The forms of hoarding that have been pathologized in the twenty-first century result in accumulations that are, for the most part, of no direct consequence to the general economy. These amassments are different from those elaborated in economic theories of hoarding, which focus on the accumulation of exchange value (bullion or representative money) or necessity goods (primarily grain). The hoarder’s possessions often seem like junk to others: old newspapers and magazines, tattered plush animals, rusty tools, and auto parts are common examples. Hoarding looks like an investment of libidinal energy unmatched by economic value. Studies influenced by behavioral economics have described hoarding disorder as a failure of rational consumption, the result of poor decisions about resource allocation. Some medical researchers—hoping to transform the pathologized hoarder into a *homo oeconomicus*—have even attempted to treat the disorder with economic instruction. If only hoarders could properly assess value, the theory goes, they would be able to discard the objects that overwhelm their living spaces.

Given the contrast between rational investment in exchange value or necessity goods and irrational investment in broken-down matter, it may make sense to ask whether the two conceptions of
hoarding—in economic theory and in popular culture—have anything more in common than a shared basis in accumulation. When grain spoils in siloes or sketches by old masters emerge from musty cellars, when whimsy fortune wreaks havoc on value with time, rational and irrational begin to look more similar. Both forms of hoarding are premised on the axiom that value changes over time. This truth—and its corollary that the moment of acquisition is decisive—is particularly evident at emporia like stock exchanges, auctions, pawnshops, popup stores, and those with which this chapter is concerned: flea markets.

Flea markets conjure hoards because they, too, are spaces defined by a multitude of objects, not piled up to the ceiling but spread across acres. Market merchandise comprises an array of postconsumer goods, in forms kitsch, counterfeit, or damaged; antique, authentic, or rare. As with hoards, the most striking aspect of flea markets for many who describe and document them is the variety of the merchandise and the odd juxtapositions that result. Flea market merchandise, like hoards, seems to elude classificatory schemes. But the similarities between flea markets and the pathologized object practices that define hoarding are more entrenched than mere physical resemblance. Flea markets enmesh political and psychic economies, modernity and obsolescence, intentionality and contingency, and art and abjection, anticipating structuring tensions and themes at the root of hoards. Here I trace a cultural history of flea markets, charting the narrative, rhetorical, and visual topoi that define them, as well as the characters that animate them. I show how flea markets become spaces in which openness to contingent meetings with undervalued objects becomes a defining feature of modern conceptions of the artist, poet, street photographer, and historian.
The first markets to gain the verminous epithet *marchés aux puces* (flea markets) were both produced by and excluded from the modernizing city of Paris. These markets developed in the Paris Zone, a *zona non aedificandi* established in the 1840s just outside the new Thiers Wall. The prohibition of construction in the roughly 250-meter wide and 34-kilometer long area created a liminal space gradually given over to makeshift housing occupied by Roma, vagrants, ragpickers, and later, poor Parisians displaced by Baron Haussmann’s renovation. The Zone also became the primary site for the processing and peddling of scavenged material. There, *chiffonniers* (ragpickers) sorted and sold scavenged materials, including rags, bones, cardboard, nails and other scrap metal, shards of glass, and animal carcasses. Gradually, these makeshift points of sale evolved from sites where waste is remade through labor, gaining market value in predictable ways, to places where chance seems to rule, and modernity seems distant. Guides to Turin and Milan occasioned by expositions convey a similarly antithetical relationship between the odds and ends at the market and the modernizing cities. By the interwar period in Italy, photographers and writers influenced by Eugène Atget’s pictures of ragpickers and their dwellings and by André Breton’s writings on surrealist objects found revolutionary potential in the markets.

The shifting economic underpinnings of the *puces* mirror the conceptual extension of hoarding from political economy to psychology, and across materials, from necessity goods and exchange value to enticing objects like the postconsumer bric-a-brac that ends up at the markets. Removed from their histories of production and possession, recovered by ragpickers, and ripe for reinvention, flea market objects substantiate subjective “marginalist” theories of value that developed contemporaneously with the first *puces*. Beginning in around 1870, political economists began to break
from the classical theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, who understood cost as a function of labor. Marginalism, instead, makes the price of a commodity dependent on expected satisfaction—that is, desire, or what Vilfredo Pareto called ophelimity, from the Greek ópheleó for useful, advantageous, or pleasurable. In his 1973 study of the enmeshment of psychic and political economies, the French poststructuralist Jean-Joseph Goux argues that in the logic of marginalism, to produce desire is to create value, but also to produce the lack or scarcity that will intensify desire. In such calculations, labor and raw materials recede, becoming invisible or irrelevant. Marginalism explains what economists call the infinite elasticity of demand, which traps desire and scarcity in mutually reinforcing loops, creating bubbles—whether of tulips, rare books, or bundled subprime mortgages. Marginalism offers an illusory alternative to the “somber realism of labor value” by “dropping into the magnetic field of political economy (of market exchange-value) everything ‘sacred’ and ‘transcendent’ that might appear to escape it—including desire.”

As the raw materials of urban detritus and the labor of rag-pickers began to give way to the mysterious workings of chance, popular flea market anecdotes told of windfalls of exchange value, generally in the form of coins. These episodes imbued the markets with the logic of belatedness that defines gambling for Walter Benjamin: “The particular danger that threatens the gambler lies in the fateful category of arriving ‘too late,’ of having ‘missed the opportunity.’” This changed somewhat as the merchandise became more varied and less predictable; over time, the rule of chance came to function for the flea market flaneur in much the same way it did for Adam Phillips’s agoraphobic patient. Like the painter who begins a new work by splattering paint on the canvas and decides what to wear by grabbing garments at random, the
flaneur finds at the flea market the possibility of chancing upon a unique object that answers to unforeseen desires. Because of the unpredictability of merchandise, every sale at the flea market is catalyzed by the fleeting time of an encounter—that is, by transience, which Freud defines as scarcity value in time. Transience also characterizes the objects that seem to have outlasted their use and value. Accordingly, the flea markets often prompt nostalgic ruminations by writers—most famously, Breton—on the transient, the fleeting, the contingent—three terms Charles Baudelaire uses in *The Painter of Modern Life* to define modernity. For Baudelaire, modernity is what will soon be gone. This, Theodor Adorno writes, is the “false promise” that makes the “idea of modernity”: “everything modern, because of its never-changing core, has scarcely aged than it takes on a look of the archaic.”

In his allegorical reading of Paul Klee’s 1920 *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin uses the modern production of the outmoded to illustrate the urgency of his historical method. He describes the angel in Klee’s watercolor: “His eyes are wide, his mouth is open . . . his face is turned toward the past” and glosses: “This is how the angel of history must look.” He elaborates:

Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. We call progress this storm.

Scavenge work becomes the model of a historical method that takes up the urgent and unending project of resisting the devastating
effects of the myth of progress. Analogizing the past and present with dialectical images suggests not the work of mourning, but that of reviving and repairing; awakening the dead and making whole what has been smashed. Salvaging meaning and value
from the debris that piles up in the name of progress is possible to imagine because of the way in which “the moderns”—those who consider themselves to be modern—understand themselves and their objects to exist at a point of temporal rupture so that what is past is irretrievably lost.\(^{18}\)

Francesco Orlando considers the accumulation of obsolete objects in modern literature to be a return of what is repressed by a society driven by the functional imperative; flea markets might look similar to literature in this regard. In threadbare matter, furthermore, Orlando finds an image of the corroding, rather than ennobling effects of time, and in that, a way of understanding the obsolescence of the aristocracy. While Orlando focuses on the ways in which imaginary relationships to real conditions of existence are mediated by representations of objects affected by the passage of time, Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory* makes social status a determinant of the way in which time affects the value of objects. Thompson takes as a point of departure the axiom that possessable objects can be divided into two categories: transients and durables. The value of the former decreases until it reaches zero while that of the latter increases toward infinity.\(^{19}\) He relates social status to the ownership of durables and marginality to transients, not so much because the wealthy can afford durables, but rather because the value of objects is made by social relations.

Unlike durables and transients, which gain and lose value in predictable ways, the alchemy of value, with regard to rubbish, is opaque. For Thompson, the creation of value, or the transformation of rubbish into durables, cannot be attributed to fortune, as in such windfalls as an original Renoir painting in a box of junk at a West Virginia flea market, or—a more quotidian example—a nice-looking table up for grabs by the curb.\(^{20}\) The dumpster is, instead, a reflective surface; the value therein is a mirror of social relations
so that what appears to be a spontaneous creation of value is produced by and contributes to the reproduction class-based society. The difference between a piece of junk and a valuable antique rests not in the objects but in social relations. Applications of Thompson’s theory are everywhere in literary and visual texts dedicated to flea markets, which first focused on the ragpicker’s stoic labor and then remade him as figure for the poet, artist, or street photographer. This metamorphosis creates the possibility for wild changes of value while obscuring the less dramatic profits made from the slower labor of repair—of slowing the deterioration of transients.

Thierry Bardini’s playful and ambitious *Junkware* also obscures such labor by lending agency to apparently useless stuff: “Junk is junk. . . . You forget about it, and it somehow grows anarchically. Junk rusts, fades, decays. . . . Junk is its own cause.” Notwithstanding this agency, affective relationships of humans to junk are, for Bardini, determined by the social. To marvel at junk is a luxurious endeavor; nostalgia is a malady of the well-fed: “Junk . . . incarnates the sentimental scrap we choose to love tenderly in these parts of the world. It materializes the memories of consumption that we grew up idolizing. Junk, on the other hand, is a necessity for the starving.” The cultural history I trace in this chapter is one in which scavenged necessity gives way to sentimental scrap as chance comes to rule over the flea market.

The distinction David Trotter draws between forms of refuse brings into focus the stakes of the transformations of flea market merchandise. Mess, he writes, is “contingency’s signature,” an event with no author and no intention beyond chance. Waste, by contrast, “is an effect which can be traced back to its cause. . . . However foul it may become, it still gleams with efficiency.” He explains: “Mess is waste that has not yet become, and may never become, either symptom or symbol. The difference between mess
and waste is partly a difference of scale and point of view, and partly a difference in the imaginative uses to which they have consistently been put.” In other words, the distinction between waste and mess is not just ontological, but also aesthetic.

The Ragpicker Becomes an Artist

Charles Baudelaire’s “Une Charogne” (“A Carcass”) illustrates the aesthetic distinction between mess and waste by transforming the eponymous carcass from the former to the latter. The poet recalls to his beloved “that beautiful morning in June” when the two happened upon a carrion splayed across their path. From a mess—a shameless object “sweating out poisonous fumes,” encountered by chance—the carcass becomes a memento mori laden with meaning for the lovers. More important, its splendid putrefaction becomes a happy part of a cycle smiled upon by the sky. The carcass becomes waste: part of a system with ongoing, predictable results, including the worm-kissed decomposition of the beloved.

Ragpickers, especially those sorting and selling scavenged materials in the Paris Zone, were inspiration and allegory to modern writers and artists. In “Le Vin des chiffonniers” (“The Ragpickers’ Wine”), Baudelaire likens the ragpicker to a poet, scavenging for beauty and meaning in the city’s dross. Benjamin describes Baudelaire’s use of the ragpicker’s labor as an extended metaphor for the poetic method: “Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. . . . He sorts things out and selects judiciously: he collects like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects.” In his 1869 *Chiffonnier*, Édouard Manet lends the ragpicker the stoic melancholy fitting for a “vital character in
Figure 2.2
an urban drama,” removing him from the streets of Paris to set him against a “featureless, peculiarly inappropriate, dissociative background.” 29 In contrast to the stylized plainness of the background of Manet’s *Chiffonnier*, the painter Jean-François Raffaëlli dedicated many canvases to ragpickers, usually depicted alone or accompanied by a dog, against the barren terrain of the outskirts, sometimes with factories billowing smoke visible on the horizon. 30 In his photograph of a ragpicker, taken between 1899 and 1901, Eugène Atget returns the doleful icon to the streets of Paris with a composition that is in dialogue with these painters. Looking apprehensively at the photographer, Atget’s *chiffonnier* is immersed in the tedium of his work: he is dwarfed by the cart piled high with stuffed sacks of rags.

Like the carrion at the beginning of Baudelaire’s poem, the objects and materials scavenged by ragpickers working in Paris are encountered by chance. According to Trotter’s distinction, the refuse that ragpickers gather looks more like waste than mess because it is reproduced daily and scaled to the city’s cycle of consumption. In an 1884 article in *L’Illustration*, Louis Paulian describes the important labor performed by ragpickers: “Household rubbish represents, in the city of Paris alone, an asset of 50,000–60,000 francs that is tossed into the street each day that would be lost to society if the ragpicker weren’t there to gather it, transform it, and put it back into circulation.” 31 The ragpickers’ scavenging remakes the metropolis as an awe-inspiring system of producing and processing waste. Paulian concludes: “Thanks to the ragpicker, nothing is truly lost.” 32

Whereas these artists and writers represent ragpickers as solitary figures removed from or isolated within the city, gradually more attention was given to the spaces they occupied. Postcards depict ragpickers returning to the Zone in horse-drawn carts after their
Figure 2.3
Eugène Atget, Villa d’un chiffonnier, 1912. Courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.
morning rounds.\textsuperscript{33} In these images, the figures lack any detail of facial expression like those that distinguish the lone ragpickers of Manet, Raffaëlli, and Atget. In some images, ragpickers are absent save for the awe-inspiring traces left in the spaces they inhabit. In his 1912 \textit{Villa d’un chiffonnier}, Atget captures the ornate exterior of a ragpicker’s hovel, grandiose despite the humble origin of the building materials.\textsuperscript{34} The “villa” is lavishly decorated with scavenged gargoyles: mangled dolls; pull toys of various sizes and species. A plush cat balances at the edge of the shingled roof, as if trying to catch the creature mounted just below; a poorly taxidermied bird of prey extends out from a wooden beam, as if ready to put its unpracticed wings to the test of flight; and two child-sized stuffed animals sit regally atop the roof like guardian lions. Anticipating the contemporary interest in the crowded dilapidation of hoarded homes, the picture becomes a portrait of the marvelous creativity or fascinating lunacy, rather than the resourcefulness, of the absent ragpicker.

A second photograph, taken the same year, depicts the interior of a ragpicker’s workspace on the Boulevard Masséna. As in the \textit{Villa}, the labor of the absent ragpicker, in the \textit{Intérieur d’un chiffonnier}, enlivens the squalor with fascinating detail. The materials accumulated in the frame include a dozen or so baskets, a large drum, wooden beams, ladders, chairs, a wagon wheel, rope, as well as human forms: a graceful nude statuette, and the straddling legs of a broken doll. In place of the heavy bundles of unseen rags borne with weathered forbearance, both photographs display marvelous finds of absent ragpickers. The \textit{Villa} makes the ragpicker’s hovel a spectacular œuvre; suggestive of some practice that lingers between resourceful labor, artistic genius, and mad compulsion. The \textit{Intérieur}, by contrast, delivers an inviting perspective for flea market shoppers in the debris punctuated with barely discernible and perhaps unrecognized treasures.
The changing picture of ragpickers’ wares represented by these two photographs is, in part, the product of the increasing stratification of the profession. *Coureurs* or *piquers* worked by night with a lantern in one hand, a pick in the other, and a basket on the back. The slightly better-remunerated *placiers* scavenged in specific neighborhoods and transported their wares by cart. The *chineurs*, the highest earning among *chiffonniers*, dealt primarily in scavenged objects. As the makeshift points of sale came to be officially designated markets—Montreuil-sous-bois in 1860 and Saint-Ouen in 1885—these *chineurs* began to predominate.

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Alongside the chineur was the brocante, defined in 1898 as a “dealer of old furniture, linens, clothing, jewelry, dishes, weapons, metals, and other objects and occasional goods.” The professionalization of ragpickers and the increasing proportion of chineurs and brocantes among those vending in the Zone resulted in a shifted emphasis; rather than a site for the processing of the city’s waste, the markets came to be stocked with “objets et marchandises de hasard,” and ruled by chance. This transformation is reflected in the shift from the portraits of ragpickers, alone and august—by Manet, Raffaëlli, and Atget—to the spaces where they keep the fascinating things cast off, lost, or forgotten by the modernizing city. With that shift, the fruit of scavenge work becomes increasingly invisible, even as the ragpicker retreats into an archaic world that seems to exist beyond the modern conception of time. The romanticized figure of the poet-artist who takes his place is not the vendor, but the shopper-flaneur.

Stories of Saint-Ouen

The beginning of the transformation of flea markets from points of sale for rags and bones to places where chance rules is reflected in the changing stuff of windfalls—first, luck strikes in the liquid form of exchange value; then in alluring objects, either valuable or strange. Two apocryphal accounts explain the origin of the term “marché aux puces.” In the first, a guard looking out over the market from the heights of a watchtower along the Thiers Wall exclaims: “Why, it’s a market of fleas!” The second, more probable explanation is that the term evolved from an old joke that the ragpickers sold clothes with everything—even the fleas—included. In each case, the origin has to do with the filth and poverty of the markets; whether tiny indistinct laborers hopping about, or
contagious bugs, the analogy was unlikely to attract shoppers like the well-heeled young women afflicted with *magasinitis* at the department stores.

Early uses of *marché aux puces* in the French press were consonant with the second anecdote. A note in the Paris crime report of June 24, 1891 in *La Lanterne* titled “Marché-aux-Puces” offers a primer on the Montreuil-sous-Bois market, presenting it as a picturesque urban secret.39 “Few Parisians know about the ‘Flea-Market,’” the note begins, then adds the description: “A mishmash of old ragged clothing, gibus hats collapsed into accordions, and shoes without soles, for sale alongside more or less fresh meat, the remnants of vegetables, and old crusts of bread.”40 The crime reported is a scuffle between two junk dealers over a shiny coin that rolled between their stalls. One ends up in the hospital with a broken leg, the other lands in jail. Introducing the aggressor, whose stall is decorated by a sign that reads “Michel knows rags and everything that comes with them,” the note evokes the origin of the term “marché aux puces,” adding: “So much meaning in that simple word ‘everything!’”41 The glimpse of urban seediness, and of the shiny coin amid detritus, violence, and the suggestion of fleas made for a compelling vignette: the note captures themes that would remain vivid for decades in writing about flea markets. Art critic André Warnod writes, in 1914: “Despite the name, don’t think that they sell fleas at the market. . . . Even if some fleas pass from seller to buyer, the prices stay the same.”42

Just over a month later, *XIX Siècle* published a short note, “Surprises of the flea market,” about Madame Pacaud, a widow who bought an old mattress to use for wool at the Montreuil-sous-Bois market.43 She immediately cut open the mattress and began extracting its woolen innards, when out fell a heavy sack filled with 14,000 francs in gold coin. The note settles the nagging
question of whether the widow would get to keep the gold: “The
mattress had passed through so many hands, and through so
many mansions that it would be impossible to locate the coin
hoarder. The widow will therefore remain in possession of the
hoard.” The note was reprinted that evening in La Presse.
The anecdote marks the transformation of the market from a
place where you can reliably go to find what you seek, to a place
where you can stumble on something you never expected to see:
the answer to your dreams.

These two news items from 1891 are representative of flea
market narratives. Both are accounts of coins turning up unex-
pectedly. Scoffing at the scuffle over a couple cents, the first
illustrates the poverty and desperation of the vendors. The
second, by contrast, makes the flea market appear closer to
bourgeois sensibilities. It is silent on the squalor of the mar-
ket and offers no list of incongruous and broken-down wares.
That a widow with a fixed abode would visit the market alone
makes the advice offered in the monthly organ of the subur-
ban landowners’ association in 1897 seem alarmist: “Think
of your safety and carry a gun when you walk through the
Zone.” The two narratives are similar not only in sketching
encounters with unanticipated riches but also in foreground-
ing uncertainty about the rightful owner of the riches. In these
anecdotes, economic gain is granted by inconstant fortune; the
windfalls come in the liquid form of specie, which cannot be
traced to any individual and is therefore available to whoever is
so lucky as to stumble upon it.

A third story—more widely reported than the previous two—
suggests that unexpected flea market fortunes are contingent on
this dangerous and alluring untraceability. In October 1895, the
thirteen-year-old Henri Pouget purchased a box of old issues
of *Le Voleur* at the Montreuil-sous-Bois flea market.\(^{46}\) When he returned home, he began rifling through them and noticed some documents clipped to the pages. He showed the magazines to his father, who saw the name Mr. Haas printed on some pages, along with “Banque de France.” Other pages were marked with phrases like “nominative share” and “bank voucher.” The older Pouget did not know what to make of the documents, so he showed them to his friend, Mr. Cassagne. Once the two men realized that the documents were worth more than 150,000 francs, they hatched a plan to recover as much value as possible from them. They decided to go to Belgium, where they would not be recognized, and where no one would have heard of the recent death of the well-known miser, Charles Haas. There, they attempted to exchange the documents, but when they asked for a curiously low sum the bank teller tipped off the police, and the two were arrested.\(^{47}\) The case was tried in February of the following year, and both Cassagne and Pouget were sentenced to four months in prison and a fine of fifty francs.

The *marché aux puces*, in these early anecdotes, is a place where humble fortunes can be reversed by an unexpected find: riches stitched into a bedbug-infested mattress or jailbait interleaved in mildewed magazine pages. Chance becomes the law of the market, though its rewards take a less liquid form; a form that is available only to those more cunning than poor Pouget and Cassagne or to those discerning enough to recognize its overtures. These anecdotes chart the transformations of flea markets—first associated with squalor, they next become places where luck might strike in the form of specie, and then places where fortune must be matched by some act of discernment. As chance prevails, flea markets gradually begin to attract the curious, idle, and nostalgic: flaneurs.\(^{48}\)
Off-Modern Italian Markets

Like the Paris puces, miscellanea markets of the outskirts of Milan and Turin were spaces through and against which the idea of modernity was forged in Italy. In writings occasioned by two expositions—the 1881 National Exposition of Art and Industry in Milan and the 1884 Italian General Exposition in Turin—flea markets represent picturesque counterpoints to the modernizing city and essential stops on any visitor’s itinerary. One of the most widely read of these exposition narratives is Edmondo De Amicis’s *Torino 1880*, “the official portrait of the modern Italian metropolis.”

Turin, De Amicis promised, would impress any visitor because of the stately elegance of its bright thoroughfares framed by mountains. But the Italian visitor, in particular, would be moved by the patriotic spirit that infuses the city’s every stone, house, and portico: “There you can still feel the warmth of the great gust of patriotism that swept through the city, enfl aming and overwhelming everything, like a hurricane made of fire. What Italian could arrive there and not feel moved?”

De Amicis reads perseverance, rectitude, and diligence on every visage, and democratic virtue in every building: “The architecture is democratic and egalitarian. The houses can address each other informally as citizens.”

In contrast to the sober grandeur of the city center boulevards, in De Amicis’s account, is the raucous market, today called the Balòn. Midway through his guide, De Amicis introduces the dramatic shift that will confront any visitor who ventures into the eastern part of the city center: “The nature of Turin’s appearance morphs suddenly upon entering the part of the city that extends from via Santa Teresa to Piazza Emanuele Filiberto. Here, the city ages unexpectedly by several centuries, darkening, narrowing, winding, and becoming poor and depressed.” To wander from
the modern Turin of Corso Francia to the area between Via Santa Teresa and Piazza Emanuele Filiberto is to travel back in time, to a place that “makes you want to deliver the breaking news of Italy’s Unification.” The market, for De Amicis, is the core of this picturesque other Turin and requisite for any visitor. To see the city in its greatest complexity, he insists, one must visit on a Saturday morning in the winter when the market is in full swing. There, he writes, at once elevating his own project and the modernity of the city he lauds, a Zola from Turin could set a novel titled “Il ventre di Torino” (The belly of Turin). “From one end to the other, the street is one enormous open-air junkshop, a great and pitiable display of misery such as would be impossible to imagine except by supposing that an entire neighborhood of Turin, invaded by some devastating fury, was turned upside down and emptied of every last article from each of its households, from the attics to the basements, and down to the last knickknack from the last cupboard.” The spectacle of the market is the scene that would result if every last piece of junk in every house in an entire neighborhood were tossed out the window and laid out neatly on the cement with scrupulous care. The merchandise is neither exotic nor valuable; it is the marvelous abundance of the everyday turned upside down and inside out.

The market De Amicis describes is distinguished by the variety of everyday wares: “It’s a confusion of things and of remnants of things that would drive the poor wretch who had to inventory it mad.” Common to this miscellany is a threadbare, broken-down uselessness, which is conveyed—notwithstanding the mental health of the poor wretch—through the form of the list:

The priest’s chasuble, the misshapen infantry helmet, the broken marionette from the San Martiniano Theater, the torn silk
ballgown from the Scribe Theater, the 16th century lock, the unfinished novel of Eugène Sue, the broken nail, the donkey saddle, the oil painting, the feathered beret of the tenor, dentures, crushed pins, pans without handles, helmets, globes, table legs, the spoils of alcoves, living rooms, law offices, attics, workshops, taverns, moldy, shredded, gnawed by mice, holey from moths, rotten from rain, corroded by mud, consumed by rust, without color, without form, without name, without price: everything cast off in the turbulent waters of the human condition.  

De Amicis first names seventeen objects. The final item on the list, spoils, is then divided into six types: spoils of alcoves, living rooms, law offices, and so on. Two adjectives—moldy and tattered—bespeak the deleterious effects of time. Five adjectival phrases then reveal that the passage of time is accompanied by human use and nonhuman abuse: the stuff is gnawed by rats, rotted by rain, and consumed by rust. Next, four adjectival phrases attest to the properties the merchandise lacks: it is without color, form, name, or price. The list eludes any single organizational principle beyond the mere fact of presence; it seems to invite underinclusion. And as with hoards, lists like the one above that expand in apparent defiance of organizing principles direct a sense of marvel at the place or being that brings together such disparate abundance.

The coherence of De Amicis’s list is not threatened by logical impasses that develop from elements that work their way out of the plane of denotation to distort the language that would contain them, as in the “subversive” rhetorical figure of hypallage; rather, it conforms to what Umberto Eco calls the “poetics of etcetera.” Instead of (or in addition to) an overview of the multiplicity conveyed, “everything cast off in the turbulent waters of the human condition,” the poetics of etcetera involves the use of a catalog that is ample, but that appears synecdochic; a metonym of even greater
multitudes. Orlando’s symptomatically monumental *Obsolete Objects* offers copious examples of the tendency of broken-down objects to accumulate in literature in the form of lists. The uselessness of the objects listed, he argues, is accentuated by the structural properties of the list itself: the absence of any logical relationship between the objects beyond the simple fact of their presence.

In addition to an accumulation of broken-down objects, De Amicis’s Turin market is a gathering place for people excluded from the economic life of the modernizing city. He writes:

Work at the strange market begins in the dead of the night, by lantern light; the swarming crowds arrive at the break of dawn. The seamstress sneaks there to look for a cast-off shawl. The cash-strapped family man goes to buy oil for a lamp. The artist goes to find a dress for his model. The antiquarian, the bibliomaniac, the penniless actor, the Jewish junk-dealer, and a procession of collectors of baubles and all kinds of curiosities, are all eager to be among the first to fish in that great sea that might hide unknown treasures and small, unexpected fortunes. They ramble and rummage greedily until high day amidst the coming and going of peasants haggling over worn-out clothes, ambulant ragpickers loaded down with worn-out boots and cracked pots, porters, gleaners of cigarette-butts and papers, municipal guards, maids, shopkeepers, brokers, who float in two opposing currents between the farmers market and the great pandemonium of the nearby square.

The human odds and ends come to resemble the objects they peruse in part through the shared aquatic metaphors. Like the wares, cast off in the rough waters, the market denizens “float in two opposite currents,” all longing to fish first “in that great sea.” The flow of shoppers in two currents recalls the avaricious and prodigal punished in the fourth circle of Dante’s hell. There, the
two groups of sinners crash against each other, “As does the wave, there over Charybdis, breaking itself against the wave it meets.” In hell, hoarders and squanderers calling to each other, “Why do you hoard?” and “Why do you squander?” are punished together because of their common abandon of measure and their attempts to trick fortune. In De Amicis’s market, the shoppers are both avaricious and spendthrift; they rummage greedily and squander their energy in search of fortune.

Like the assorted merchandise among which they wander, the people haunting the Turin market in De Amicis’s account are odds and ends—their labor seems external to the general economy; they are more specimens than types. These characters contrast with those of Edgar Allan Poe’s proto-detective story, “The Man of the Crowd.” The convalescent narrator of the 1840 story sits at the window of a London café, scrutinizing the changing physiognomy of the crowd outside. The procession of passersby is rationally matched to the hierarchical structure of the society. First to pass before the convalescent’s gaze are the “noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers—the Eupatrids and the commonplaces of society—men of leisure and men actively engaged in affairs of their own—conducting business upon their own responsibility.” Next come the clerks, then, “descending in the scale of what is termed gentility,” the pickpockets, gamblers, Jews, and beggars.

As darkness descends outside the café, the narrator is transfixed by the countenance of one passerby—“that of a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age.” The visage “arrested and absorbed” the narrator’s attention because of “the absolute idiosyncrasy of expression.” That singular countenance conjures, “confusedly and paradoxically” within the narrator’s mind, “the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of
coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair.”

Poe scholar Paul Hurh offers an intriguing gloss: “What is idiosyncratic about the face is not any one feature, but the paradoxical synchronic manifestation of several common, yet usually exclusive, ones. . . . The stranger’s is not just another face in the crowd; it is all of them.”

The composite visage, a synchronic manifestation of disparate elements, resembles the market that contains all the everyday objects of the modern city.

With *Torino 1880*, De Amicis became the unofficial bard of the 1884 exposition and of Turin. The literary production associated with the 1881 Milan exposition bestowed no such laurels, though amid the prolific publicity the city acquired the enduring epithets of the “moral capital” and “the most city city” of Italy.

In addition to catalogs, the exhibition organizing committee commissioned two guides to the city: the four-volume *Mediolanum* and *Milano 1881*. Though they included contributions from prominent writers, the promotional style of these and other similar guides—their celebration of “an optimistic, Ambrosian [Milanese] efficiency”—ran counter to platforms of major intersecting literary circles in Milan: the veristi, the scapigliati (disheveled), and the palombari (divers).

Although the Senigallia market is virtually absent in the exposition-sponsored guides, palombari and the scapigliati find rich material for their literary renderings of the city. Paolo Valera—one of the palombari, so named because they would “dive” into the world of the urban poor—makes brief mention of the Senigallia flea market in *Milano sconosciuta rinnovata* (*Unknown Milan Restored*), first serialized in the progressive journal he cofounded, *La plebe*, beginning in 1879. For Valera, the Senigallia market suggests not the transient, the fleeting, and the contingent, but rather the greed
of modern capitalism. Valera contrasts this avariciousness with the generosity and warmth of Milan of yore. He laments the changed Sant’Ambrogio Fair, known as “Oh, bei! Oh, bei!” (“Goodie! Goodie!”) because of the joyous cries of children who were given cotton candy and other sweets. Now, instead, he complains, people go to the “Oh, bei! Oh, bei!” the way they would go to the Senigallia market: “To see if they come across some outmoded tool among the old chestnuts. To look for shabby books cheap, to get themselves an iron or a fine suit stained by its last owner.”

The most significant guide to exposition-era Milan, from a literary perspective, is one that was published eight years after the event: *Il ventre di Milano: Fisiologia della capitale morale* (*The Belly of Milan: Physiology of the Moral Capital*), a collection of vignettes by a dozen-odd contributors edited by Cletto Arrighi (pseudonym of Carlo Righetti). The work is organized around the idea of a banquet, with an introduction titled “Antipasto.” The “Head Chef,” Arrighi, presents the volume as a physiology of the city: “physiology in the strictest sense of the word—varied, extensive, yielding, breezy, palpitating—of this great city.” The literary ambition of the work is signaled by the title, which evokes Zola’s *Le Ventre de Paris* (*The Belly of Paris*), as well as the Neapolitan writer Matilde Serao’s *Il ventre di Napoli* (*The Belly of Naples*), published just four years earlier. Arrighi is particularly vitriolic (and misogynistic) in his attack of Serao, whose *Ventre* he introduces as follows: “Instead of darning her husband’s socks, Mr. Scarfoglio’s wife put out a *Belly of Naples*.” In addition to neglect of her husband’s socks, Arrighi objects to Serao’s efforts to fundraise for her city:

Poor Naples, how could you not be grateful to Mrs. Scarfoglio for her blessed belly? She presented you to Europe as an agonizing beggar, one who can do nothing but hold out a hand for alms. And, in the name of that beggar, the author turned to the government, to the
The vendors of Arrighi’s Senigallia market, accordingly, are not greedy but aloof.

The short whimsical episodes in the section on the flea market in *The Belly of Milan* draw attention to the mangy and mismatched merchandise as well as the popular customs and vernacular. Arrighi does not list the objects for sale, in part because so many of them would be unidentifiable even to the vendors. What’s more, "it would take at least ten dense pages to name all the objects displayed." That, Arrighi explains, would create a farcical effect that might appeal only to "certain unrepentant ultra-realists." He therefore leaves out such a list for stylistic reasons: "I’ll gladly renounce it, because objects named one by one don’t seem to me to add any artistic value. It is only possible to find some expression of vulgar poetry or picturesque squalor in that exposition of misery if you consider it in its interminable entirety. Only then do contrasts jump out before your eyes and make you think or laugh or maybe even shudder." These stylistic considerations also speak to the aesthetics of the hoard, according to which the whole becomes something more perplexing and pathological than the sum of its parts.

In lieu of a list, Arrighi presents the flea market through short vignettes, recording his conversations with vendors, noting their behaviors, and describing objects of particular interest. He begins by noting the mystery of the market’s name: “that outdoor market, that the ragpickers and junk dealers of Milan hold every morning during the summer and that people call the *Fiera di Senigallia*. Don’t ask me..."
why it’s called by that name.” Arrighi notes that while ambulant ragpickers in Milan wander the city calling out, “Rags for sale!” the stallkeepers at the Senigallia market are all “as mute as fish.” He glosses their silence: “It’s almost as though they want to ennoble their miserable wares by acting like serious dealers, or as though they are too proud of their merchandise to bother showing it off to passersby.” Arrighi conveys the excitement of stumbling upon a delightfully outmoded and misshapen hat with the interjection: “How sublime!” A matchless right brodequin embodies the exasperating uselessness of so much of the merchandise. Asked about the left booty, an indifferent vendor shrugs: “There isn’t one.”

As in De Amicis’s Turin and Arrighi’s Milan, in F. T. Marinetti’s 1909 Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, the market—a figure for Italy itself—is the antithesis of modernity. Marinetti describes the nation teeming with the “fetid cancer of professors, archeologists, tour guides, and antiquarians.” “For much too long,” he writes, “Italy has been a junk market.” Whether frequented by ragpickers digging through the debris of the past, or by aesthete collectors like the decadent poet and novelist Gabriele D’Annunzio, with his “profound passion for the past and mania for collecting,” the market is a negation of the values celebrated by Italian futurists, even though the junk that accumulates there is a necessary by-product of the temporal the movement avows. History itself, for Marinetti, belongs among the characters who frequent the market: “a miserable collector of stamps, medals, and counterfeit coins.”

Photographs and Found Objects

In futurist writings, as in De Amicis’s modern and patriotic Turin and in Arrighi’s quiet and proud Milan, the flea market is a picturesque milieu set apart from the modern city and nation. De
Amicis and Arrighi are not interested in stories of sudden riches but in the strangeness of the market—the merchandise and the people that frequent it, and its exteriority to the general economy. It is against the spectacle of abjection at the market that the modernity of the metropolis and the writer, reader, and touristic visitor of the markets can be established. The spectacle of so much curious stuff changes in the interwar period when flea markets become laboratories of surrealist thought. Where else might one expect to find a chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting room table? Breton roots his own artistic project in contingencies of *trouvailles* (found objects) and writes about the *puces* in his autobiographical novels *Nadja* (1928) and *L’Amour fou* (*Mad Love*; 1937). Of the Saint-Ouen market, he writes: “I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse.”

Absent from Breton’s accounts of the market are lists of knick-knacks like those that clutter De Amicis’s *Torino*. Instead, Breton focuses on the singular objects that attract his eye: “[An] irregular, white shellacked half-cylinder covered with reliefs and depressions that are meaningless to me, streaked with horizontal and vertical reds and greens, preciously nestled in a case under a legend in Italian.” Neither Breton’s description of the object, nor the accompanying photograph diminishes its dogged inscrutability: “After careful examination I have finally identified [it] as some kind of statistical device, operating three-dimensionally and recording the population of a city in such and such a year, although all this makes it no more comprehensible to me.”

What is the device? A representation of a historical dataset in the form of a phallic plaster sculpture? A meter that registers some invisible atmospheric quality, like humidity, temperature, or
pollution? What could the air possibly say about the population in a certain area at distinct historical moments? Whether or not some measure exists that would make such a reading conceivable, the idea conjured is one of registering the traces of human presence that accumulate in the skies above like the odds and ends that pile up in the stalls below. That would make the statistical device similar to a camera, preserving an index of that-which-was-present-at-one-time. But the device would also preserve that-which-was-present-at-another-time; presumably, the traces would bear some indication of the duration of their presence so that a reading taken in 1880 would be able to measure the population in 1870 and 1860.\textsuperscript{89} The device would thus index a presence that is intercalated by a “spacing” that reveals a multiplicity that undermines the illusion of “seamless integrity of the real.”\textsuperscript{90} 

That is how Rosalind Krauss describes photography in a 1981 essay. She argues for the primacy of the medium for surrealism, not only because of specific works and artists but also and more important because its formal properties coincide so closely with the principles of the cultural movement. Surrealism engages and dismantles the most powerful illusion of photography: that it is the “capture of a moment” and the “seizure and freezing of presence.” With heterogeneous techniques that range from the “absolutely banal” photographs by Boiffard that illustrate \textit{Nadja} to multiple exposures, negative printing, and solarizations, surrealist photography conveys that “we are not looking at reality, but at the world infested by interpretation or signification, which is to say, reality distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign.”\textsuperscript{91} 

Susan Sontag presents the illusion of photography as that of chance reigning over artistic intentionality—that is, the rule of flea markets and found objects. She writes: “Photographs are, of
course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world.” The similarities between ragpicking and flea market shopping, on the one hand, and photography, on the other, have been widely noted. This is in part because they are so vivid in the work of Atget, who first follows the footsteps of the ragpicker, with his early painterly portrait, and then follows in his footsteps, focusing on the fascinating objects of scavenge in Villa d’un chiffonnier and Intérieur d’un chiffonnier, as well as photographs of Paris junk shops with merchandise hanging from awnings and piled up along the sidewalks of empty streets.

Breton encounters a second significant object at the flea market in Nadja: “Our attention was simultaneously caught by a brand new copy of Rimbaud’s Œuvres Complètes lost in a tiny, wretched bin of rags, yellowed nineteenth-century photographs, worthless books, and iron spoons.” The simultaneity of Breton’s perception of the book and the statistical device delineates the spatial framing of an instant, suggesting photographic capture. The discovery of the Œuvres Complètes occasions a new friendship between Breton and the “extremely cultivated” stall-keeper, Fanny Beznos, who possesses “great revolutionary faith.” Between the pages of the volume, Breton finds a poem and some notes written by Beznos and discusses them with her at length. The book seems to Breton to be an uncanny repetition of his chance meeting not long before with a girl who had asked for permission to recite Rimbaud’s “The Sleeper in the Valley.” The sense of simultaneity and chance is complicated by the accompanying photograph by J. A. Boiffard noted for its absolute banality. Ian Walker notes that the image is void of the encounters that animate the text: neither book nor statistical device is visible within the frame, Beznos is pictured with
her back to the camera, and the merchandise—primarily fabrics and furniture—is indistinct. 96

The objects Breton finds at the flea market in *L’Amour fou*, like those in *Nadja* are notable for their strangeness and their resonance
with the author. On an excursion to Saint-Ouen described in the novel, Breton and Alberto Giacometti first experience the place as a blur of indistinct objects creating a general impression of transience: “The objects that, between the lassitude of some and the desire of others, go off to dream at the antique fair had been just barely distinguishable from each other in the first half hour of our stroll. They flowed by, without accident, nourishing the meditation that this place arouses, like no other, concerning the precarious fate of so many little human constructions.”

When particular objects emerge from this haze, they do so through grammatical formulations that lend them agency; they attract, draw in, and strike the flaneurs: “The first one of them that really attracted us, drawing us as something we had never seen, was a half-mask of metal striking in its rigidity as well as in its forceful adaptation to a necessity unknown to us.”

In such instances of “objective chance” in L’Amour fou, flea market objects are emissaries bearing the message of the recipient’s desire, so that “finding of an object here serves exactly the same purpose as the dream.” A material unconscious, the flea market can only be a marginalist economy, one that “reconciles the laborious detours of the political economy with the subjective shortcut of the libidinal economy,” obscuring the social relations and histories of the objects. But objective chance does not short circuit desire in jouissance, producing desire only by satisfying it. Instead, objective chance presents desire in the enigmatic form of the surreal.

Squaring the Circle

Flea market photography influenced by the work of Atget as well as surrealist thought is particularly vivid in analogizing the labor of the ragpicker or junk-dealer and that of the street photographer.
In André Kertész’s 1929 *Paris Flea Market*, a vendor sits huddled under a cape or coat with a small rug draped over his lap—the border of the rug occupies the center of the frame. His wares include pictures and empty frames, a mirror, rags, a top hat, a helmet, assorted wicker baskets, and metal objects that might be identified as the stand for fireplace tools, the wheel of a baby carriage, the base of a folding card table. Though his eyes are veiled by the visor of his cap, the vendor looks resolute on surveilling his wares or keeping warm and unaware of or uninterested in the photographer. A top hat balanced on a tripod and a helmet balanced on the folding table rhyme visually with the vendor’s cap, making him look like another peculiarly composite hatstand. A mirror next to the vendor reflects his profile and, with it, a fourth hat; if a rectangle were drawn connecting these four hats, they would frame nothing. An empty frame hanging on the wall behind the vendor misses the mark of a portrait. Nonetheless, it is positioned such that from a different angle the vendor’s face would appear to be centered within it. The empty frame invites a comparison between the frame of the photograph and the arrangement of the merchandise by the vendor; the conflicting perspectives suggested by the two frames are aesthetic rather than economic. And the makeshift garments that keep the vendor warm attest to his poverty; his apparent indifference to the photographer seems to represent a repudiation of “somber realism of labor value” in favor of unpredictable flashes of chance, or desire.¹⁰²

One of the first examples of Italian photography bearing traces of Atget’s fascination with the outmoded is an uncredited picture that appeared in 1932 in *L’italiano. Periodico della rivoluzione fascista* (*Periodical of the Fascist Revolution*), a literary journal founded by Leo Longanesi.¹⁰³ The September issue included a still life of dispossessed domestic objects: a baby carriage, a trunk, a
commode, a sewing mannequin, and assorted buckets and pans, all arranged to face the camera and the empty road. The composition is set against a sparse backdrop of scrawny trees, cement steps, and an indistinct building.\textsuperscript{104} No context explains the presence of the objects by the side of the road; there is no indication of a nearby market or of a move in progress. The objects appear to be of high quality, and nothing is pictured—with the possible exception of the sewing mannequin—that would not be found in a bourgeois household. The sewing mannequin, though, is a simulacrum of woman, making the scene a diorama of bourgeois life.\textsuperscript{105} Unlike still lifes of flowers and food, the photograph is a vivid reminder
Figure 2.7
not of mortality but of the transience and emptiness of bourgeois domestic life.

Longanesi became a major figure in Italian publishing; he went on to start the first Italian illustrated news magazine, *Omnibus*, in 1937; it was closed two years later by the fascist Ministry of Popular Culture, known as Minculpop. Surrealism was an important influence for Longanesi, and a fascination with objective chance is evident in his collaborations with Cesare Barzacchi, who became his “photographic alter-ego” and may have taken the photograph above. Barzacchi describes the frequent excursions the two would make to the flea market at Campo de’ Fiori in Rome:

Longanesi bought every sort of knickknack: crystal stars, blown-glass ornaments, cardboard prosthetic noses, carnival masks, a gypsy dress, an old tux and top hat, the angel from a Neapolitan nativity scene. And at the office he had accumulated a lot more stuff to use in his compositions: illustrated postcards, artificial flowers, gold cardboard letters and ribbons of various sizes—the ones used in funeral wreaths. Old military and diplomatic decorations, metals, empty boxes, women’s shoes, lace doilies and linens. Glasses, Morandian bottles, armchairs, ottomans . . . In short, a strange and unusual universe that intrigues and excites Longanesi, suggesting crazy fantasies, absurd dreams, and unheard-of juxtapositions.

Whether Longanesi would be a considered a hoarder today is entirely moot, but the sensibility of his creative projects is marked by what Ennery Taramelli describes as a “passion for collecting and accumulating traces and relics saved . . . the abysses of historical memory.”

Between 1937 and 1940, Alberto Lattuada, a young photographer who would go on to become a prolific film director, began taking pictures of the Senigallia market. His *Occhio quadrato* (*Square Eye*), a collection of twenty-six square Rolleiflex photographs
of the Milanese periphery and its inhabitants, was published by Corrente in 1941. The volume is often considered a document of antifascism because it captures urban poverty censured by the fascist regime beginning in the mid-1920s. The photographs also constitute an important contribution to the flourishing genre of documentary photography represented, in Europe, by the work of Bill Brandt and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and in the United States, by work funded by the Farm Security Administration. FSA-funded documentary photographers included Walker Evans, whose 1938 MoMA exhibition was reviewed by Giulia Veronesi in the journal Corrente in 1939. Noting its resonance with photography outside of Italy, art critic Piero Berengo Gardin writes: “Occhio quadrato thus enters the history of photography as the title of a work, but also as an emblem of a particular aesthetic moment.” That aesthetic moment was one in which photographers took great interest in documenting poverty, which was conveyed visually in part by the objects with which the poor get by and make do. Critical discussions of Occhio quadrato tend to focus on La passeggiata della sera (The Evening Walk), a photograph of an old man out for a stroll in the desolate environs of a hovel built from stones, tarps, and other found materials. The image captures a private, contemplative moment, conferring a dignity that is undermined by the angle of the photograph, shot from above.

Critics have focused less attention on pictures of vendors and wares at the Senigallia market, though more than one-third of the images of Occhio quadrato were taken there. The seventeenth photograph, of wooden stands locked shut, captures a moment before the market opens. Lattuada explains: “One knows that at a certain point a thousand human voices will fill the air with the din of celebration and of the anxiety of selecting, of acquiring, of possessing for a coin that object . . . that dwells as a prisoner
now—at the moment of the photograph—locked in the inert stalls.”114 The following six images are also of the market; four are titled *Fiera di Senigallia*. The second of the photographs titled *Fiera di Senigallia* features a lamp and a vase, candelabra and irons, a trunk, a commode, and an electric fan. The most prominent human form of the composition is a female bust missing one arm. Her gown is loosely draped, leaving one breast exposed. She
looks modestly down and to her left, beyond the frame. A vendor sits precariously—he seems to be floating—on a bedframe behind her: his gaze extends horizontally beyond the frame, never to intersect with hers. Five figures on the other side of a bicycle-cart stand with their backs to the camera, looking in at least three directions. What seems to predominate in the image is a sense of isolation; the sightlines of the vendor and bust do not intersect, a nondescript residential building looms over the scene, its windows blinded. But Lattuada also suggests serendipitous solidarity among the broken and maimed. The vendor rests his left hand on his right thigh; he is missing three fingers. As if in recompense, the bust’s right arm reaches gracefully to her head, an unusually long and slender finger extends past the hair bun.

The next picture captures assorted merchandise: paintings, candelabra, dressers, mannequins, statues, plates, quilts, side tables, and frames. The frame is dominated by inanimate and animate human forms whose arrangement emphasizes both resemblances and communicative lapses. The top half of the frame is taken up with the residential building; the bottom half is dedicated to the flea market merchandise as well as the vendor, a cheery old man sitting on a stool. The human forms in the image can be used to imagine two diagonal lines. One line extends from the man to a sewing mannequin behind him, a standing lamp composed sturdy pedestal, a kitsch statue of a woman draped in a gold strapless mini dress that does not quite cover her breasts. She holds up a torch composed of three bulbs with three crenulated glass shades. Between the lamp and the vendor is a sewing mannequin. Another diagonal line can be formed from a framed oil portrait of an august man behind the vendor, to a figurine on the ground in front of him—paperweight, or bookend, or perhaps, judging the awkward angle of its recline, an ornamental element detached
from a façade. The vendor has a clubbed foot and only one shoe. As Arrighi marvels in *Il ventre di Milano*, shoes can be purchased at the market in units of one.

The final image bearing the title *Fiera di Senigallia* includes no human figures. The frame is entirely filled with objects, most of which are round: candelabaras; oil lamps and lampshades; scales and weights; paintings and empty frames; clocks, grates, and goblets. The predominance of circular shapes within the square
frame, in a volume titled *Occhio quadrato*, brings to mind an idiom of futility: squaring the circle. The sale of such objects would be equally improbable. Like De Amicis’s list of disparate wares at the Turinese flea market, the picture employs a poetics of etcetera, as objects extend beyond the frame, conjuring a larger space filled with more of the same. Disguised among this interminable sameness are two unexpected objects: a felt dog is nestled uncomfortably at halfway up on the right side of the picture.
More surprising is a second canine in the top right quadrant. A taxidermied dog’s head extends up as if sniffing the air. It seems to be mounted on a plaque like a hunting trophy. Bringing a beloved pet back to life may be no less possible than squaring a circle. The taxidermied dog may once have been a warm reminder of a lost companion to the human who commissioned it. But upon the death of that person, the relic tests the boundaries between inert matter and forms of life.

**Junk at the Gate of Eternity**

In March 1940, Carlo Emilio Gadda published “Fiera a Milano” in *Panorama*, a short-lived biweekly illustrated news magazine that was shut down later that year by the Minculpop. Gadda’s essay appeared in the first issue of the magazine published under a new editor, the architect Giuseppe Pagano. Under his direction, *Panorama* achieved a modernist sensibility different from the rationalist architecture for which Pagano is best known. The redesigned cover evokes Dadaist collage, with soldiers, planes, or ships cut into whimsical cloud shapes and pasted against a brightly colored background. The influence of surrealism and a tacit opposition to fascism are evident in the magazine in such features as an essay by Giulia Veronesi on anti-objectivist photography, one on the secret signs used by dissidents and medicants to communicate friendly participation in underground networks, and a photo-essay on nudity in public art.

Gadda’s essay was accompanied by nine photographs by Pagano. It is almost certain that the essay was commissioned to accompany the photographs since the objects enumerated in the text correspond closely to those pictured. The title, “Fiera a Milano” (rather than “Fiera di Senigallia”), would have brought
to mind a different sort of *fiera*: the expositions celebrating new technologies or fascist initiatives. The contrast between the glorification of the new, heralded by such expositions, and the worn-out junk of the Fiera di Senigallia would have seemed satirical, suggesting a restrained antifascism. Pagano’s photographs convey the arbitrary hodgepodge of the market thematically and through inconsistent cropping and layout. Four retain the square shape of the Rolleiflex negative; the others have been cut into rectangles of various dimensions.

The first image shows two sets of coat-shrouded human legs and an advertising cutout of the shoulders and head of a smiling woman. All of Pagano’s black and white photographs were shot with a Rolleiflex; the negative would have been square. The uncropped image, which was included in a 2008 exhibition curated by Daria De Seta, shows a transaction-in-progress: one woman weighs out leather or cloth remnants. The version included in *Panorama* is cropped to the scale of the advertising cutout; the sacks of scraps in this version are inscrutable and the human legs, irrelevant. Sharing the page with the picture of the advertising cutout is one of a seated vendor with his back to the camera, poised as if to wait as long as it takes to make any improbable sale. A second old man, a shopper, is blurry across the expanse of unrecognizable merchandise laid out on the pavement. He holds the arm of his companion for support. The vendor and shopper here seem to mirror each other, each inhabiting a space and time beyond the bustle of the piazza, and, more broadly, the market economy.

The images on the next page highlight arbitrariness, both in the assortment of things depicted and in their layout in the magazine.
Giuseppe Pagano, “Fiera a Milano,” Panorama, 1940.
A picture of a pile of nuts, bolts, wrenches, and gears is cropped to an awkwardly long rectangle. The photograph of shoes is captioned with a line from Gadda’s essay: “There you see slippers lined up, and shoes frayed and flattened by chaos like battalions of cockroaches.” The few pairs turned against the order of the battalions, and the intrusion of a basket and other unidentifiable
C'è un segno di riparo e di prospetto, un tentativo di creare uno spazio protetto e di unire la città con la campagna circostante. In un periodo di grande attività industriale e di sviluppo urbano, la Fiera di Giuseppe Pagano a Milano divenne un luogo di incontro tra la produzione artigianale e la nuova architettura moderna. Il panorama del 1940 mostrava una città in evoluzione, con nuovi edifici e strade che andavano ad arricchire lo spazio urbano.

Gli archi Ferdinando e Napolitani superstiti ai vecchi dati. Questa parentesi a proposito della Ludovica. Ma mantenne la notorietà della fiera di Singallia non ci sono dubbi che ci ricorda il Piazzale Florio e di Olivovento Ushodi ad opera del caro Valentino, per il bel periodo medievale, in cui si tentavano le dimore, o quasi, vuoi dire niente altro che con «vecchi pugnali d'alluminio, poese odi e cucinare staccati, con mani che su una padella sbellicano il grasso, gli omelet senza i brandelli, attecchirono un po' scenografie e bisogni un po' sospesi. E vi vedeste le allineate delle ciabatte; scarse alate ed appuntite da un manciato, come battiglie di scarfaggi od ottomani; e con un rozzo, con un po' di calice, candeline ci chiudeva il bomboniere, nel brucio una canna da latta in figura di Carlo d'Ar- gò; un panico per paratie campestre in revo del Navi- glio Grande e di maniglie di nata opportune- mene della biciclette, sia intesi che a pietre, delle forbiie per le unghie, delle pinze da chiunista.

L'incredibile retino s'è venuto ad arricciare su questa spiaggia senza frangente co- me un raccolto di uva e in fondo, delle maniglie, delle le scarpe di biscotto zappato appiccicato all'isola dei gab- biani. Non è un naufrago questo, ma il corso del vento e dell'acqua, anche il ca- stone, cioè l'abitato, della nostra civiltà meccanica è incertamente viene a domettere, nessuno, tra le brocche di questa ritrattoria birra, ma implacabile, che si attenda, un corno dei anni, « dalle parti di porta Ludovica, Co- tre il Petrassi sarà laureato poeta in Campodoglio, con il cavatappi, nel suo vecchio sabato, assurserà finalmente al collasso della Ludovica: il pitale di ferro e smalto, il manto di baccelli con via tre palle (figlie, sfere). Ora il vento della civiltà urbana è più fatto di frang- bene e di pelli-pattini, di re- tuline e cinture e un crac-line alla luce che fanno girare, a po- por lo fango di brocche a resellina per i tachdi dei mu- ratori e di coltelli femmine.
objects in the upper left corner makes this seem like a particularly slovenly regiment of cockroaches.

Many of the recognizable objects—human forms, picture frames, a basket—are cut off, and the framing highlights the absence of logical connections between the objects pictured. In the photograph with sewing mannequins, a finger points from the shoppers’ side of the makeshift stall. The three mannequins seem to mimic the shoppers; they too are without heads. What’s more, it seems like they are the ones looking out over their wares. Indeed, after the first two pictures the images on the remaining four pages do not feature living people, with the exception of the legs of shoppers and the pointing finger.
The studied artlessness of the page layout contrasts with Gadda’s notably wrought language and accentuates the arbitrariness of the flea market merchandise. Gadda surveys the bric-a-brac that comes forth from the attics and basements of Milan on Saturdays—rusted keys, bent coat hangers, terracotta figurines, lopsided bidets, mismatched tableware. These and other worn-out, broken-down, and obsolete objects convene on the squalid pavement to await improbable moments of sale at the Senigallia market. Gadda focuses on the motivation of the vendors, sketching the conflicting theories of value that circulate amid the eclectic wares. The essay opens with three exclamations of the difficulty of discarding, each beginning with a verb that aggrandizes the act, naming it a “liberation,” “separation,” and “divorce.” Ironic descriptions thicken the objects, detailing their broken-down uselessness and inscribing them within family bonds, class relations, and national lore. A fake mahogany frame wreathed with golden chili peppers, for example, holds a portrait of the first wife of the uncle of a collective “our” father’s ex-brother-in-law. A little brass knob for sale at the market is what remains of an old petroleum lantern shattered by Cesira, the housekeeper with a light touch. Garibaldi is commemorated at the market with a chipped plaster bust. The goods are tattered traces of a disappearing world of deceased relatives and national heroes.

Though the incipit emphasizes the sentimental value of the objects for the vendors, the essay goes on to claim that it is not sentiments that motivate the vendors, but economics. Gadda even makes the urge to save appear both rational and universal:

Rather than sentimental reasons, we might say some other reason, constitutional of the human person, or better, the foundation of the human soul: (excuse the sincerity): that instinct to stash away,
to retain, to never let go of a button: in any case never to take a loss, to utilize in whatever way possible, and down to the very last cent salvageable, that which is acquired, bought, lugged home, enjoyed—perhaps even for years. The idea that having to divest yourself of a cork, you might at least extract the profit it merits, the maximum profit allowed by the market.¹²⁴

The “instinct to stash away,” here constitutive of the “human person” is a drive to extract—from even the most improbable of objects—as much profit or use as the market allows. However peculiar the determination to stash away even disintegrating corks, the locus of wonder—and parody—in the essay is not the vendors’ instinct, but the metropolitan marketplace that matches even such dregs as these with buyers: “Market? But can there be a market of holey corks, busts of Garibaldi, used graters, pipes with mouthpieces missing, mangled bicycle seats, keys to who knows what door, bike horns without squeezers? . . . There are those who buy and those who sell all of that: there exists a market of the unthinkable. Everything exists in Milan.”¹²⁵ The marvelous Milanese marketplace renders the instinct to stash things away a rational behavior; this is a dramatic (and satirical) departure from earlier flea market writings like those of De Amicis, Arrighi, and Breton. Gadda’s fiera is not in direct dialogue with the unconscious, or antithetical to the modernizing city—it is a perfectly efficient market, where every last trinket can be matched with a buyer. Whether a vendor is a homo oeconomicus or a hoarder depends on the fortunes of his wares at the market; at the Fiera di Senigallia, all wares fare well, albeit because of the “combinatorial certainty” that points to the remotest future.

Gadda emphasizes the timelessness of the market, imagining the objects washing up at Porta Ludovica like shipwrecks: “The incredible relic comes to graze upon this surfless shore, like in stories of
shipwrecks when tins of soaked cookies wash up on the island of Melancholy. This is not a shipwreck, but the consumed customs of humans: even the costumes—that is, the ‘habitus’ of our mechanical and bandaged up civilization, resigns itself, exhausted, at the end of its years, to the arms of the junk dealer.”¹²⁶ The knickknacks that come to graze on the pastures of the market are like shipwrecked objects, but Gadda specifies that they are not actually lost to the abyss of history.

To arrive at the Fiera di Senigallia is the crowning achievement in the life of an object: a testament to its having been passed down through generations, to its having almost outlived any use or exchange value. Unlike shipwrecked objects, which would loll about the shore in obscurity, the junk at the fi era could yet be transformed by a redemptive moment of sale; designated, in Gadda’s essay, with the dialect locution, a literary analog to the indexical quality of the photographic image: “el moment bon!” Because of such moments, the market becomes a wondrous site of economic efficiency, as customers emerge from all corners of the city to transform the odds and ends, sometimes after years: “There’s a dream of savings and profit, an attempt at resurrection in extremis; . . . but also an economy and a combinatorial certainty—of managing to smash together the frayed with the useful, the part with the whole, and infinite patience with perfect timing: “el moment bon!” that in which the tuning peg of a broken violin will be resold for nineteen cents, after eighteen years on display, to the fiddling mendicant from via Mac-Mahon, who just broke one in his hand three days ago.”¹²⁷ The “dream of savings and profit,” unthinkable or unlikely as it may seem given the utter ruin of the merchandise, could be realized with “el moment bon!” that would transform a hoard into an investment, remunerating (and rendering rational) the eighteen-year wait.
Chapter 2

Gadda draws attention to other popular idioms related to the market, capturing dialect locutions in direct quotations in a way that parallels the indexical quality of the photographic image. He writes: “This convocation is called the Senigallia Market; it’s held every Saturday, in the afternoon, ‘Out around Porta Ludovica.’” Gadda explains the vague directions: “The myth of Porta Ludovica,” which he repeats: “Everyone knows it exists; nobody knows where.” The 1905 urban renewal involved the demolition of Porta Ludovica so that what remained of the renaissance city gate was popular memory and myth. Three years after the publication of “Fiera a Milano” in Panorama, Gadda changed the title of his essay to “Carabattole a Porta Ludovica” (“Knickknacks at Porta Ludovica”). The new title is suggestive; because much of the essay is dedicated to listing the carabattole, the Porta Ludovica of the title seems at once the imaginary urban space, the essay itself and, more broadly, the literary text.

Like the Fiera di Senigallia, where long-awaited encounters result in improbable moments of sale, the essay concludes with an abrupt change of course, in the form of a consideration of the mechanics of the essay itself: “At the end of every poem of manners, every portrait of the times, there is, perhaps, a perfunctory device [buggerata meccànica], just as in the depths of every home you love there is a well-known trap, the spring-loaded sort, with a piece of dry cheese, to catch the unreachable mouse that would otherwise go drown himself in the demijohn of oil. Life is a fight, and you’ve got to fight with traps, with old junk.”

The perfunctory device of the essay—Gadda’s poem of manners—consists in the introduction of the essayist into the fiera as a market flaneur who, after the tedium of a strange day, would happily open a bottle of Barbaresco: “But good grief, how can that be done? You need the corkscrew, the corkscrew! But where is this
rascal of a corkscrew! It was in the drawer on the left, at the stall on the right. But what if it’s not there anymore? No, it’s not there! Don’t despair! At the Fiera di Senigallia there’s a cork, and a corkscrew.”

The serendipitous encounter between the weary essayist and a corkscrew for sale at the market works as a prose mousetrap. With this perfunctory device, Gadda signals his own participation in the cruel optimism of “el moment bon,” which inspires the vendors to show up, day after day, week after week, and year after year with their broken violin strings and their fake mahogany frames. With the direct quotations—the exclamation “el moment bon!” and the vague “out around Porta Ludovica”—Gadda situates the literary text between the mimesis of the essay and the indexicality of the photographs; between representation and trace. Orlando argues that the useless objects of modern literature convey anxieties about the usefulness of literature itself while embodying the uselessness repressed by the functional imperative and the myth of progress. But in Gadda’s essay, such uselessness cannot exist because for every object there is an eventual flea market shopper prepared to pay what it is worth.

With the serendipitous mousetrap, the essay analogizes the relationship between the photographs and prose to that between vendor and shopper; the reality of value is produced somewhere in between. After explaining the myth of Porta Ludovica, Gadda writes: “But of the existence of the Fiera di Senigallia there can be no doubt: It’s even been photographed.” That the objects accumulate at a place that does not exist except in popular memory and in the essay substantiates Orlando’s conception of the literary text as a repository of repressed uselessness. The photographs enact a transformation analogous to “el moment bon” that returns the objects lulling about on the shores of oblivion to economic legibility and ontological certainty. The Fiera di Senigallia
is where the frayed meets the useful, the part meets the whole, and infinite patience meets perfect timing, as in “el moment bon” that transforms the merchandise into a sale. It is a place where the free market is realized in the most improbable of ways, as even an old violin string and an eighteen-year wait earn the nineteen cents they are due.

The Senigallia market of the Panorama feature encompasses economic rationality and grotesque uselessness; the documentary claims of street photography and the wrought language of the archiveaholic; the modern city of Milan and the lieu de mémoire of Porta Ludovica. Gadda’s essay and Pagano’s photographs condense the cultural history of flea markets traced in this chapter. First points of sale for scavenged materials, the flea markets of the Paris Zone evolved into emporia for objets d’hasard—from places where waste is processed in predictable ways by labor, they become places where chance rules. The contingent meetings with undervalued objects that results become a defining feature of modern conceptions of the artist, poet, street photographer, and historian. That hoarding continues to be animated by these hallowed heroes of modernity helps to explain its tenacity and ambivalence.

The threatening obscurity of market and metropolis come together in the episode discussed of young Henri Pouget’s discovery of registered stock shares and bank vouchers attached to the pages of old magazines purchased at the flea market. The provenance of the flea market treasure Pouget finds is not in question; the financial documents are traceable to one Mr. Haas, a recently deceased miser whose wealth was the stuff of local legend. The reinvention engendered by the market’s anonymity is instead one of identity: Henri’s father and his accomplice, Cassagne, attempt to redeem the vouchers under a false name
in Brussels. Their severe punishment—four months in prison and a fine of fifty francs—attests to the danger perceived in such anonymity. An even stronger testament to this sense of danger is the success of the literary genre I investigate in the next chapter: detective fiction.