrara (1988)—can only remind us that there have been actual explosions next to metaphorical ones.⁷

Needless to say, this multifaceted process of disruption is still underway, and in various guises, it continues to replicate itself in other developing parts of the world. Environmental historian Piero Bevilacqua observes that some of the agents involved in this process of disruption and subsequent socioenvironmental degradation were (and still are) human, but some were nonhuman, such as the “sulfur mines in Sicily and iron mines on the island of Elba,” or “lead and zinc . . . and coal” in Sardinia, or the “steel and iron industry . . . in Terni . . . Piombino, Savona and the Bagnoli neighborhood in Naples,” or the chemicals in the “triangle between Milan, Turin and Genoa” (2010, 21). In light of Bevilacqua’s considerations, it is particularly appropriate, if not actually urgent, to interpret the expressive capacity of these agentic materials and, in general, matter’s narrative potential in its eloquent interplay with human culture and discourse in the construction of meaning.

Although not specifically in relation to an Italian-Mediterranean context and not informed by new materialist theories, this sense of urgency may be traced back to Patricia Yaeger’s initial remarks in a thematic issue of *PMLA* entitled “Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources” (2011), which helped me better define the topic of my research. As she and the other contributors focus on the roles and representation of such materials in a variety of literary texts and reflect on “the ways thinking about energy sources might transform our notions of literary periods” (Yaeger 2011, 310), they recognize the hermeneutical and methodological benefits of “addressing matter” and, by extension, of contemplating what Levi calls “the transversal bonds which link the world of nature to that of culture” (1989, 10; i legami trasversali che collegano il mondo della natura con quello della cultura).

More recently, such urgency is even more clearly articulated and underscored by Stacy Alaimo, who observes that in the current period of the

Anthropocene, it is impossible to avoid concerning ourselves with matter from a cultural theory perspective “when mass extinction, climate change, nuclear technology, industrial agriculture, urban and suburban sprawl, biotechnology, and the production of xenobiotic chemicals have profoundly altered the biophysical world” (2017, 13). Additionally, as she points out, chemicals, technologies, and various products transcorporeally traverse our bodies, literally and concretely making substances be in and of us. From its necessarily limited geographical perspective and focus, my book therefore represents one more attempt to address and respond to this kind of timely concern.

As should be at least partially evident by the names of the scholars mentioned thus far, my methodological approach is grounded in and inspired by recent theoretical paradigms and disciplines gathered under the large umbrella of the environmental humanities, from environmental history, social justice, and geocriticism to cultural/political ecology, econarratology, and posthumanism. In particular, I draw from the insights of the recent “material turn” within ecocriticism, a conceptual framework rooted in feminist theory and practice. Defined by Iovino and Oppermann as an approach that “examines matter both in texts and as a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality” (2014, 2), material ecocriticism frequently overlaps and “intersects with and has substantial affinities to [most of] the paradigms” mentioned previously (Zapf 2016, 72). Its most distinguished and, for my purposes, fertile features are its assignment of agency to nonhuman nature and its “emphasis on the narrative dimension of material reality” (Oppermann 2017, 290). By extending the notion of text to include all material formations, it expands ecocriticism’s practical applications beyond nature writing, questioning traditional anthropocentric stances and theories by foregrounding that human beings are always embedded and embodied in their physical surroundings in a reciprocal relationship with agentic matter.

The philosophical genealogy that helped shape new materialisms is quite large and illustrious, and therefore, given the presence of excellent introductions to this conceptual field and its rich interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations, my overview here is very general and far from exhaustive.⁸ Fundamentally, the new materialist theories that inform my ecomaterialist approach emerge out of and build on earlier feminist engagements with materialism. Informed by a continental, Deleuzian background, these theoretical positions question some of the perceived limitations and excesses of the linguistic turn and social

8 constructionism and establish productive dialogues between cultural theory and the natural sciences. In addition to stressing matter's coproductive role in affecting human life and the sociocultural sphere, new materialisms also distinguish themselves for their more pronounced ethical component and fruitful links to posthumanism. Besides the scholars already mentioned, one should at least allude to Manuel DeLanda's excursions into "nonlinearity" and his ideas on the reciprocal interconnections between natural and historical processes, Bruno Latour's questioning of culture-nature and language-world dichotomies, Karen Barad's notions of "agential realism" and "intra-action," Jane Bennett's idea of a "vibrant materiality," Donna Haraway's material-semiotic view of the world, and Rosi Braidotti's enthusiastic posthuman scholarship. Although readers will find additional references to some of these thinkers in the following chapters, I wish to emphasize here the most relevant ethical-environmental implications of a scholarship that, despite its differences, nonetheless unanimously believes in repositioning the human in the more-than-human world and exploring the ramifications of this meaningful encounter.

In its invitation to view anthropocentrism—the tendency to assign agency and intentionality exclusively to human beings—as the intellectual force responsible for the devaluation of animals, plants, matter, and things, this new materialist turn aims to more ecologically and sustainably relocate the human horizontally and nonhierarchically. Namely, it repositions the human as just one more entity in a world that is constantly reconfigured by the "intra-action of discursive practices and material phenomena" (Barad 2007, 152)—in the flow of and in relation to other things, substances, and bodies. Thus this approach has far-reaching ethical consequences that go beyond and accompany any single aesthetic interpretation.

Given the context, it seems worth noting that Italian culture itself has not been alien to theoretical and political interrogations of the Western anthropocentric tradition that have a similar, implicit ecological flavor. Although they are from different disciplinary perspectives and backgrounds, especially over the past two decades or so, Italy has experienced a growth of innovative philosophical ideas that have helped us reflect on and reassess the intellectual legacy of Italian Humanism and the Renaissance.

The so-called New Italian Thought, through its own critique and questioning of the contemporary social and political world and its elaborations of the biopolitical paradigm, has certainly played a role in problematizing the humanistic dream of "man as measure of the world." In addition to the contribution of

Giorgio Agamben, already a familiar presence in Anglo-American academia, I am thinking in particular of the work of Roberto Esposito—specifically, his definition of Italian philosophy as “living thought” (*pensiero vivente*) and his individuation of a geophilosophy that, in his view, from the early sixteenth century materialistically opted “for an entanglement with the external world.” As he puts it, “At the center of Italian philosophy, there is not the individual but the common world [*mondo comune*] in its inexhaustible vital power” (2010, 13).

Without pushing this too far or making superficial connections, I limit myself to observing that there are some points of potential synergy between Esposito’s position and ecomaterialist thought. If it is true that among the latter’s objectives is to reconsider ontologies by going outside and “meeting the universe halfway” (Barad 2007), it is also true that Esposito’s “living thought” aims at getting involved with and is projected into the “world of historic and political life” (Esposito 2010, 12). Echoing some of the tenets of the new materialist scholarship, his affirmative biopolitics wishes to move beyond the limitations of the individual, humanistic being (“*persona*”) in order to establish relations through different levels of reality and forms of life (human, animal, vegetal, material). Furthermore, it too implicitly questions exclusively anthropocentric worldviews and “welcome[s] life in all its different guises” (12).

Together with Esposito, although not associated with the “New Italian Thought,” I approach the end of this introductory chapter by mentioning ethologist, zoo-anthropologist, and philosopher Roberto Marchesini. Starting with his *Posthuman: Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza* (Posthuman: Toward new models of existence; 2002) and, most recently, his *Alterità: L’identità come relazione* (Alterity: Identity as relation; 2016), Marchesini has aimed at overcoming the perception of human beings as isolated, self-referred entities impermeable to external contaminations. Rather, he pushes forth the notion of a hetero-referred, nonanthropocentric humanism that is not necessarily antihumanistic.⁹ As such, some of his reflections will prove particularly useful and inspiring in the following pages.

Mindful of this eclectic theoretical background and, more tangibly, informed by the fundamental idea that we humans are immersed in the environment as much as the environment is in us, *Elemental Narratives* thus focuses on the Italian-Mediterranean natural-cultural dimension in order to draw attention to the intersection of human stories with those of the more-than-human worlds around and within us; it discusses some of the environmental implications of such an entangled situation. By taking an imaginary trip around

10 the peninsula, it examines relevant “material narratives” emerging collectively from aesthetic forms (literary texts, artworks, documentaries), places (factories, construction sites, suburban areas), bodies, and materials. All these narratives insert the human in a productive dialogue with the nonhuman, increasing our understanding of “glocal” environmental challenges and, hopefully, helping us reassess some of our priorities for the future.

Sharing Hubert Zapf’s belief that an “attention to the transformative role of the aesthetic in reshaping the ecocultural imaginary . . . is one of the crucial tasks of future ecocriticism” (2016, 50), I reflect on the combined role these localized material and cultural narratives—and storytelling in general—can play in raising awareness, changing perspectives, and shaping ideas about our engagement with the places we inhabit in the era of the Anthropocene and thus ultimately advancing the ecologization of our thinking and existence.

My first chapter, “Modernist Matters,” begins with some theoretical reflections about situating a few Italian modernist authors within the current ecocritical (and specifically, new materialist) interpretative horizon. The interest of early twentieth-century modernism and avant-garde in matter, objects, and things is not critically new, nor is its reconsideration of the subject-object dualism, fascination with urban spaces, and expanded understanding of corporeality.¹⁰ Less studied, however, is what such an interest may signify in ecocritical terms and in light of recent theoretical developments within the environmental humanities.¹¹ After arguing in favor of a specific elemental approach to modernism, I provide two sample case studies, briefly focusing on Scipio Slataper’s autobiographical novel, *Il mio Carso* (My Karst; [1912] 1988), which is mostly set in the rocky northeastern mountains of the Friuli region, and on some of Luigi Pirandello’s Sicilian sulfur narratives. Centered on F. T. Marinetti, I then invite further reflection on the general notion of matter, which is notoriously central to the futurist avant-garde. I draw attention to potential affinities, parallelisms, and, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s term, “adjacencies” (1986, 7–8) between the way futurists—as they wrote about landscapes around Lake Garda, wood furniture, construction materials in Venice, and lava flows from Etna in Sicily—imagined the interrelated notions of nature, matter, and corporeality and some of the current positions of postmodern, posthuman material ecocriticism.

In the second chapter, “Slick Territories: Petroculture, Italian Style,” I explore Italy’s discursive and material encounter with petroleum. Initially, I return briefly to the early modernist decades of the twentieth century and to the futurist context, when it began its rise as a global source of energy. I first

discuss some of the revealing “petro-texts” in *Il Gatto Selvatico*, one of the propaganda publications of Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI; Italian Hydrocarbon Corporation), and conclude by addressing material and discursive contaminations caused by oil in a novel and a recent documentary both set in Sarroch, in the south of Sardinia.

In chapter 3, “Apua Ma(t)ter: Narratives of Marble,” I focus on the storytelling and agentic powers of a quintessential Italian material, Carrara marble, and the landscape of the Apuan Alps between the regions of Tuscany and Liguria, where the marble is found. The attempt to geopoetically connect the Apuan topography to the local mindscape allows me to discuss a number of fictional and nonfictional texts by indigenous authors from 1905 to 2015.¹² Like Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, these texts literally emerge from this mineral, and at the same time, they become sites of resistance to politics of extraction and industrial exploitation.

The fourth chapter, “Steel and Asbestos: Stories of Toxic Lands and Bodies in Tuscany and Beyond,” investigates the vibrancy of two closely connected substances and subverts stereotypical, pastoral, touristic depictions of Tuscany. My interest here is focused on how some recent fictional and nonfictional narratives have responded to long-standing yet often conveniently silenced eco-socio-biological crises in this region. I first consider the depiction of the steel town of Piombino as a site where environmentally poisonous entanglements between human actors and nonhuman matter take place, a reality represented in Silvia Avallone’s novel *Swimming to Elba* (2012). Then I address an Italian version of what Alaimo calls “material memoir” (2010, 85), Alberto Prunetti’s novel *Amianto: Una storia operaia* (Asbestos: A blue-collar story; 2012). Finally, departing from Tuscany to reach Casale Monferrato (in Piedmont), the “ur-site” of asbestos contamination in Italy and Europe, I consider other transmedial narrative dimensions and artistic performances (from journalistic blogs to “word theater”) that chronicle the deadly consequences of hazardous industrial practices and asbestos exposure and manage to achieve some form of socioenvironmental justice.

Taking the site and material text of the Expo 2015 in Milan as the utopian/dystopian entry point for a final North-South journey along the peninsula, my fifth and final chapter, “Concrete and Asphalt: Geographies of Environmental Disruption in Modern Italy,” begins by discussing the damaged ecologies and “widespread peripheries” of an extended Italian northeast in works by contemporary authors Giorgio Falco and Wu Ming 2 (alias of Giovanni Cattabriga).

Partially following the narrative walking route Wu Ming 2 carved through the Po Valley in his *Il sentiero luminoso* (The shining path; 2016), I investigate how cement and building practices in general are central issues in *Violazione* (Violation; 2012), a novel by Alessandra Sarchi set in the region of Emilia Romagna. Sarchi's novel treats the violence and danger naturally present in but also cynically layered onto the land, our twisted relationship with the nonhuman other, and in short, the essentially unethical dimension of the space we inhabit. Issues of environmental justice, soil consumption, and abusiveness recur in the final part of this chapter. Here I establish an imaginary link between Tuscany and the southern region of Calabria, attempting a joint consideration of Simona Baldanzi's novels and her inquiries into the socioenvironmental impact of new tunnels and Treno Alta Velocità (TAV; a high-speed train) infrastructures in Tuscany's Mugello area as well as Mauro F. Minervino's poetic reflections on Calabria in his compelling "road narrative" *Statale 18* (State road 18; 2010).

In a frequently cited remark, Robert Kern writes that "ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful . . . when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere" (2000, 11). My research shares his perspective, and as the chapter descriptions should suggest, with very few exceptions, it does not address narratives that have a specific environmental agenda.

Along a similar line, and in spite of the potential appropriateness of some of their works, my discussion does not address (either directly or tangentially) a number of canonical authors such as Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, or Gianni Celati, who have already been the object of ecocritical attention (see works by Seger, Iovino, Luisetti, and Barron). This explains why, for example, readers will not find a classic like Calvino's short novel *La speculazione edilizia* (A plunge into real estate; 1991b) or a discussion of Celati's take on the Po Valley in my "Concrete and Asphalt" chapter. Likewise, in the chapter on oil, I barely skim the surface of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* (Petroleum; [1972] 1992). While these names remain crucial in Italian ecocritical discourse, *Elemental Narratives* implicitly demonstrates that "storied" environmental concerns are more pervasive in Italy than previously thought by introducing lesser-known and unexpected figures to such a discourse. As such, it boosts the relevance and visibility of Italian studies in the larger field of the environmental humanities.

"This little trick with amber was a sign to decipher. . . . It will never be possible to eliminate all risk nor to solve all problems, but every solved problem is a victory in terms of saved human lives, health, and wealth" (Levi 1989,

138; Il giochetto dell'ambra era un segno da decifrare. . . . Non si riuscirà mai ad annullare tutti i rischi né a risolvere tutti i problemi, ma ogni problema risolto è una vittoria, in termini di vite umane, salute e ricchezze salvate), writes Primo Levi in his collection *Other People's Trades* (1989). Interestingly, even though Levi refers only to human lives, I am quite confident that given his obsession with animals and matter, the addition of *nonhuman* would not be unwelcome here. This said, what amber eventually reveals is electricity: "a force that would change the face of the world" (138; una forza che avrebbe mutato la faccia del mondo) but that, if not respected, also contains a harmful potential.

To a certain extent, and despite their differences, all the matters discussed in the following pages are a bit like amber. Depending on how we interact (or, better, "intra-act," to quote Barad 2007, 33) with them, they can solve problems or create disruptions and trouble for human and nonhuman lives, health, and wealth. Continuing to decipher the signs they send and to listen and learn from their emerging stories may then be a good, humble strategy after all. If it does not immediately save lives, then it may at least raise awareness, keep humankind in balance with the environment, ameliorate attitudes, and prevent some of the calamities that we (some of us more than others) excel in bringing upon ourselves and our planet. After all, on this planet, as Levi wisely sensed, "everything seems stable and is not . . . [and] awesome energies . . . sleep a light sleep" (1989, 110; tutto sembra stabile e non è . . . [e] spaventose energie . . . dormono di un sonno leggero).